

Doubt: Nothing ‘beautiful’ about this ‘question’

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3 January 2009

Written and directed by John Patrick Shanley, based on his play

Doubt, directed by John Patrick Shanley, based on his play, takes place in the Bronx, New York in 1964. A conflict emerges at a Catholic school between a relatively young and ‘progressive’ parish priest, Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), and a battle-ax of a nun, Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep).

This is the era of Pope John XXIII and Vatican II in the Catholic Church, and the radicalized years of the later 1960s are not far away. Sister Aloysius is fighting, it seems, a rear-guard action.

Based on a tip from a younger nun, Sister James (Amy Adams), and her own instincts (and dislikes), Sister Aloysius becomes firmly convinced that the priest is acting improperly toward one of the school's students, in fact, its first black student, Donald Miller (Joseph Foster). She sets about driving Father Flynn out.

In the opening sequence, Flynn delivers a sermon about the unifying and sustaining character of doubt, pointing as an example to the state of the American population in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination. "What do you do when you're not sure?" he asks at one point. Aloysius, on the other hand, has no uncertainties, she trusts her intuition implicitly and plunges ahead without hesitation (until the final moment). Sister James is torn, she distrusts the priest and yet admires and likes him too. She doesn't know what to do.

Aloysius even appeals to Donald Miller's mother (Viola Davis), a working class woman, who argues in defense of Flynn—and her son's continuing presence in the school—on the most improbable grounds.

The nun will not give up her crusade, threatening to contact all of Flynn's previous parishes until she comes up with some evidence against him.

While competently and sincerely written and performed, *Doubt*, which has won prizes and will probably win more, is thoroughly conformist ideologically and fiercely mediocre

as an artistic effort.

It accepts, in passing, *as a given*, the legitimacy of the Catholic Church as an institution seeking to do good. Writer-director John Patrick Shanley comments: "Now the Catholic Church has its flaws, but these dioceses, these church schools, these centers, provided a gravity which kept people from flying off into outer space. And we haven't really come up with a great substitute." (An interview with *Newsweek*)

"Flaws." Yes, well, perhaps one or two. It seems almost inconceivable, but Shanley offers a picture of a Catholic school in the 1960s devoid of social criticism. Aloysius hits the pupils and intimidates everyone around her, but Streep's character is meant to be a sympathetic one. The nun, although a little overzealous, clearly has everyone's best interests in mind.

Twenty years ago, a minor work such as *Heaven Help Us* (1985), directed by Michael Dinner, felt obliged to deal with the sexual sadism of the priests and teaching brothers in a Brooklyn Catholic high school in 1965. The institution was treated as something deeply dysfunctional.

With *Doubt*, we might as well be back in the intellectual territory of *Going My Way* (1944) and *The Bells of St. Mary's* (1945), directed by Leo McCarey, where earnest, ‘forward-thinking’ priests and nuns fight it out with their gruff, but well-meaning counterparts.

Shanley apparently accepts everything about the world. How can an artist accomplish anything on such a basis?

You would think, for example, that Shanley might make a single reference to the ghastly consequences of celibacy, given the scandal that has erupted over abuses committed by priests. But there is not a hint of that. He used nuns as his advisers and claims to be thrilled that "all of the nuns loved the film."

At the time of the abuse scandal in 2002, we wrote: "The crisis over sexual abuse by members of the priesthood underscores the profoundly reactionary and anachronistic character of the Catholic Church as an institution. Its corrupt and hypocritical officials, living like kings, preach against sin and vice, oppose birth control and abortion, inveigh

against homosexuality, enthusiastically advocate censorship and intellectual repression, universally ally themselves with the powers that be and generally make life miserable for tens of millions of people. ...

"Every aspect of the sexual abuse crisis—the pain and suffering of the victims, the misery and sexual dysfunction of the priests, the callousness of Church officials—suggests a diseased institution whose practices and beliefs run counter to elementary human needs and inevitably breed the unhealthiest of psycho-sexual climates. The Catholic Church's essential being flies in the face of modern society." (See "Why the epidemic of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church?")

Another aspect of *Doubt's* conformism is its attitude toward contemporary political events. Shanley, it seems, had the Bush administration in mind with his portrait of Aloysius's moral certainty (and lack of evidence). He told an interviewer: "Well, when I wrote the play, we were living in a time of great 'certainty' in our country, leading up to the Iraq War, and I didn't feel certain. And the culture around me seemed to be sending me the message that I didn't feel certain because I was weak. I didn't agree with that. So, that germ of an idea, about certainty and doubt, was there." (The Hollywood Interview)

The problem with Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld was not their 'certainty.' These individuals and many others, including Democratic Party leaders and a large swath of the American media, knew perfectly well that the claims about Iraqi 'weapons of mass destruction' were lies. Those claims served a political propaganda purpose only. What can Shanley be thinking?

'Doubt' is no more an absolute than 'certainty,' both terms describe points on a continuum, the never-ending collective human effort to arrive at closer and closer approximations of objective reality, which itself is in a state of never-ending change. Is certainty always harmful? Is doubt helpful in every instance?

If human beings did not approach some matters, in science, politics or art, with certainty they wouldn't accomplish anything. Assurance about the correctness of one's understanding, arguments or approach is an element in the success of any significant undertaking. Practice determines the validity or otherwise of that assurance.

There is no more eternal doubt than there is eternal certainty. Universal skepticism is no recipe for anything, except the preservation of the status quo. "All politicians lie" is a commonplace generally uttered by people who are not terribly advanced politically and, sadly, susceptible to all sorts of manipulation. All political figures, in fact, do not lie. In the broadest sense, social interests determine whether or not an individual can tell the truth to the public.

Shanley, in my view, is very light-minded. We are not meant to know by the end of the film whether Flynn is abusing Donald Miller or not. The writer-director explains helpfully: "In life, you don't get to know everything. You get to know that you think you know, maybe. You receive a lot of information, or a little information, and you reach your conclusions from that." This is not much of an insight.

The film's production notes contain this comment from Shanley: "For more than a hundred years, filmmakers have tended to ask a question and at the end of the movie, they answer it. With *Doubt*, I wanted to leave the audience at the end not with an answer, but saying rather: 'What a beautiful question.' In that way, it becomes the audience's story."

It's true that we can't know everything with certainty. But that is not a justification for intellectual sloth and complacency. We strive for and move toward truth, against initial (and perhaps unavoidable) ignorance, error and unclarity.

Many Americans were cut off from the truth about the invasion of Iraq, for instance, by the massive campaign of lies carried out by the media and the political establishment. That wasn't their fault. But that's very different from saying the truth about the war and its aims didn't exist or that it wasn't important to arrive at it. In fact, arriving at such a truth is a life-and-death issue.

Even within the narrower confines of Shanley's film, does it matter whether Flynn is sexually abusing Donald Miller? Yes, it matters a great deal. Either a crime has been committed or it hasn't. Either Aloysius is a meddling busybody with a reactionary moral and political agenda, or she's possessed of remarkable instincts and is saving other children from psychological damage. Shanley's argument is simply banal and evasive, and, unfortunately, says a great deal about the general state of mind of the economically comfortable, vaguely liberal, essentially self-satisfied, upper echelons of the American professional classes.



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