

Philomena: Crime and forgiveness

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Directed by Stephen Frears; written by Steve Coogan and Jeff Pope; based on the book by Martin Sixsmith

Directed by veteran British filmmaker Stephen Frears, *Philomena* is based on the non-fiction book *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* (2009) by Martin Sixsmith, a former BBC journalist and Labour government advisor.

In Frears' film, Martin (Steve Coogan) has recently lost his advisor position and is desperately searching for a quick-selling story that can save him from financial ruin. By accident, he meets a woman who recounts her mother's story, which involves the latter's 50-year search for her lost child.

Philomena (Judi Dench) became pregnant as an unmarried young girl in Ireland in the early 1950s. She sought refuge in a Catholic convent and remained there for several years while the nuns raised her child. Together with other "fallen girls" she was essentially forced into indentured servitude in the convent's laundry and was allowed to see her son only on very rare occasions. After a few years' time, her son was taken away from her and given up for adoption. Tormented by guilt and traumatic memories, Philomena embarks on a journey to find him with the help of Sixsmith.

With *Philomena*, Frears (*The Queen*, *Dirty Pretty Things*, *Dangerous Liaisons*, *My Beautiful Laundrette*) contributes to the exposure of the church-run Magdalene asylums, which exploited religious superstition and "morality" to dragoon tens of thousands of young Irish girls into virtual slave labor over the course of more than two centuries, the last known asylum closing as late as 1996.

The phenomenon was most famously depicted by Peter Mullan in his film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) and by Steve Humphries in his television documentary *Sex in a Cold Climate* (1998). While *Philomena* has some interesting and genuine moments, it largely falls

short of those earlier efforts.

Initially created in the mid-18 century for the supposed purpose of reducing prostitution, the asylums in Ireland became in time "a part of a large structure of suppression," writes Francis Finnegan, in *Do Penance or Perish: A Study of Magdalene Asylums in Ireland* (2001). According to Finnegan, "The issue of continued demand for prostitutes was barely confronted, so absorbed were moralists with the disgraceful and more visible evidence of supply. And while acknowledging that poverty, overcrowded slum housing and lack of employment opportunities fuelled the activity ... they shirked the wider issues, insisting on individual moral (rather than social) reform."

The full story about the abusive nature of the prison-like institutions, however, only reached the public in the 1990s. After a lengthy inquiry initiated by the advocacy group Justice for Magdalenes, which presented its case to the United Nations Committee Against Torture, the Irish government issued an official apology to the women of the Magdalene laundries in February 2013.

Unfortunately, *Philomena*'s treatment of the subject often comes across as inappropriately glib and light-minded. "We wanted to make a film that was enjoyable to watch and used humor to cancel the sadness," said Coogan, *Philomena*'s co-producer and co-writer.

Many important aspects of the Magdalene phenomenon are left untouched by the film. One feels that the movie, in its own way, is trying to close the book on a disgraceful chapter in the history of the church, which remains mired in sex abuse scandals and still retains a powerful influence over the Irish state.

Frears' film draws no connection between the church and that state, which, as Irish prime minister Enda Kenny acknowledged in his apology speech, was directly involved in over a quarter of all admissions to the Magdalene laundries through social services,

industrial schools and the court system. Complex social situations are treated in *Philomena* through the narrow prism of individual acts of integrity or brutality.

The film essentially treats the subject as a moral question, with the burden of individual responsibility being transferred from young girls to church elders and politicians. While this is an obviously healthier response, it barely scratches the surface of the social and historical reality.

If *Philomena* is a pleasant film experience, that is primarily due to Frears' warm and gentle sympathy for the abused teenage mothers (Sophie Kennedy Clark is very good as the young Philomena) and the excellent performances of both Judy Dench and Steve Coogan.

Dench is authentic, tough in character, yet imbued with a deep humanity, emblematic of the best qualities of the Irish working class. At one point, the motionless camera focuses on her face, creating a moving and memorable portrait that resembles the *Pietà*.

Coogan's portrayal is also very good in his role, even though the character of Sixsmith is a reprehensibly “apolitical” and non-challenging representative of today's mainstream media. Known for playing characters with a sarcastic wit, Coogan hardly has a chance to spread his comic wings in *Philomena*.

There are, nonetheless, appealing elements to the Sixsmith character. The humility Martin feels after being sacked at least expresses a kinship with the rest of the population, which he wouldn't have had to pay heed to as a government advisor. This is refreshing. Probably his most touching moment comes when Martin pretends to be Phil's son to get into her hotel room and check on her safety. The scene movingly suggests the affection that grows between Philomena and Martin throughout the movie.

The “odd couple's” class differences are delicately contrasted in the movie and poked fun at. Philomena comments on Sixsmith's various efforts to show off his status. He owns an expensive BMW, is able to pay for hotel rooms with a view, and feels an obvious social and intellectual superiority expressed in his “Oxbridge” education and atheism as opposed to Phil's religious faith.

The Coogan character's metamorphosis from a self-centered liberal bourgeois into a more compassionate truth seeker and someone capable of committing disinterested acts of kindness is touching. However,

one suspects strongly this is the filmmakers arguing that the world would be a better place if only individuals went through a similar process of personal growth and made the right choices.

Philomena never loses her faith throughout and is more than willing to forgive her church oppressors. Victim of a crime, manipulated into seeing herself as sinful for her alleged promiscuity, she is made to feel guilty while the actual perpetrators of the crime feel no remorse whatsoever. This is briefly touched upon when Sixsmith angrily tells her during a church visit, “It's the Catholic Church that should be going to confession, not you.”

Inevitably, *Philomena* has been denounced in the US as an example of anti-Catholic bias: a vile *New York Post* review, for example, called the film a “hateful and boring attack on Catholics,” and Bill Donohue, the president of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights termed it “pure propaganda.” In fact, the film is fairly easy on the church. “The institution lets people down, not the individuals who are just quietly going about their lives and have this simple faith. So I wanted to make sure that they were respected,” said Coogan in an interview.

A good many filmmakers at present seem driven to consider pressing social and political realities while still contending they can do so without being social or political themselves. The act of eternally pulling one's punches, probably against one's better judgment in some cases, results in works that are not entirely whole-hearted or convincing.



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