

## Life's Other Plans at Full Disclosure in 'Philomena'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on November 27, 2013 - 4:22pm

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Although “Philomena” sounds like a faraway land, it actually is a name of a real Irish lady, who lost her son through a Catholic adoption service that was designed to hide her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Judi Dench portrays the title character as an older woman, with Steve Coogan as the reporter trying to help locate the son for her.

This is basically a two character story, with the old lady and the reporter discovering something about themselves through the process. They travel together, they make discoveries together and ultimately come to conclusions about the circumstance together. The is partially a film about the Catholic Church – and their unique ability to sweep harsh sins under the rug – and it is also a testament to that church, whose power with their followers include a deep and abiding forgiveness. Comic actor Steve Coogan also co-wrote the screenplay, and matches Dame Judi in performance, warmth and salvation.

Martin Sixsmith (Coogan) has been unceremoniously fired as press liason for a high British official. He is aimless and clueless as to his next move, when a story about an Irish mother named Philomena (Judi Dench) comes to light. She has had a full life as a nurse, and has raised a daughter, but she laments a son she had lost. In flashback, the young Philomena (Sophie Kennedy Clark) is shown making the baby, working for Irish nuns while hiding the pregnancy, and then watching the son being shipped to America for adoption.



Philomena (Judi Dench) and Martin (Steve Coogan) Contemplate Destiny in 'Philomena'  
*Photo credit: The Weinstein Company*

In modern times, Philomena decides to help Martin pursue the story of finding her son. This takes the couple to America to do the research, and along the way they form a kinship, despite Martin's anti-religious stance and Philomena's ardent Roman Catholicism. What they discover will change both their lives, especially within the passion of absolution and coming to terms.

Coogan and Dench make a great team, and each bring something to the table that the other feeds upon. In reworking his brand, Steve Coogan takes on a character actor intuition in communicating the role of Martin. His crutch of losing a prestigious position needs to be thrown away within the journey, if he is to become the reporter that will seek the truth for Philomena. Dench obviously had a tremendous time interpreting the Irish Catholic damsel – especially in the quietest moments – given her marvelous performance.

The overview is of the time in the Catholic Church in which a peculiar cruelty took place – the nuns would take in these pregnant-out-of-wedlock girls in the 1950s and turn them into indentured servants with little access to their children, then with coerced permission put up the children for adoption. This holier-than-thou situation was both contemptuous and guilt-inducing for the young, confused girls, and the deaths that took place, either of the mothers or babies, were swept under the symbolically lumpy rug of the church.

Steve Coogan, who co-wrote the screenplay with Jeff Pope, seeks to use the symbolic elements of the characters – Martin as secular truth seeker and Philomena as a prayerful lamb seeking closure – as two angles against these religious sins. By keeping the story light and making it somewhat of a road picture, the harsh realities are lessened, and the chance for seeking and providing forgiveness is a virtuous path in the story structure.



Martin, Philomena and the Great Emancipator in 'Philomena'  
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

This is based on a true story, but the elements of the two fellow travelers are exaggerated a bit. Coogan adds a personality to Philomena that directly clashes with the highfaluting Martin – she loves trashy culture, for example – and that borders on precious, but it is the serious parts of the story which reels in the whole fiber of morality. What is remarkable about the film is that both anti-Catholic and pro-Catholic sentiment are equally accessible.

And quite frankly it's a bit of fun to experience Judi Dench as a working class Irish Catholic woman who can't help but tell the truth, except in times of direct confrontation with the church she still loves. If that is not the very definition of faith, then immediately close the missal.

*'Philomena' continues its U.S. release in Chicago on November 27th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Steve Coogan, Judi Dench, Sean Mahon, Sophie Kennedy Clark and Mare Winningham. Screenplay by Steve Coogan and Jeff Pope. Directed by Stephen Frears. Rated "PG-13"*



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