

Despite Smothered Direction, ‘Doubt’ Brings Out Best in Performers

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – The inherit drama of a Catholic priest accused of molesting an African American boy during the 1960s would be enough to make for an interesting film on its own. In “Doubt,” this is one of the less-explored themes writer and director John Patrick Shanley examines.

Instead, there is a tale of Machiavellian ethics, power struggles within the church, and of course the gray areas that encircle certainty and doubt.

Sister Aloysius Beauvier (Meryl Streep) is everything you could expect from a pre-Vatican II nun in 1964. Playing the strict disciplinarian at her Catholic St. Nicholas Church School in the Bronx, Beauvier doesn’t believe that the students should be coddled with things like ball point pens.



Philip Seymour Hoffman as Father Flynn and Amy Adams as Sister James in “Doubt”.

Photo credit: Andrew Schwartz, Miramax

“Every easy choice today will have its consequence tomorrow,” she explains to her colleague, a cynically free and more hopeful Sister James played by Amy Adams. What seems to be a simple personality clash between Sister Beauvier and the younger, progressive thinking Father

Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), comes to a head when Sister James reports that Father Flynn might have “interfered” with school’s first black student.

Adapted from the 2005 Pulitzer Prize and Tony award winning play, Doubt makes for a great story and magnificent on screen performance, but not the full cinematic experience that separates a stage production from a moving picture show. Shanley, a masterful writer that was awarded an Academy Award in 1987 with his screenplay for Moonstruck, hasn’t directed a feature film since his first outing nearly two decades ago, the infamous Joe Versus the Volcano.



Meryl Streep as Sister Aloysius in “Doubt”.
Photo credit: Andrew Schwartz, Miramax

Doubt feels overly directed and the fact that it overcomes the stifling and controlling auteur (Shanley is often noted to have a clause in his contracts that doesn’t allow a single word to be changed from his screenplays) is a testament to the intricateness of the script and powerhouse cast.

The imagery and scarcity of locations seems underplayed perhaps in part to make room for emotion packed dialogue. One looks at Nichol’s stage to screen adaptation of Edward Albee’s “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,” another four person character driven drama, as an example of minimizing cinematic techniques in favor of bringing the drama to life.

In Doubt, though, this method seems to lack the subtlety and at times almost makes it as though the thesis of every scene was given to the audience before the screening.

The four principles of the film—Hoffman, Streep, Adams and relatively new face Viola Davis—each bring layers upon layers to their characters. Streep, who will without question get numerous well deserved accolades for another remarkable performance, plays Sister Aloysius as a fascinating gorgon-like character, rich and complex. Streep and Davis’s scene—which apparently took a week of shooting alone—is the pièce de résistance of the film.

Without question, Doubt is a terrifically deep and enjoyable film. The audience is clearly set up to love characters they hated at the beginning, and hate people they thought they loved. The relationship between the people sitting in the theatre is just as complicated with those on screen as the diocese members and parishioners interacting with one another.

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Shanley stated, of his original stage play, that the final act actually takes place in the lobby after the show when the viewers discuss what they think happened. The film version doesn’t leave loose ends at its finale, but does give the observer something to take away and reflect on beyond the ninety minute running time.

“Doubt” stars Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, and Viola Davis. “Doubt,” which is written and directed by John Patrick Shanley, opened on December 12, 2008. In Chicago, the film opened at Landmark Century Centre Cinema and AMC River East.



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