

Philomena (2013)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hour 13 min. .

Our Advisories: Violence 4; Language -1; Sex/Nudity -1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.

Psalm 72.4

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven* times.*

Matthew 18:21-22

Director Stephen Frears, best known for his *The Queen*, *Mrs. Henderson Presents*, and *Dangerous Liaisons*, gives us his best film yet—and Judi Dench presents us with perhaps the best of a long string of great performances. Although overshadowed by the huge blockbusters, this film—no doubt to become a part of the Oscar buss soon—will be around and cherished long after the mega-producers have ceased counting their hundreds of millions in box office receipts. Steve Coogan and Jeff Pope's screenplay is based on Martin Sixsmith's 2009 book *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee*, a story as filled with grace and forgiveness as it is of oppression and institutional cruelty.

The film at the very beginning brings together the strands of three stories:

1. That of Martin Sixsmith (Steve Coogan) dealing with his dismissal from a post in Tony Blair's administration, amidst

charges of scandal, and his attempt to restart his career in journalism.

2. Retired nurse Philomena Lee, holding a picture of a toddler boy and, musing guiltily over the events, and, on the day of his birth, deciding to tell her daughter Jane (Michelle Fairley) her secret story of how Anthony, as she had named him, was taken from her.

3. Frequent flashbacks to the young Philomena (Sophie Kennedy Clark) meeting and having a one night stand with a boy; of her father abandoning her to the cruelties of life in an Irish convent run by overly moralistic nuns who showed her no sympathy.

Jane, working as a server at a catered party, overhears one of the guests, Martin talking about his journalistic ambitions, tells him about her mother in the hope that he might help her find out what happened to her son. However, Sixsmith, a former BBC correspondent and bureau chief, has his heart set on "serious" journalism, not what he condescendingly calls "feature story" writing, so he blows her off. He would like to write a book on Russian history, but the lack of enthusiasm from those to whom he mentions the project makes him aware that this is not the way to go. Talking over with his wife Jane's invitation, he makes an appointment at a restaurant to meet the mother and daughter.

He is upset by Philomena's story in which the nuns, believing that she is a depraved girl, dismiss her terrible childbirth pains with, "Pain is her penance." She and the other Magdalene girls are forced to work in the laundry to pay off their care, allowed to see their infants for just one hour a day. Then, when Anthony is three, the nuns sell him to a wealthy couple without any warning or the opportunity to say goodbye. The one bright spot in her incarceration was a young sympathetic nun who managed to take a picture of the boy and give to her on the sly. Through the years this small framed photograph had

become like a holy icon, bringing Philomena a measure of comfort, even a tiny pleasure, as she takes it out and gazes at it.

Martin, backed by his editor at a newspaper, agrees to accompany her for still another visit to the convent in County Tipperary, Ireland. The two are received courteously at the convent, but are told that they do not have any further information because the old records had been destroyed in a fire. When Martin continues to push the matter, suggesting that they be allowed to talk to the older nuns to see if they remember anything, the nun curtly dismisses him so that she can talk privately with Philomena. Noticing through a window a dour old nun, he tries to enter and talk with her, but is prevented by the staff from doing so. He goes outside and comes across a graveyard. It is filled with the graves of unnamed babies, as well as of several mothers who had perished in childbirth. The nuns had not bothered to tend the graves, all of which are covered over with vines and weeds.

Discouraged, the two return to the village inn, but there in the pub Martin learns that they have been lied to by the nuns. The fire was a bonfire, the bar tender informs him, with the nuns themselves burning all of the old records. They also learn that American parents probably had adopted Anthony. Clearly the convent is not well liked by the villagers.

Deciding to go to America, Philomena experiences culture shock—you probably saw in the trailer her express her fear that Anthony might be overweight—because of the large portions of food they serve in America. Thanks to his journalistic contacts and his trusty laptop computer, he learns the truth about Anthony, who had been given a new name by his adoptive parents. There are several surprises in store for the two, as well as for viewers, so we will go no further with the story—only to say that it is a powerful one that deals with faith and forgiveness as much as with the solving of a the puzzle of a lost son's fate.

The film reminds me a bit of *Les Miserables* in that it can be seen and discussed as one contrasting two ways of life—that of grace and forgiveness as opposed to one of clinging to past wrongs and refusing to forgive. Martin and Philomena both grew up in the Catholic Church, but whereas Martin now has given up his belief in God, Philomena's faith is even deeper than when she was young. Martin refuses to forgive the church, and the nun in particular, Sister Hildegarde (Barbara Jefford), whose cruelty so hurt his friend. Philomena, on the other hand, still goes to confession and loves the church, able even to offer the now aged but unrepentant nun forgiveness. Philomena is free from the bitterness and dour outlook on life that plague Martin.

It would be nice to be able to write that forgiveness softens all hearts, but the rigidly moral nun still believes that it was Philomena, not herself, who is guilty of mortal sin. Martin loses his cool and lashes out like an Old Testament prophet. If Philomena's naïve faith has softened his atheism a bit, the nuns' cruelty—their past wrongs against Philomena are added to by a new, incredibly cruel, one—quickly confirms his contempt for any and all religion, thus illustrating an old observation that the church has created more atheists than all other causes combined.

Despite the heaviness of the drama, Stephen Frear's film is much lighter than the similarly themed *Magdalene Sisters* (2002). The script (co-written by actor Steve Coogen) plays on the class differences between the Oxford-educated Martin and the lower class Philomena. He quotes T.S. Elliot, whereas she goes on almost endlessly telling him the plot of a bodice-ripping novel she tries to get him to read. In fact, their status as odd-couple friends is confirmed by the ending when the last words we hear are her reciting again the plot of her favorite novel while he listens in silence.

The film also has many moments of grace that makes it a shoo-in for Visual Parables' Top Ten Film list. One of them is when

the couple are still in Washington DC at the airport, about to give up because the trail has gone cold. Reporting this to his editor back in London, the response is negative. She orders him to convince Philomena to keep up the quest. He is clearly reluctant to do so, seeing what pain she is in. He says nothing about his phone conversation. It is Philomena who decides they must go back into the city, thus relieving him greatly. Later, when she is highly troubled, his humanity is affirmed even more when he tells her that he will not write the story, quite an offer for a journalist to make!

This opportunity to see two actors at the top of their form is not to be missed!

The full review with discussion questions will be included in the January 2014 issue of Visual Parables, scheduled for posting early that month. To subscribe to the publication go to the Store. A year's subscription will gain you access not just to this issue (which has far more features in it than just film reviews and guides), but also to issues as far back as Summer 2006.