

Doubt

A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor

Doubt has always suffered an uneasy existence among people of faith. Even after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples of Jesus are divided between worship and doubt (Matthew 28:17). For Frederick Buechner, “Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith, it keeps it alive and moving.” Yet the space between pants and skin is never for the faint hearted.

In this space enters Doubt. Based on a Pulitzer Prize Winning play of the same name, the movie offers a subtle storyline, engaging acting and intellectual stimulation from a complex range of issues.

Father Brendan Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is a new priest leading change in the New York Parish of St. Nicholas in the Bronx. Powerful skills of oratory might inspire some, but inevitably sour others.

His charisma and innovative methods stumble against the ironclad convictions of Parish principal, Sister Aloysius Beauvier (Meryl Streep). The battlelines are drawn between hope and fear, love and discipline. Into the fray steps the schools first ever black student, Donald Miller (Joseph Foster) and his teacher, Sister James (Amy Adams), still learning her trade.

Meryl Streep as Sister Aloysius Beauvier is superb. While her austerity repels, the audience remain intrigued by the moments of human empathy that leak from under her starched wimple.

The two central conflict scenes, despite being extended in length and placed back to back, are superb. The tension between Sister Aloysius Beauvier and Donald Miller’s mother (Viola Davis), followed by Father Brendan Flynn and Sister Aloysius Beauvier, crackle and pop open a absorbing range of issues. For religious communities, what is the greatest sin? Should it be racism, sexuality or child abuse? Is it Christian to protect those you serve today, at the expense of justice tomorrow?

For a movie about people of faith, God remains strangely absent. The opening was promising, the image of a toy dancer, spun by the invisible force of a magnetic mirror, offering a fleeting image of potentially divine interaction. After that, we are left exposed to the full emotional toll demanded by the complexity of doubt.

One of the gifts of cinema lies in the ability of abstract images to convey mood and build story. If Doubt has a fault, it is found in the simplistic, almost linear, use of such images. Open windows, blown light bulbs, branches broken by storm winds and dead mice lack sophistication and nuance. Perhaps the move from play to film is at fault, amplified by the fact that John Patrick Shanley is not only director, but also writer of both play and movie script.

Despite this criticism, Doubt is a knockout. If you are looking for a movie to stimulate Lenten debate, seek Doubt. By the end, even this Baptist was converted.

*Rev Dr Steve Taylor is Senior Pastor at Opawa Baptist Church and Lecturer in Gospel and Film at Bible College of New Zealand. He is the author of *The Out of Bounds Church?* (Zondervan, 2005) and writes regularly at www.emergentkiwi.org.nz.*