

DOUBT

US, 2009, John Patrick Shanley



John Patrick Shanley won a Pulitzer Prize for this drama about the Catholic Church in the Bronx in 1964. It also won a number of Tony Awards on Broadway. Shanley has opened out his play for the screen, written the screenplay and directed the film.

There will be quite contrasting responses from Catholic audiences who have a feel for the church and its history and from audiences who don't share the Catholic experience and will see it as another drama about authority and power, which has a church setting.

It is a film of strong Catholic interest.

On the immediate surface, it might seem another film about clergy and sexual abuse. Shanley is aware of the current situation but his drama does not indicate whether the priest is guilty of any misconduct or not. There are some clues which might suggest that he is. But, there are clues which might suggest that he is not. Shanley is much more interested in doubt and the uncertainties of certainty. He wants his audience to doubt.

So, the focus of the film is on a struggle of authority and power in the context of a strict American Catholic Church which is about to enter an era of transition, about to learn different models of Church, especially that of the people of God and a more biblical way of interpreting authority and action.

Sister Aloysius belongs to the old school of sternness, a superior and a principal who demands order and good conduct. Older Catholics will recognise her. And Meryl Streep does one of her extraordinary performances, lowering the register of her voice, barking out commands, frightening the children (she says that is what she is supposed to do), supervising the nun's community and, most of all, pursuing Fr Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman convincing as a priest of the time) with relentless certainty and judgmental superiority. Caught between the two is the nice, young and rather naïve Sister James (Amy Adams) who tries to do the right thing.

The nun who taught Shanley at school and who is the model for Sister James was technical adviser to the film and so it has a much more real and convincing Catholic atmosphere about it than most films (though Ubi Caritas from Taize was composed later and there is an English breviary in 1964).

There is a powerful performance from Viola Davis as the mother of the boy who is at the centre of the dispute between Sister Aloysius and Fr Flynn. He is the only African American in the school and is bullied. A quiet boy, Fr Flynn tries to affirm him – which, after his opening sermon on doubts which Sister Aloysius will have none of, arouses her suspicions. She pursues them righteously and there are some powerful scenes of confrontation between the two.

The film is set in the autumn and the season as well as the relationship between pursuing nun and accused priest become colder and colder. The look and colour of the film reflect this, so that this memoir of a period of a Church about to change is quite a sombre, strong and well-acted experience.

