

# BREACH

US, 2006, d. Billy Ray



This is a very interesting drama. In fact, it is more than interesting. It broaches not only the issues of national security and espionage, treason and treachery in the American context, it takes us further into the complex psyche of the traitor. The traitor is a patriot with a twist, but he is also a surface outspoken religious man whose dark side is not limited to lies and betrayal but involves some sexual deviance. He is a proselytiser for his Catholic faith and a devout member of Opus Dei.

We are told immediately that Robert Hanssen was arrested in 2001 for the worst breaches of American security ever, information given to Russian contacts over a period of 22 years. At the end we are told that he is serving a life sentence in a Florida maximum security prison with 23 hours a day isolation.

There has been a succession of films, fact as well as some fiction based on fact, especially about English spies like Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald MacLean and Anthony Blunt. Timothy Hutton appeared as American Aldrich Ames who is referred to in this film by Hanssen as the most destructive spy up to that time.

This film, directed by Billy Ray who directed the fascinating story of serial plagiarist, *Glass*, *Shattered Glass* from the *New Republic*, delves into the character of Robert Hanssen, showing him in the two months prior to his arrest, caught in the act of making a drop of documents. The FBI appointed him to a fake task to keep an eye on him and get enough evidence for the arrest. They assigned an ambitious young employee, Eric O'Neill, as clerk to Hanssen to keep an eye on him because of the sexual issues. They soon have to reveal the truth to him when he finds that he admires Hanssen – at which stage both he and the audience are quite shocked. We have seen the earnest, ultra-serious Hanssen in action, know him as personally unsympathetic but a rosary-praying, mass-going grandfather, supported by a similarly devout and devoted wife.

The young assignee is a careless Catholic with an East German wife whom Hanssen wants to convert. This Catholic theme is well explored although the enigmas and contradictions of Hanssen's life are not solved. The final words in the film are a request from the haggard Hanssen for Eric O'Neill to pray for him.

Chris Cooper has proven himself a versatile and persuasive actor in many roles (including his Oscar-winning *Adaptation*). He communicates the surface as well as the depths so that we are continually astonished by his inconsistencies of attitude and behaviour and continually scrutinising him to try to grasp and understand more. It is a fine performance.

Ryan Phillippe also proves that he is developing as an actor (after *Flags of our Fathers*) showing the blend of ambition and naiveté that makes him credible to Hanssen as well as reliable to his Control (played with ice and intensity by Laura Linney). He grows into the job even though it is in danger of ruining his marriage. He is able to make Hanssen believe him and exercises great shrewdness to lull Hanssen and lure him into a trap. O'Neill finally leaves the bureau and the credits' information is that he is a practising lawyer in Washington – he would be a formidable performer in court.

The screenplay does not make much overt reference to Opus Dei – Eric complains at one stage when Hanssen explains the society to his wife – so there are no Da Vinci sinister overtones. Rather, the religious theme is shown in action. It contributes to those insightful films which show the extraordinary inconsistencies in the behaviour of respectable Catholics (like *Looking for Mr Goodbar* or *Priest*).

This is a well-written and intelligent drama for adult consideration with challenging psychology and themes.

