

# REASONABLE *DOUBT*

Philip Seymour Hoffman and Meryl Streep spar in a thespian showdown

by Kieron Barry

**THE DISCOVERY OF SEX**, like the discovery of one's religious faith, initially promises a life of joyful communion. Instead, both generally bequeath journeys of unbearable loneliness. Making a mournful plunge for the heart of these twin, paradoxical transcendences is *Doubt*, directed by John Patrick Shanley in an adaptation of his own four-hander stage play.

Philip Seymour Hoffman plays Father Flynn, a hearty, faintly radical priest attempting to shine *lux aeterna* into the gloom of his drab 1960s Bronx parish. Meryl Streep is Sister Aloysius, a bony predator somewhere between crow and vulture, who by day terrorizes the schoolchildren to whom she is principal and by night presides over convent meals of *Riffifi*-length silence. With little more to go on than misanthropy, a pathological fear of pleasure, and the confused evidence of an impressionable and flighty novice (the always-fun Amy Adams), Aloysius begins to suspect there's a touch of eros in Flynn's dealings with one Donald Miller, the school's only black child.

Sister Aloysius is brutal, unscrupulous, and easy to despise. Flynn is loose, gregarious, and life-affirming. His pedophilia, though, would surely negate all his good qualities and justify Aloysius's rule-bending witch-hunt, wouldn't it? Yet which is destroying more lives? In *Doubt*, every question unfolds only to reveal another question. Even the matter of Flynn's guilt or innocence—which in most films would be a key reveal—remains here a tantalizing enigma.

MOVIE

Flynn may or may not be criminally culpable, but he's indisputably guilty of being a man—and not just a single man but a solitary one. Most problems within the Roman Catholic Church stem from the fact that its hierarchy consists solely of men, a gender proven to be uniquely unsuited not only to celibacy but to basic governance. One of the manifold tragedies of such an infrastructure is that many women within the church, consciously or not, end up aping rather than agitating. So it is with Aloysius, who becomes so emotionally void that when Donald's mother breaks down in her presence, all the Sister of Charity



**TIGHTLY WOUND:** Meryl Streep portrays Sister Aloysius as a brutal unscrupulous emotional void.



**ETERNAL LIGHT:** Philip Seymour Hoffman, effortless and relaxed as Father Flynn in *Doubt* (with Amy Adams as Sister James), gives fans another reason to worship.

can do is stare with fascinated disgust at the snot pouring down the woman's face. It feels as though there are 12 inches of glass between Streep and every other character, and the only suggestion of desire we ever see in her is when she gnaws hungrily at her thin lower lip at the carnal prospect of catching her prey.

In fact, *Doubt's* climactic scenes are less assured than its taut and twitchy build-ups, in which one glimpses the addictive thrill that gossip and suspicion can provide in otherwise endlessly dun-colored lives. Of course drama (like sex) requires restraint and impediment in order to reach its apotheosis, and the church readily obliges here. Its rich yet desolate iconography haunts the film, all but literally at one point when the eye of a stained-glass window seems to unblinkingly follow Flynn around the room.

The key delight of *Doubt* is watching two world-class actors spar. Ignoring Streep's occasionally flailing Irish vowels, both she and Hoffman give flawless performances. Streep lends her reading the hard-fought-for, furrowed, introverted intensity of a Miles Davis solo. Hoffman takes the opposite approach; his performance seems entirely effortless. Like Jack Nicholson

(but without the ego), Hoffman is so compellingly relaxed it's easy to forget what a technically skilled actor he is. He gives off the ineffable sense of not caring, of having stayed up all night, stumbled onto set, opened his mouth, and delivered a performance of supreme quality.

He also gives us one moment of unforgettable beauty towards the end of the film, comparable in theme—and, I would argue, stature—to the entrance of Captain Wentworth in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. The young Donald stands isolated and ridiculed in the corridor, his schoolbooks in a helpless pile around him. Suddenly, almost magically, Hoffman has his arms around the boy. As in the doctrine of transubstantiation, we are forced—given the allegations surrounding Flynn—to distinguish between the appearance and the essence of this embrace, endlessly breaking down and reassembling what we see in an attempt to get at something invisible and, perhaps, unknowable.

It's as complex and arresting as almost anything in cinema, and the selfless, subtle, yet masterful acting justifies the increasingly common worship of Philip Seymour Hoffman—a forgivable idolatry if ever there was one. **Ⓜ**