

## Philomena

Dame Judi Dench will be 80 in 2014, but the strength and richness of her acting shows no diminishment in her delectable turn in the new film “Philomena,” a poignant family chronicle based on a real story.

Lee was a pregnant teenager in Ireland in 1952 who was forced to have her baby in a convent, then stay there as a “Magdalene Sister” working in the laundry to pay back what the nuns had spent on her upkeep. The girls were able to bond with their children as babies and toddlers for one hour each day but then had to watch, agonizingly, as strangers showed up to adopt them.

Based on a book by BBC correspondent Martin Sixsmith (“The Lost Child of Philomena Lee”), the new film, directed by veteran British director Stephen Frears, traces the search by Philomena and journalist Sixsmith (Steve Coogan) to find her child. The film begins in 2003, the year of the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday of her lost son Anthony. It triggers in Lee, now a retired nurse with her own family, the desire to track down the child. She comes in contact with Sixsmith, sacked from his government job and saddled with finding a “human interest story,” a prospect he deprecates, but he agrees to take on her search. Their “odd couple” odyssey begins.

It takes them to Washington, DC after they learn that her son was adopted by an American family. With pluck and luck they track him down, and the revelations they learn about Anthony eventually lead them back to Ireland and, in fact, to the Roscrea Sacred Heart convent where the journey started, with surprising results.

The role of Philomena is catnip for Dench, who imbues the character of an Irish everywoman with multiple layers and real substance. A committed Catholic, she is devout but not hidebound, respectful of the Church but forgiving of its zealots. She knows she has sinned but she accepts this rather than wallowing in it. She may not be attuned to high culture, but she shows commendable enthusiasm about her tastes. She is ever proper and well-spoken, yet she can toss out a cuss word. She is wide-eyed about America yet instinctively recognizes some of its frailties, like its growing obesity. It is an intricate and nuanced performance, one ready to be recognized for year-end honors.

She is nicely balanced by Coogan, a prominent comedian (“The Trip,” “Hot Fuzz”) who here has taken on a mostly straight role—rather like Will Forte does in “Nebraska.” Coogan’s Sixsmith is a world-weary, semi-cynic who’s seen it all yet gets caught up in Philomena’s hunt. He comes to identify with this comfy “mum” who may be not of his “class” but who is wise in engaging people. He at first just suffers her literary tastes (there is a funny airport scene where she spins out an entertaining story from a romance novel she has just read) but later comes to accept her lively narrating. It turns out that the fairly irrepressible Coogan can dial his sarcasm back a bit and still come out on top.

Stephen Frears, one of England’s most consistently sound directors (“The Queen,” “Dirty Pretty Things”) handles his stars and the rest of his cast beautifully in converting the script by Coogan himself and Jeff Pope. Also, the film offers locals some

nice looks at DC locations, including intimate moments at the Lincoln Memorial as well as some scenes on Capitol Hill (the Folger Library and the Washington Court Hotel).

We've come to expect intelligent, thoughtful film drama out of Great Britain every year, and this year "Philomena" fills that bill.

*(The film is rated "R" and runs 95 min.)*

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