

Advertisement

Largest Private Direct Diamond Importer!
Lowest Prices Guaranteed!

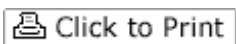
1000s of GIA & EGL Certified!

.48 ct. \$499 F-SI	1 ct. Solitaire \$599
.73 ct. \$999 I-SI	
.90 ct. \$1,999 GIA J-SI	
3.33 ct. \$2,399 White! No Carbon!	
Semi Mounts from \$99	1 ct. Studs \$399

the Jewelry Exchange
FACTORY DIRECT!
 888.539.3574



Powered by Clickability



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

'Doubt' is cut from the cloth of a nun's austere habit

Advertisement

By Susan Wloszczyna, USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Heaven knows, if anyone could resurrect the movie-nun genre, which hasn't had an award-worthy Hollywood showcase since 1995's *Dead Man Walking*, it's Meryl Streep. Her austere role in *Doubt* could be her penance after wallowing in so much guilty fun (and grossing her biggest box-office hit ever at age 59) as a diva of a dungaree-donning dervish in *Mamma Mia!*

REVIEW: [The excellence of 'Doubt' is a certainty](#)

VIDEO: [Check out the trailer for 'Doubt'](#)

Stripped of makeup and shrouded in black, she's not just any movie nun, but a stern sentry of moral certitude circa 1964 known as Sister Aloysius. She's a primal force to be reckoned with in the film, based on the Pulitzer- and Tony-winning drama, opening Friday. With a Bronx squawk and righteous smirk, the record-breaking 14-time Oscar nominee who soon might reach No. 15 gives the full-blown Streep treatment to what could have been a stereotypical holy terror.

From her red-rimmed eyes that peer warily through utilitarian glasses as she patrols her school's nooks and crannies to the homemade shawl that wraps around her like armor, the no-nonsense principal is out to deflect any perceived threats to the children under her care.

"The dragon is hungry," says Father Flynn, the jovial, open-minded parish priest played by Philip Seymour Hoffman, while observing Streep's hawkish sister swoop down on yet another young wrongdoer. He himself becomes a target of her wrath when she suspects he is abusing the school's lone black student.

Streep might be a little hungry herself. It has been 26 years since she won an Oscar as the lead in *Sophie's Choice*, her second after a supporting trophy for 1979's *Kramer vs. Kramer*.

Considering the golden age of movie nuns basically ended with 1965's *Sound of Music*, the character's uniqueness these days may work to Streep's advantage.

"Nuns seem like foreign creatures now to the general public," says Oscar historian Damien Bona. "There are so few Catholic schools around that they aren't much a part of people's day-to-day experience."

Plus, their numbers are dwindling. A survey in 2004 found 71,486 nuns in the United States, half as many as there were during the decade in which *Doubt* is set. Average age: 70.

After nuns were allowed to wear street clothes in the late '60s, they lost much of their mystique as dramatic tools. In movies, they mostly have been relegated to comic relief (*The Blues Brothers*, *Sister Act*) or as objects of scorn and satire (Jodie Foster's peg-legged version in *The Secret Lives of Altar*

Boys).

"In mainstream culture, it's difficult to deal with nuns without a habit," says Bren Ortega Murphy, an associate professor of communication at Loyola University who is working on a documentary on how nuns are seen in mass media. "Joan Chittister, the Benedictine nun and author, has observed that many people's longing for the habit seems to be more about their own comfort than the good it would do regarding the sisters' actual work."

As a period piece, *Doubt* re-instates the visual impact of the habit, especially one as exotic as that once worn by the bonneted Sisters of Charity, an order founded by Elizabeth Ann Seton, the first American-born saint.

Wearing a habit definitely was a transforming experience for *Enchanted* star Amy Adams as Sister Aloysius' beatific sidekick, the sweet and unseasoned Sister James, who gets caught in the tug of war between her superior and the charismatic priest.

"There are so many layers, there is so much bulk to you," she says. "I have a high-heel addiction, and flat shoes created a different stride. The bonnet isolates your world. You can only see forward. You must turn your head."

The most memorable cinematic nuns have some basis in reality, and John Patrick Shanley, who adapted his play and directed *Doubt*, drew from his own past. He sought out the technical advice of Sister Margaret McEntee, 73, who goes by Sister Peggy. She was his first-grade teacher at St. Anthony School in the Bronx and is the model for Sister James.

"She lived a life of anonymity and service, and it was my great pleasure to dedicate the film to her," says Shanley during lunch at one of his regular Soho haunts.

He believes the more mean-spirited portraits of nuns too easily discount the good such women did and the sacrifices they made. "I'm tired of people dedicating films and stuff to people who are dead. My point of view is, they can't hear you."

He certainly comes through loud and clear to Sister Peggy as she sits in the modest seating area of her living quarters at the scenic College of Mount St. Vincent in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. Much of the movie, including the church where Hoffman preaches, was shot here.

"He absolutely fascinates me," she says of her onetime pupil who used her former name, Sister James, in his 2004 play because he figured she had died. Thanks to her efforts, they reunited 48 years after they shared a classroom when she was 21 and he was 6. "I remember him from first grade. He was very quiet and reflective, a very thoughtful kid."

She couldn't be more excited about her foray into filmmaking, pointing out the auditorium where they built Sister Aloysius' office and the pew that her family members sat in as extras.

She also dug up an old habit, which used to be stitched by hand by each individual nun, to give to costumer Ann Roth as a reference.

Sister Peggy stopped wearing hers in 1968. And she doesn't miss it at all.

"It's true that it's almost difficult to portray a religious nun nowadays. That is, if you are only looking for externals," she says. "Some people say it's the garb that invites them in. Others will argue the garb restricts them from coming up to you. Me, I'm perfectly happy not to wear it. As I told my father, 'You know, Dad, there are policemen who wear their uniforms, and there are private detectives who don't, and they both do their jobs.'"

Besides, if anyone wants verification of her status, there is a pin and a ring to confirm she is a Sister of Charity. As she says, "You have to behave yourself when you see this pin."

As for filling Sister Aloysius' sensible shoes, Shanley says he didn't have to think too hard about who should bring his rigid traditionalist to life on the big screen. "If you walked out on the street here and asked 10 people who should play that part, they would have said Meryl," he says. "It's sort of a no-brainer. She is the person for the part."

While she might start off as a typical Nunzilla, Sister Aloysius soon exposes less expected sides to her personality, such as her kindness toward a blind nun.

"It's important when you are a storyteller to start where the audience is, and then take them where you want to go," Shanley says. "Rather than start in the first frame by saying, 'You don't know anything about this, so I'm going to show this to you.'"

As for why she gravitated to Sister Aloysius, Streep simply replies, "How could I not? It's a great role."

She appreciated the ritualized aspects of religious life. "Every single part of the day is subscribed. From the prayer upon rising, there

is a consciousness about what you are doing. That certainty is part of who Sister Aloysius is. There is a serenity and real comfort in it."

And she understands the appeal that playing such an independent female figure would have to such actresses as Deborah Kerr and Audrey Hepburn in the '40s and '50s.

"They go beyond sexuality," she says. "Unlike most women in films, it's easy to imagine a male protagonist separate from a love interest. For nuns, their romantic relationships are not the most important thing about them."

She was drawn in by the war of the sexes that unfolds in *Doubt* as her nun struggles to exert herself within the patriarchal structure of the Church.

"I thought of her like Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men*," referring to the actor's disgraced Marine officer in the 1992 courtroom thriller who justifies his actions as being for the greater good. "If she were a man, she wouldn't be thought of as prickly, just commanding."

When Streep and the estimable Hoffman, an Oscar winner for 2005's *Capote*, verbally clash in their climatic encounter, it's as if *Alien* and *Predator* converted to Catholicism.

"That's how they were in the room," Shanley recalls. "Meryl was pacing up and down, muttering, 'I'm going to kick his ass,' before each take. The crew could hear it. Phil could hear it. They kept each other on their toes. No question about that."

How did Hoffman counter-punch? The filmmaker says, "He would mutter her name and say, 'Meryl. Let's just do the scene. I'm not going to buy into it, so cut out your shenanigans. You're not going to get into my head.' "

Shanley has described the experience of shooting the battle royale as "one of the most electrifying weeks I've ever had."

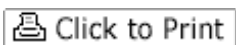
Streep mostly supports her sister's crusade against encroaching modernity, from the ballpoint pens that undermine student handwriting to the chumminess with parishioners advocated by Father Flynn.

"There's not much I would disagree with," says the actress, who grew up Presbyterian but occasionally attended Catholic Mass with friends. "John has done an amazing job expanding his play. The biggest difference is with the presence of the vivid faces of the children. It really raises the stakes in her argument. The priest calls her a dragon. I see her as the protector at the gate."

And, she says, "Oh, I loved her."

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/news/2008-12-11-doubt-nuns_N.htm



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2008 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.