

# The heartless of a heartless world

The Magdalene Sisters, written and directed by Peter Mullan

By Joanne Laurier  
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*“Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world”—Marx*

Five years ago in Dublin, Ireland, an order of nuns sold off part of its convent to real estate developers. On that property the remains of 133 women buried in unmarked graves were discovered. It turned out that the women had been incarcerated by the Catholic Church to work as virtual slave laborers in institutions known as Magdalene Asylums.

The asylums were a network of laundries named after Mary Magdalene, who, according to Christian theology, was a prostitute turned devout follower of Christ. The Magdalene Asylums were set up in the 19th century, first as homes to rehabilitate prostitutes and then as industrial orphanages in response to the growth in the number of abandoned children resulting from the devastating Potato Famine of the middle and late 1840s. By the early 20th century, their role was expanded to function as workhouses for women who in a variety of ways had offended the country’s moral code. Run by the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland, the asylums functioned as commercial laundries, financing the order’s operations.

Under pressure from the Church and its archaic mores, families sent daughters who were deemed wayward to the asylums. The girls were brutalized and worked long hours every day but Christmas, for no pay. The choice of work was not accidental. Called “Magdalenes,” or penitents, the inmates were intended to scrub away their sins by scrubbing clean the dirty laundry from orphanages, churches, prisons and local businesses. Many of the women were so broken in spirit and isolated from the outside world that they chose asylum labor over leaving the institutions, some remaining until they died. The Catholic Church in Ireland indentured more than 30,000 women and girls in the Magdalene Asylums. Amazingly, the last one was not closed until 1996.

Inspired by a British television documentary aired in 1998, called “Sex in a Cold Climate,” Scottish actor-director Peter Mullan (lead performer in Ken Loach’s *My Name is Joe* and director of *Orphans*) wrote and directed *The Magdalene Sisters*.

Winner of the Golden Lion at the 2002 Venice Film Festival, the film predictably caused a stir at the Vatican and among Italian cinema industry officials. The right-wing Berlusconi

government had recently overhauled the Venice festival, aiming to prevent the rewarding of antiestablishment works that would generate controversy. One Catholic media figure commented: “It’s a bizarre signal that the first festival of the center-right government has chosen to honor a professedly anticlerical film.”

*The Magdalene Sisters* is a semi-fictionalized, composite account of the stories of four inmates. It opens in 1964 at an Irish wedding with a priest coiled around a drum, furiously banging away. The shaman is musically transfixed. His sweaty-collared appearance suggests that he may also be engaged in some manner of soul cleansing, no doubt involving an element of sexual release. Concurrently a young woman, Margaret (Anne-Marie Duff), is being raped by her cousin. When she reenters the wedding room, word of her violation round-robins through the crowd. The next morning, Margaret’s father ships her off to the Magdalene Laundry.

Rose (Dorothy Duffy) has just had a child out of wedlock. Priest and parents rip the baby from her breast, force her to sign adoption papers and send her to the laundry.

Bernadette (Nora-Jane Noone) is reaching adulthood in St. Attracta’s Orphanage. When she innocently flirts with the local factory boys, she too is sent to the laundry.

The three sack-clothed girls are met by the convent’s Mother Superior, Sister Bridget (Geraldine McEwan), the provider of the “earthly means to help cleanse your very soul.” “All men are sinners ... therefore all men are open to temptation,” croons the diabolical head nun as she berates the girls for being “temptation” incarnate. Simultaneously, this Bride of Christ is greedily counting rubber-banded rolls of money in front of a photograph of the late President John F. Kennedy.

In the laundry, supervised by the semi-mad Katy—a 40-year veteran of the institution—the girls meet Crispina (Eileen Walsh), a mentally handicapped girl who refuses to wash priest collars. Crispina, whose real name is Harriet (the girls are routinely renamed by the nuns) has had a child out of wedlock, the father an anonymous soldier. Father Fitzroy, the asylum priest, is also sexually molesting the innocent, feeble-minded girl.

In one sadistically graphic scene, naked girls are lined up in the shower room as two nuns mock and compare the girls’

body parts. Apparently, this does not fall under the sinful category of lust or “impure thoughts.”

Bernadette incites the others to consider an escape, insisting “that all the mortal sins in the world would not justify this place.” But the consequences of a failed attempt can be grave. Director Mullan himself portrays a crazed father who brutally pummels his daughter in the asylum dormitory after an aborted escape.

A Corpus Christie celebration in town provides the girls with a short respite from their grueling life. But while officiating at the mass, Father Fitzroy is exposed before all as Crispina’s seducer through an avenging act by Margaret (both victim and victimizer come down with an irritating rash). With unabashed cruelty, the nuns send Crispina to an insane asylum, where she dies from anorexia at age 24.

Some years later, Margaret is released through her brother’s efforts, but not without one last humiliation at the hands of Sister Bridget. Bernadette, fearful of becoming a “lifer” like Katy, daringly leads Rose out of the convent, threatening to bludgeon with holy artifacts any nun who stands in their way. A postscript intimates that life after the asylum was grim for the three remaining Magdalenes.

Mullan’s film is an angry, direct work that displays an abundance of commitment on the part of both its creator and actors. The film depicts a society that up until only a few years ago tolerated Church-sanctioned torture and extreme levels of exploitation. One reviewer likened the “Magdalenes” to the Guantánamo Bay prisoners.

Mullan deserves plaudits for his sledgehammer attack on the Church, uncompromising in its dramatization of the “Holy Mother’s” medieval grotesqueries. One senses that all involved in the project drew from harsh, deeply-embedded experiences. “We’re talking about institutionalized sadism which in any century, in any context, is inhumane and unforgivable,” said Mullan in an interview with *FutureMovies.co.uk*.

In the same interview, the director speaks about the collusion between the Church and the Irish state and the fact that the surviving “Magdalenes” are being denied compensation because they had entered the institutions “voluntarily.” Mullan also discovered during the course of a question and answer session at the New York Film Festival that Magdalene Asylums existed globally: “It was a 1,300-seater and there were loads of women jumping up at the end saying: ‘I was a Magdalene!’ And I figured they were émigrés from Ireland, but these women were from Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Sydney and Rio de Janeiro.”

In another interview, Mullan speaks about the film’s timeframe: “The 1960s were awful for women in Ireland because it was the Church’s last gasp. It tried to turn back the clock.” When asked by *Movieweb.com* why the laundries were eventually shut down, Mullan replied: “Economics. They ceased to be economically viable around the late-70s, early 80s. It coincided with the domestic washing machine, and the very

slow beginnings of the Celtic Tiger Economy ... the Capitalists moved there. There was money to be made there. And on the other hand, you’ve got this labor intensive laundry business.... The modern Celtic Tiger Economy is based upon child slave labor. Because, when you add together the Magdalene asylums and the industrial schools, it’s an enormous unpaid workforce of kids.”

Several reviewers suggest that the prison genre employed by Mullan tends to dilute the complicity between society and the Church, by limiting physically and socially the scope of *The Magdalene Sisters*. There is a certain validity to a criticism of the film’s narrow focus. But it is not so much that the genre and its attendant clichés eclipse the larger social connections. The problem is a more general and complicated one, how to invest particular moments and characterizations with a broader and more objective significance.

Powerful as it is, the work undeniably suffers from a certain lack of texture. Part of this is no doubt due to Mullan’s genuine horror and outrage at the history he uncovered, which perhaps overwhelmed somewhat his more sober instincts. (*Orphans*, an imperfect work, does not suffer from this particular difficulty.) In a sense, the film is more advanced emotionally than it is intellectually or artistically.

The director is determined that the spectator not miss his message, to an extent that was probably unnecessary. The one-note effect of many of the laundry scenes tends to deaden slightly the overall impact. And Geraldine McEwan’s approach to the monstrous Sister Bridget is enthusiastic and lively, but again makes the nun so diabolical or one-dimensional that the film teeters occasionally on the edge of caricature.

The sequences outside of the asylum—in particular the opening wedding scene—stand out and allow for a more deliberate and complex examination of the social and psychological processes at work, in the given social milieu, in the Church, in Irish society.

In any event, Mullan deserves congratulation for taking on the entire Church and state hierarchy in Ireland, and exposing one small, but telling piece of the filthy historical truth.

As the director told *BBC.films*: “In bringing the subject of religious oppression to a wider audience, I didn’t just want to kick the Catholic Church, but to poke a finger in the throat of theocracy and let it be known that people shouldn’t tolerate this anymore.”

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