

“Philomena”

Based on a true story, “Philomena” covers 50 years in the life of Philomena Lee (Judi Dench). Now in her 70’s we first meet her as a teenager at a local county fair in Ireland. There she has a sexual encounter which will change the arc of her life. Pregnant, with no place to go, she is taken in by an Abbey which operates a home for unwed mothers. This is the Catholic Church of 1950’s Ireland not the enlightened world of Pope Francis. The girls slave 12 hours a day and may have an hour a day with their children. But unbeknownst to them their time with their children will be brief as the sisters regularly collect money by putting the children up for adoption.

Now in England 50 years after she watched her 4 year old son march off with his new family, Philomena is haunted by the fact that she has no way of knowing what ever happened to him and whether he still remembers her. But a chance meeting at a cocktail party between her daughter and an ex-BBC correspondent Martin Sixsmith (Steve Coogan) will change everything. The daughter takes Martin home to meet her mother and from that encounter Sixsmith decides to tell her story.

Martin has two tasks before him. The first is to earn Philomena’s trust and the second is to find out what happened 50 years ago. While Philomena yearns to find out what became of her son, a lifetime has taught her not to make waves. By contrast Martin has made a career of making waves and he persuades her to go back to the Abbey. But when he and Philomena get there they hit a stone wall. They are told that all the records were destroyed years ago in a fire. It seems that Martin has hit a dead end but one night in a local pub he finds the thread that will ultimately lead to the answer of what happened to Philomena’s son. Since one of the many pleasures of this film is the unexpected I will say no more as to how the story turns out except to note the following:

There is a reason Judi Dench is one of England’s most honored actors. Her portrayal of this woman with a tortured soul is beautifully nuanced. On the one hand she can seem flighty, witness her long dissertations on the junk romance novels she regularly reads. But as the story progresses we learn that there is a much more complex side to her personality. She knows far more than she lets

on and is deeply attuned to the feelings of others, a character trait the ever cynical Martin does not share. But as they spend more time together Martin learns from her.

The portrayal of the Abbey encapsulates what happens when rigid doctrine makes no room for human frailty. The spirit that animated the Abbey so many years ago is perfectly captured near the end of the film when an aged nun who was there at the time launches into a diatribe on the pain that must be expected by girls who “sinned”.

The reason there is a picture of Jane Russell on one of the walls in the Abbey.

The conversation between Philomena and Martin on religion. Philomena has remained devoted to the Church despite what the sisters did to her and is a model of the healing power of forgiveness. By contrast Martin is a devoted secularist and summons up all the arguments as to why her religious beliefs defy logic. They will never convince each other but it is a fascinating exchange.

The ultimate discovery as to what happened to Philomena’s son. It is not what you would expect.

The emotional grip of the film from the heart stopping moment when Philomena loses her son until the final scene 50 years later as she stands outside the Abbey and reflects on her newfound knowledge.

“Philomena” is a film to be savored.

(Amazon Prime)