

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[Doubt]

### Through a Glass Darkly

By Steve Sailer

LIKE A GREAT baseball player's career, Meryl Streep's three decades in the movies can be depicted in a few statistics: 14 Oscar nominations, four children, one husband, zero rehabs. Her new role as Sister Aloysius, the fearsome Mother Superior of a 1964 parochial school in the film version of John Patrick Shanley's drama "Doubt," would seem like the perfect outlet for her theatricality.

After all, it's a charismatic job. When I entered St. Francis de Sales in 1964, all the big kids in the second grade explained that I might not survive being sent to the principal because before Sister Adrian entered the convent she had been a lady professional wrestler.

Unfortunately, Streep's performance never quite harmonizes with Shanley's somber adaptation of his Pulitzer-winning drama about the knuckle-rapping principal's quick conjecture that a likable progressive priest is molesting a 14-year-old altar boy. Streep's hamming up Sister Aloysius as the Wicked Witch of the Bronx sounds entertaining, but she runs out of invention, perhaps due to her deprived upbringing as an affluent Presbyterian.

As a film, "Doubt" is a tidy he-said-she-said play (imagine "Sleuth" with

four characters instead of two) by the Oscar-winning screenwriter of 1987's "Moonstruck."

Philip Seymour Hoffman (an Oscar winner himself for "Capote") plays Father Flynn, the newly arrived priest who is the state-of-the-art Vatican II cleric: progressive, genial, even cool. The priest is particularly solicitous of the feelings of the grade school's first black student, a lonely eighth-grade boy.

Hoffman radiates so much acting technique that he's a bit miscast as the guiltily cringing molester: you keep expecting the expert thespian to turn on his reality distortion field and bluff his way out of the jam his character is in, but he never does.

Sister Aloysius is deeply suspicious of this trendy liberal, so she instructs a kindly novice teacher to be on the lookout for any funny stuff. Young Sister James is portrayed by Hollywood's perpetual ingénue, Amy Adams of the Disney musical "Enchanted." Once again, the casting seems a bit off. If the Mother Superior in "The Sound of Music" could recognize that Julie Andrews wasn't cut out to be a nun, surely the even girlier Amy Adams is a little doubtful?

Setting the play in 1964 allowed Shanley, who was born in the Bronx in 1950, to get the period details right—Sister Aloysius bans all ballpoint pens because pressing too hard ruins penmanship—but undermines a plot that should have been set 20 years later. The institutional crisis in the Catholic church in 1960s was less homosexuality among priests than rampant heterosexuality: the Father Flynn's and Sister Jameses were falling in love, leaving holy orders, and getting married. The admittedly anecdotal evidence suggests that declining numbers of straight priests allowed the gay element

in the clergy to reach a critical mass, enabling what had been a chronic but limited problem to metastasize.

By naming his play "Doubt," Shanley pulled a fast one on the many critics who assume Sister Aloysius is the villainess as quickly as she assumes the worst about Father Flynn.

Programmed to praise doubt and denounce dogma, the pundits salivated on cue when Shanley launched a media campaign to spin his sturdy little play as an attack on religious fundamentalism. In the *New York Times*, for instance, Christopher Isherwood asserted that "Doubt" delivers "a broader commentary on the state of the cultural and political discourse in America, and indeed on the dangerous human tendency to take refuge in certainty..." Surely, though, the church's homosexual molestation scandal is a case of tolerance run amok, just as Father Flynn's guilt is beyond doubt?

Shanley's actual text has a much less hackneyed point to make via the movie's best performance. Viola Davis plays the victim's mother, who, to Sister Aloysius's shock, explains that she is at least relieved that her son's latest admirer is a kind gentleman. After all, she took him out of public school to keep him from getting beaten up by other boys so much.

Shanley himself is struck by the duality he has witnessed in homosexual priests. A child in his extended family was molested, but a similar man "saw something in me, and educated me; gave me a great classical education. But he was a predator, and in my case he did nothing about it, but in other cases he did do something about it." ■

Rated PG-13 for thematic material

## BOOKS

[*Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*, Richard Dowden, Portobello, 550 pages]

# The Beautiful and the Damned

By Mary Wakefield

A DECADE AGO, at 3 a.m. on a hot night in a small village a few hours north of Kampala, Uganda, I was woken by the sound of screaming. I sat up in the pitch black, head cocked. All around me, in concrete dormitories, the pupils of Makonze boarding school were sleeping—but it wasn't a child's voice. I listened for a while longer, then identified the noise: the cold, futile shriek of a dying dog. So I got up, full of indignation at the thought of canine suffering, and padded out into the dark.

A few minutes later the shrieks turned to a whimper then collapsed into silence. Out of the night appeared a knot of excited children. "He want chickens, but we got him!" one boy, Anthony, proudly explained. A hungry dog had jumped into the chicken coop, so a gaggle of alert 7-year-olds, led by Anthony, had leapt from their beds and stoned it to death.

The next morning, to my horror, the Makonze teachers congratulated the children. They saw nothing wrong with youngsters enjoying the drawn-out murder of man's best friend. I was incensed and began a strict regime of colonial-style re-education, but to no avail. It took me weeks before I could think of the dog's death without outrage and months before I realized that outrage was best applied to myself and to my wilfully daft attempt to impose British sentimentality on to Africa.

If I'd read Richard Dowden's *Africa* then, I'd have seen sense sooner. The most important lesson, the one that runs

through the collection of linked essays, is this: be patient, don't be too quick to judge. In Africa, nothing is black and white.

Dowden's first experience of Africa was also at a school in Uganda, in the early 1970s, but he learned much quicker than I did. "Here I lost my virginity, physical, spiritual, moral and found Africa's huge patience and humanity—and its cruelty and violence," he says. Dowden was forced to leave a year or so later when Idi Amin decided that all whites were spies, but he made a vow to return—one that he kept.

For the last three decades, Dowden, now head of Britain's Royal African Society, has interviewed dictators, been shot at by rebel militias, and risked his life to report Africa's hidden atrocities, to debunk received wisdom and to write this humane, heartbreaking, and scholarly book.

Dowden says that to see Africa as just a victim is a mistake. Yes, the continent has been exploited by European and American greed, but it gives as good as it gets. His chapter on Angola says it best. During the Cold War, the two great adversaries treated Africa as a chessboard full of expendable pawns. In Angola, the Soviets backed the Marxist MPLA, so America sponsored the Africanist FNLA, with the intention of bleeding the Russkies of money and determination. On one interpretation, Africa was a patsy that paid an appalling price in the lives of Angolan peasants.

But there's another side to the story: "Like many of the small civil wars of the Cold War period that appeared to be ideological, fought by proxies of the Marxist Soviet Union and the capitalist United States, the Angolan war was actually the continuation of a local historical conflict," explains Dowden. "To woo powerful allies, both sides cheerfully sang the hymns of the Soviet Union or the US. The superpowers were fooled into believing they had real disciples."

The continent's complexities and its ruthlessness make it hard to help. Dowden's heart bleeds for Africa, but

unlike most of us, he doesn't salve his conscience by writing a check. He investigates and asks: will aid here do more harm than good? Too often, the answer is yes. Time and time again, all over the continent, he finds that foreign aid—food and medical supplies—is used to sponsor militias and prolong conflict.

In the mid-1990s, for instance, Dowden flew to southern Sudan and camped for a few days by Panyagor airstrip. Rumors of an incipient aid drop had snaked through the jungle, so by the time Dowden arrived, the strip was surrounded by desperate, starving families. But in between the huddled groups stalked the soldiers of the SPLA, who also depended on the aid—just as much as they did on guns and ammo—to prolong the war that had starved the people in the first place.

So what's a poor NGO to do? Feed the people and the conflict? Or let women and children die? The aid question has a particular, horrific relevance because of the trouble in the Congo, but Dowden addresses another related and equally current concern. Is there ever a case for Western intervention in Africa? Do we always make things worse? As that 21st-century monster Robert Mugabe incites global fury, there is talk of trying to depose him by force. But that would almost inevitably lead to greater suffering for Zimbabweans.

So what should the international community do? They could do worse than ask Dowden for advice. He explains Mugabe's schizoid personality: "On the one hand he loves cricket and the Queen. ... On the other hand he is an angry African man battling British colonialism and imperialism."

And then there is the other simple fact we find so difficult to understand: Mugabe's hold over other African states. "South Africa was terrified of being seen in the rest of Africa as the cats paw of the West or the bullying boss of the continent," says Dowden. "Besides, Mugabe was a hero of the liberation struggle. When others, such as Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, had wobbled, Mugabe had remained clear and steely."