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BROTHERS SHOULDN'T DO IT

The Boys of St. Vincent is
dramatic dynamite that should be seen

by Steve Warren

If only abused altar boys, past and present, watch *The Boys of St. Vincent* it could win record ratings for the A&E network when it airs Feb. 19 and 20. This docu-fictional miniseries is "inspired by" but "not a reenactment of" events that won't be news to many. It involves the abuse of young boys by Catholic brothers who ran an orphanage in Newfoundland, Canada, and a cover-up that extended to high levels of church and state.

Television

The Boys of St. Vincent is definitely one—no, two—of the most compelling dramas you'll see this year.

The first half of the story is set in 1975. The hero is Mike Finn (Phillip Dinn), a newly hired janitor who gets wind of what's going on at St. Vincent: The orphans are routinely abused, sexually and physically, by the brothers responsible for their care. "There are things in life broken that can't be fixed," the working-class philosopher says, prophetically, early on.

Against the orders of Brother Lavin (Henry Czerny), St. Vincent's director, Finn takes battered 10-year-old Kevin (Johnny Morina) to the hospital. There, the attending physician accepts Lavin's story that "it must have been one of the older boys." In the cover-up that follows, the power structure unites behind "one of the most hallowed institutions of the city."

"Everything having to do with the orphanage gets sent to the director," a social worker says, "and that's the last we ever hear of it.... Have you ever tried to go over the Catholic Church in Newfoundland?"

The story is as much about classism as anything else. On one side are the pampered priests and church, police and government leaders. On the other are the poor orphans, Finn, and a low-level police detective, Noseworthy (Brian Dooley), who is persuaded to investigate after Finn gets the official run-around.

We know what really happened to Kevin because we see Brother Lavin unbutton his shirt, caress him, and comfort him by trying to play his mother. When Kevin rebels—"You're not my mother. My mother's dead!"—Lavin flies into a rage and lashes out with his belt. Brother Lavin may be the most horrifying screen villain since Hannibal Lecter, without Lecter's ingratiating qualities.

Part One ends with business as usual at St. Vincent. The guilty brothers have been transferred, with vague promises that they will "receive treatment," but we have no reason to expect the new regime to be an improvement.

The Boys of St. Vincent: 15 Years Later begins with the arrest of Lavin, who is living in Montréal with a wife and two young sons. (The first question this domestic scene raises isn't brought up until the film's conclusion.) The case is finally coming to trial.

In a very different but equally absorbing narrative style, director John N. Smith tracks several characters and events in the second half. A talk show hostess and her callers provide a Greek chorus effect as the trial begins and Noseworthy's testimony prompts a separate inquiry into the cover-up that had kept the case under wraps. That inquiry takes bizarre twists, with one man testifying that prostate surgery has affected his memory and as much blame as possible being laid on a dead man.

Kevin (Sebastian Spence)—now grown up—won't testify, having adjusted well enough to function in society and not wanting to dredge things up again; but they do come up now that the story's out in the open.

Two other grown-up "boys" are brothers (not in the religious sense). Brian (Timothy Webber), who was expelled from St. Vincent for trying to protect his younger sibling, has become a working-class stiff, while Steven (David Hewlett) is a junkie, a hustler and a petty thief.



Henry Czerny as Brother Lavin

Lavin's sessions with a psychiatrist give some insight into his background. He was an orphan himself—presumably abused, though that's not specified. The scene where he's encouraged to get in touch with his inner child is so trendy it lets you pinpoint almost to the month when the film was made.

Several lives are changed *en route* to a reasonably satisfying conclusion.

What happened at St. Vincent has happened in some form in every parish in the world, and new stories are coming to light every day. The church is starting to assume some responsibility, having been forced to do so by the courts in many cases.

The Boys of St. Vincent was made for Canadian television but received a limited theatrical release in the United States last year. In that form, it made my list of the year's 20 best films. The cuts that have been made will be missed only by the handful who saw it in theaters. These include shower scenes which emphasize the boys' vulnerability, and flashbacks that suggest incidents of abuse as the boys describe them to the police.

It's insulting, even if true, that we're considered less capable of dealing with sensitive dramatic material than the Canadians, but don't let that keep you from watching. *The Boys of St. Vincent* is not pleasant, but even the edited version is dramatic dynamite. It should be seen.