



BERNADETTE (NORA-JANE NOONE) AND CRISPINA (EILEEN WALSH) GET CAUGHT TALKING IN THE LAUNDRY.

Slave Labor

Life Sentences

THE MAGDALENE SISTERS: Written and directed by Peter Mullan. Inspired by the television documentary, "Sex in a Cold Climate," by Steve Humphries. Produced by Frances Higson, Alan J. (Willy) Wands. Executive producers Ed Guiney and Paul Trierbits. Cinematography, Nigel Willoughby. Production design, Mark Leese. Editor, Colin Monie. Music, Craig Armstrong. Costumes, Trisha Biggar. Starring Geraldine McEwan, Nora-Jane Noone, Anne-Marie Duff, Dorothy Duffy, Eileen Walsh, Mary Murray and Daniel Costello. Miramax Films, 2003. NR. 119 minutes. Winner of Golden Lion at Venice Film Festival.

Like the result of Peter Mullan's cold fury. He begins the film by taking the viewer, briefly, into the life of each of four semi-fictional girls: Margaret (Anne-Marie Duff), Rose/Patricia (Dorothy Duffy), Bernadette (Nora-Jane Noone), and Crispina (Eileen Walsh). It's very helpful, because once the girls are forced to wear the convent Magdalene Laundries and Asylum's really ugly brown uniforms, they all look rather alike. At the convent, they suffer under conditions of servitude with the blessing of the Catholic Church in Ireland, 1964-1969.

conditions of the laundry, and they are ridiculed by the authorities who are supposed to set examples for them.

The sisters are driven by a holy war against the flesh, and these young women are punished for having desirable bodies. Young women were accused of such "moral crimes" as becoming pregnant, acting sexy or naming a rapist. The nuns worked hard to make the girls hate themselves and believe themselves wicked and sinful, deserving of punishment. The last asylum closed its doors only in 1996.

The head nun, Sister Bridget (Geraldine McEwan) is not only a sadist but also a sentimental fanatic with a heart of stone. When this one gets fired up, she takes the scissors to the transgressor's hair and whacks it off. Sister Bridget has the inner fire to be a good Nazi. McEwan's performance is blindingly artful.

Likewise, the incandescent anger Nora-

Based on a shameful secret in 20th century church history, the asylums and money-making laundries were prisons to some 30,000 women who were forced to pass through their gates.

You'll remember Margaret, raped by her cousin at a family wedding party, and Rose, holding her newborn son and trying to interest her uptight mother in at least looking at her grandchild. Bernadette is an orphan, who's never been with a boy. But she's suspect because the boys like her so much — reason enough to banish the dark-haired beauty to a life of hard labor. Crispina we learn about during the course of the film when her child comes to the asylum gates to wave at the mother he's never known.

Based on a shameful secret in 20th century church history, the asylums and money-making laundries were prisons to some 30,000 women who were forced to pass through their gates. Like their real-life counterparts, Crispina, Rose, Margaret and Bernadette are subjected to a number of harsh treatments. The nuns beat them, insult them, humiliate them, call them names, deprive them of their dignity and hope. They are forced to stand, wet and naked from the showers, while their bodies are coldly and cruelly compared. They are not paid for their work in the sweatshop

Jane Noone gives Bernadette is a rare gift. She smolders with banked fires and expresses her rage at every opportunity. Noone has presence. Margaret's flare-up with her rescuer is like a breath of fresh air in stuffy room, infused by Anne-Marie Duff's restrained focus. Eileen Walsh's Crispina is a fragile flower whose abilities are limited, but who loves simply and totally. When Crispina blows off steam, a great tension is released. Very fine work.

Mullan says that women who were actually in a Magdalene institution when young tell him they like the film, but it was actually a lot worse where they were.

While it is a heartbreaker, Mullan's film does not sentimentalize what happens to these women, nor does it make them into romantic heroines. They are simply young women doing whatever they can to survive. And when two of them choose to fight back and get out of there, it's no stretch to believe their lives will be better.

The Magdalene Sisters opens Friday at the Bijou. A must-see film, it gets my highest recommendations. **EW**

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THE RUNDOWN* PG-13 1:25, 2:00, 4:05, 4:40, 7:10, 7:50, 9:50, 10:30	MATCHSTICK MEN PG-13 12:55, 3:45, 7:10, 10:00
UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN *PG-13 1:05, 4:10, 7:05, 10:10	DICKIE ROBERTS: FORMER CHILD STAR PG-13 3:25, 9:25
DUPLEX *PG-13 12:30, 2:45, 5:05, 7:55, 10:15	OPEN RANGE R 12:20, 7:00
SECONDHAND LIONS* PG 1:10, 3:55, 7:15, 10:05	FREAKY FRIDAY PG 12:45, 6:45
UNDERWORLD R 12:05, 3:05, 7:00, 10:00	PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN PG-13 12:10, 3:35, 6:55
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— Peter Howell, TORONTO STAR
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