

Dirty linen

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

In Christian tradition Mary Magdalene came to symbolize (without much biblical support) the fallen woman who repents. Roman Catholics made Mary Magdalene a saint, and her name was attached to the "Magdalene laundries" that flourished in Ireland throughout the 1900s. These convents, many run by the Sisters of Mercy, were designed as asylums for wayward Catholic girls who were sent there to learn humility and respect. But what they did most was laundry, lots of it, while learning to fear the wrath of the nuns and priests who ran the institutions.

The brutal story of the Magdalene laundries is the subject of *The Magdalene Sisters*, by Scottish actor/writer/director Peter Mullan, who delivers numerous body blows to the Catholic Church. The tale unfolds outside Dublin in the 1960s and centers on three teenage girls who have ended up, for different reasons, at the local Magdalene asylum.

Margaret (Anne-Marie Duff) has been raped by her cousin at a family wedding, and once word spreads to her father that she has been soiled she is packed off to the Maggies. (The scene where news of the rape moves through the noisy crowd, played out visually under a blaring Irish jig, is masterful.) Rose (Dorothy Duffy) has had a child out of wedlock, and is cowed by the local priest into giving it up for adoption before being sent off to pay for her sins. And Bernadette (Nora-Jane Noone), a pretty orphan deemed too coy and flirty for her own good, is shipped off before the problem child gets out of hand.

Once inside, the girls encounter the cruel and sadistic Sister Bridget (Geraldine McEwan, in a chilling performance), who has the soul of a concentration camp commandant, prison warden and chain-gang boss rolled into one (though she's not above weeping during a special screening of *The Bells of St. Mary's*).

Once the principals are introduced, including a few lifers and various guards, the second act, as in all "women in prison" movies, explores just how nasty the authorities can be and how much punishment the girls can tolerate before they crack. (There are the requisite scenes of attempted escape and suicide.) But as the

months turn into years, we start to notice how differently the young women respond to their daily doses of humiliation.

It is this twist that turns *The Magdalene Sisters* into a deeper and more disturbing film than it appears at first. Disturbing, because the girls were all Catholic believers before being sent to the laundries, and because most landed there because of their "God-fearing" families. The phrase "But I'm a good girl!" is heard often enough to suggest that even some of the victims believe that real bad girls deserve such a miserable fate.

Like kidnaping victims, many of the girls start to accept their captors' worldview: they believe that they are indeed bad girls. One of the most rebellious young women, in fact, who initially hates the place, so believes the Magdalene line about her innate badness that she seeks to repent by becoming a nun.

The movie was officially condemned by the Vatican for presenting "an inept caricature." But according to witnesses and survivors (the last Magdalene laundry didn't close until 1996), Mullan has actually underplayed much of the barbarism of these institutions.

There are times when Mullan goes a bit overboard dramatically, as in a scene where the girls, naked as they prepare to shower, are forced to compare body parts. And in perhaps the most unnecessary sequence, a pompous priest gets his comeuppance for sexually abusing one of the girls by having his clothes washed with an itchy substance that causes him to rip them off and run naked through a field, a bit of broad comedy that undercuts the scene's compelling conclusion.

By the third act, Mullan finds a workable tonal balance, leading to some of the film's strongest sequences. In one, Margaret stumbles across a chance to escape, but quickly rejects it since she no longer knows how to cope in the outside world. And in another, Bernadette must tend to a dying lifer who still believes that the nuns love her. Bernadette sets the old woman straight, hissing that the sisters don't care what happens to her, and would prefer that she die if she's too sick to work. But when the older woman dies, Bernadette, in tears, gives her a good-bye kiss on the forehead, showing that even in this hellhole, a shred of humanity is possible.

Some may castigate the film for the amount of cruelty on display, but it's hard to imagine how else this savage tale of sexual obsession and religious hysteria could be told.