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“QUESTING FOR CONNECTION”

Film: *Philomena* (95 min)

Distributed by The Weinstein Company

Produced by Gabrielle Tan, Steve Coogan, & Tracey Seaward

Directed by Stephen Frears

Released: November, 2013 (USA)

Film: *Nebraska* (110 min)

Distributed by Paramount Vantage

Produced by Albert Berger & Ron Yerxa

Directed by Alexander Payne

Released: November, 2013 (USA)

Back in the mid 50s in Ireland, when she was a teenaged unwed mother to be, Philomena Lee was banished from her family and sent to a convent to have her child. She and the other young women sent there for the same reason were allowed contact with their babies for 1 hr a day. The rest of the time they worked long hours at menial jobs to “compensate” the sisters for taking them in. They also had to sign a consent form giving up all parental rights to their babies. When Philomena’s child was 3 years, he was abruptly taken from her and adopted by an unknown family. Philomena eventually left the convent and became a nurse.

In the film, *Philomena*, we see Philomena Lee (Judi Dench) some 50 years later renewing her search for information about her son. Her search comes to the attention of a former BBC journalist, Martin Sixsmith (Steve Coogan). With his contacts in the United States, he finds out that her son was adopted by a wealthy American family and that he became a high-ranking official in both the Reagan and Bush administrations. The rest of the story I will leave for you to see unfold for itself in this very engaging film. The film uses flashbacks to let us in on Philomena’s vivid memories of the birth,

and then the loss, of her son, Anthony. It also uses an intriguing device to let us see pieces of the life of her son after he was taken from her. We are given occasional glimpses of what appear to be home movie footage of Anthony (renamed Michael by his adoptive parents) at various stages of his life as a boy, as a teen, and then as an adult. These short flashback clips actually serve as “flash forward” hints for us about the life of Michael that Philomena, at those points in the film, does not yet know. This, combined with the marvelously expressive face of Judi Dench as she portrays the conflicted Philomena during her journey of discovery, makes for a very moving and memorable film experience.

What fuels Philomena’s search is her deep need to tell her now grown son that she did not abandon him. And she wants to know if he ever thought of her, or at least wondered about his birth mother. The longing for restoration of this basic parent/child connection is part of what makes *Philomena* such a moving and powerful film. As we watch the story of Philomena’s search, we also begin to see the character of this woman. The convent had done her and thousands of other young women and their children a grave injustice, and then years later, burned all the records of the adoptions. In spite of this, Philomena does not express outrage at the church. She expresses forbearance for the current sisters of the convent when they tell her they cannot help her with information about her son. She maintains her strong religious faith, and in the end, actually conveys forgiveness for the nuns who brutally wronged her. Is this sense of acceptance and forgiveness an expression of the core person she always was or had she come to this after a long life of struggle and maturation? Her character, as developed in the film, triggers reflection on these kinds of questions about personal and emotional

development in older adults. Who do we become as we move on down the road of time and space in the journey that carries us from one expression of our self into other expressions of that self as we grow older? What do we keep and what do we jettison? Do we develop into someone very different from who we were in younger expressions of that self?

Adding to the intrigue of these questions is the film's portrayal of the older Philomena as someone who is quite forward thinking in many of her attitudes, but who has retained many of her simple working class conventions and tastes, most likely developed in her younger years. (In the film, these are humorously played against Martin's more worldly wise disposition that sometimes borders on snobbery.) One is left smiling with appreciation and respect for this simple but wise women who came out of a difficult life situation without bitterness and with a strong and principled character.

In contrast, *Nebraska*, Alexander Payne's new movie about a son accompanying his addled and self-absorbed father's unlikely quest for the million dollars he thinks he has won in a sweepstakes, does not give viewers much to smile at. There may be a few laughs in the film, but very few smiles of appreciation and respect for the characters (except for the longsuffering son). I had really hoped to like this film as much as I have some of Payne's earlier work (such as, *About Schmidt*, reviewed in this journal, Vanden Bosch, 2003). But much of the film feels like an overblown exercise in bleakness.

Shot in black and white on mostly cloudy days in the leafless late fall, the film's overall feeling is one of dull monochrome. This would be okay if the plot was strong enough to make meaning out of such bleakness. But it isn't. The entire premise that the script and film are built on is that the film's main character, Woody Grant (Bruce Dern) is so mentally confused that he cannot be made to understand the conditional nature of a Publisher's Clearinghouse-like sweepstakes letter he received. He cannot understand the "if" in the letter—"if you have the winning number..." Yet, Woody has none of the other aspects of dementia-like confusion that would lead us to accept that he could be so confused about the sweepstakes. His memory is fine—both short term and long term. Though he is a man of few words, he *can* and does have rational conversations throughout the film. He does have a vacant air about him and has hearing loss, so people are often repeating themselves to get his attention. Though seemingly simple and

slow, perhaps from a lifetime of drinking, there is no evidence that he could not have been reminded to read and understand the "if." Instead, we are asked to accept the premise that Woody sets off *walking* from Billings, Montana to get to Lincoln, Nebraska, 900 miles away to pick up his winnings because he does not trust the mail and because no one in his family will take him there. Someone in the family could have humored and accepted his mistrust of the mail and then helped him send the sweepstakes letter by certified mail! Short of that, someone could have suggested he take the bus to Lincoln.

But this faulty premise does at least get us to a father-son road trip. Woody's middle-aged son, David (Will Forte), finally agrees to take him to Lincoln—partly to humor him and partly because he wants to try to connect with the father that was not really there for him throughout his life. Along the way, they stop to see some of Woody's relatives in the small town where he grew up. Another weakness of the film is that many of the minor characters that become part of the scene here in this small town come off as *caricatures* of rural Midwesterners. They are dimwitted, dull and lifeless—as drained of color in this film as the lifeless landscape is. One blatant example has a living room full of Woody's male relatives watching a football game with no expression and no conversation other than a few stray sentences about a car. (These parodies of Midwest rural folk are seconded by the rather obvious choice of name for the film's main character. Woody Grant is an inversion of Grant Wood, the painter of "American Gothic.")

The main characters in *Nebraska*, including Woody himself, are more nuanced and worthy of our attention. Woody's sharp tongued wife, Kate (June Squibb), and his forbearing son come across as distinct personalities that interact with Woody each in their own unique way. Their personalities become even more vivid when the plot has Kate joining Woody and David in the small home-town milieu, where the word quickly spreads among the town's residents that Woody is in line to receive a million dollars.

Woody's elusive and taciturn character in this film stands in sharp contrast to that of Philomena. It is his son, not him, who is searching for the missing parental connection. David's attempts to get to know his remote father during the road trip are met with truncated responses from this man of few words and little introspection. But near the end of

the film, there are two scenes that, perhaps because of the barrenness of much of the other scenes, do stand out as a connection between father and son. The first is when Woody, devastated after losing his sweepstakes letter in a senseless robbery by two of his nephews, finally talks with David about how he would have used the million dollars—after buying a new truck. “I just wanted to leave something for you and your brother.” Dern’s remarkable delivery of that single line shows a painful acknowledgement on Woody’s part that he had not given much to his sons during his lifetime. His fixated attempt to collect the sweepstakes is his way of trying to make amends.

The other connection happens after Woody and David have finally delivered the recovered sweepstakes letter to a small dingy office in Lincoln and Woody is told that he did not win the million dollars. Before driving back to Billings with his father, David stops at a used car lot and trades in his modest Subaru for a new looking pickup truck and puts Woody’s name on the title (with the statement to

his father that he, David, will be driving it). Later, before they again pass through the small Nebraska town where Woody’s friends and relatives live, David stops and suggests that Woody get behind the wheel and drive down Main Street so that some of the townsfolk will see Woody driving his new truck. This simple demonstration of love and respect for his diminished and silent father is one of the few things we are able to respond to with a smile of respect and admiration after watching *Bleaksville, Nebraska*, but it is made all the more sweet by the bleak.

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