



**Patron: Jim Broadbent**  
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**Friday March 23rd 2018**  
**The Innocents (Cert 15)**

*dir:* **Anne Fontaine**

*Starring:* **Lou de Laâge, Agata Kulesza, Vincent Macaigne**

*Sponsor:* **Andrew Howard**

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**Synopsis:** Poland, 1945. Responding to a nun's plea for help, French Red Cross doctor Mathilde follows her to a convent and delivers a baby to one of the sisters, Zofia. Far from being grateful, however, the Reverend Mother and Sister Maria are secretive and hostile. Mathilde discovers that another six sisters are pregnant. The Reverend Mother reveals that the convent was raided by Russian soldiers, who raped the nuns. She agrees to let Mathilde tend to them provided she tells no-one. Another sister, Ludwicka, gives birth to a girl. When three more nuns go into labour at once, Mathilde breaks her silence and asks her lover Samuel, another doctor, for help. Zofia, having discovered that the Reverend Mother left her baby and Ludwicka's in the forest to die, kills herself. Sister Maria flees the convent with the three newborns, seeking sanctuary with Mathilde and Samuel. They devise a plan to open the convent to orphans, allowing the sisters to keep the babies. Three months later, the nuns host a joyous initiation ceremony. The Reverend Mother, stricken with syphilis as a result of the rapes, lies dying.

There's something about the convent that speaks to the very essence of cinema. Or at least a certain kind of cinema; one that is dark, subdued, ascetic. The opening frames of *The Innocents* whisper the names of Dreyer, Bresson and Bazin. It's shot in colour by DP Caroline Champetier but feels like a black and white film, its muted tones the damp beige of stone and mortar, the off-white of snow and the black of bare branches and nuns' habits. Even the blood that spills throughout is a dark shiny brown. The only bright flashes are the flushed cheeks and a heavily symbolic scarlet dress. Likewise, the only sounds that pierce the hush are the howls of women in labour and the mewls of their newborn babies.

These babies are delivered by Mathilde (Lou de Laâge, poised and beautiful), a young sexually liberated Red Cross doctor working in Poland in 1945. Born to the sisters who inhabit the convent where most of the film is set, the babies are the products of rape, conceived when Soviet soldiers (the only one-note villains in a film mired in moral complexity) stormed this sanctuary and brutalised its inhabitants. We're spared the spectacle of the nuns' ordeal, but its violence echoes through the film. Scenes of surgery and birth are graphic and unflinching, and in one horribly sinister sequence, the mere sound of footsteps beating beneath the nuns' evensong is stomach churning. Against this backdrop, the newborns are shockingly real, their warm skin almost palpable. To the nuns. They are both a curse and a temptation. The 'gift' of new life both shameful and horrific. The Russian soldiers should have killed them, one of the nuns tells Mathilde. What a cruel miracle they didn't.

What will happen now to these children? At best, they are born into a traumatised country where no-one wants them, At worst...well, as the film progresses, a creeping dread sets in as to where exactly the Reverend Mother is taking them. Ferociously acted by Agata Kulesza, who played the licentious aunt in Pawel Pawlikowski's *Ida* (to which *The Innocents* is a kind of companion piece), the Reverend Mother is a striking reminder that at the heart of Christianity is a body in torment. She tells her charges that she has damned herself to save them - but she was damned from the moment those soldiers set foot in the convent.

Clinging to their vows of chastity, the nuns initially refuse to let Mathilde examine them. Many viewers will share Mathilde's frustration that these young women won't set God aside to save their own lives. But *The*



*Innocents* is a film about commitment - not just religious, but also maternal, professional, political. Mathilde considers herself a medic and a communist, a person who "has to believe in hope". She and her lover Samuel (Vincent Macaigne) are prepared to sacrifice their burgeoning romance for what they consider to be a greater cause.

It's a shame the film ends with a rather too convenient solution to the problems it throws up, since for the most part director Anne Fontaine, who co-wrote the screenplay with Pascal Bonitzer, Sabine B Karine and Alice Vial (adapting it from the true experiences of French Red Cross doctor Madeleine Pauliac), succeeds admirably in exploring the ways these women find strength to go on in a situation that seems unendurable.

#### Credits

<b>Mathilde Beaulieu</b>	Lou de Laâge
<b>Sister Maria</b>	Agata Buzek
<b>Mother Superior</b>	Agata Kulesza
<b>Samuel Leiman</b>	Vincent Macaigne
<b>Sister Irena</b>	Joanna Kulig
<b>Sister Zofia</b>	Anna Prochniak
<b>Sister Ludwicka</b>	Helena Sujecka
<b>Director</b>	Anne Fontaine
<b>Screenplay</b>	Anne Fontaine, Sabine B Karine, Alice Vial, Pascal Bonitzer
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Caroline Champetier
<b>Editor</b>	Annette Dutertre
<b>Art Director</b>	Joanna Macha
<b>Original music</b>	Grégoire Hetzel
<b>Sound</b>	Olivier Mauvezin, Francis Wargnier, Jean-Pierre Laforce
<b>Costume</b>	Katarzyna Lewinska
	<b>France/Poland 2016. 111 mins</b>

#### Another view

Poland, 1945: a young, French doctor breaks Red Cross protocol to deliver a number of secret babies. Actress Lou de Laâge turns in a detailed and subtle performance as medic Mathilde, who works in a Polish convent recovering from an "indescribable nightmare". What first appears as a place of peaceful refuge that's far from the bloody carnage of the frontline is unveiled as hell on earth.

These women were repeatedly raped during a three day raid by Russian soldiers. They question their faith as their every thought is consumed by shame. *The Innocents* is a harrowing true story, so full of sorrow that watching it is a traumatic experience, but also a necessary one.

The convent is a quarantine, closed off from the simple joys of life during peacetime. These women are imprisoned by bedrooms referred to as 'cells' and stranded by the featureless, rolling landscape which flanks them on all sides. Co-writer/director Anne Fontaine employs rapid edits and fractured dialogue sequences to mirror the inner turmoil of her characters. Some scenes are slowly placed and given a bluish hue, acting as a visual testament to collective depression. The contrasting lifestyles of sexually liberated Mathilde and her devout patients is deliberate. While she kisses her naked lover, Sister Maria (Agata Buzek) kisses the feet of her crucifix.

Fontaine excels with low-lit visuals and profound dialogue – "Faith is 24 hours of doubt and one minute of hope". She refrains from buttering the audience up with unnecessary melodrama. Her stoical female characters instead engage in everyday tasks. They wash, cook and clean. It is through their usefulness that they find solace by the end of the film. The Innocents – tackling rape, war and religion – is an ambitious film. The gamble is worth it, though, making for a harrowing portrait of womanhood at war.

### **Poppy Doran, Little White Lies**

**Our next film: Friday April 6th, 7.30pm  
Land of Mine (dir: Martin Zandvliet.  
Denmark/Germany 2015. Cert 15)**

Denmark: the end of World War 2. Young Nazi conscripts - mostly in their teens - held as prisoners of war, are put to work clearing, by hand, thousands of mines buried along the Danish coast. They are supervised by a Danish NCO, Sgt Rasmussen, who is initially hostile towards them. But as they undertake their hazardous task and he gets to know them, Rasmussen's attitude begins to change. Based on a true story, this riveting film is a compelling study of bravery, stoicism, humanity, duty and responsibility and fully deserving of its Oscar nomination last year for Best Film not in the English Language.

### **Programme News**

Nominations from members are now being accepted for the long list for our new season. We are looking for films that have been released within the last 4 months and will not consider any that have been screened in the city for over 1 week. Please send any nominations by email to [filminlincoln@gmail.com](mailto:filminlincoln@gmail.com) by Friday April 27th.

The archive classic short list has been selected and members will soon be able to start voting on which of the titles they would like to see in next season's programme. They include Louis Malle's *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, Christopher Guest's dog-show spoof *Best in Show*, Milos Forman's 1967 satire *The Fireman's Ball* and *Three Colours: Red*, Krzysztof Kieslowski's final film in his trilogy based on the French tricolor.

Full details of the films and the voting procedure will be announced at the start of next month.