

FACT OR FICTION: IT'S CATHOLIC BASHING JUST THE SAME

Whether it's based on fact or fiction, or whether it's portrayed on the stage or on the screen, the Catholic bashers are a busy lot these days. They are as good at twisting the facts as they are at developing fictional accounts. Truth doesn't matter. What matters is results.

In 1858, Church authorities in Bologna learned that a 6 year-old Jewish boy, Edgardo Mortara, had been baptized as an infant by a Catholic servant. They quickly had him abducted and brought to Rome where he was raised Catholic.

This story, recounted in a 1997 book by David Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*, is now the source of a play and an upcoming film (financial problems have temporarily put the movie on hold). "Edgardo Mine" is a play by Alfred Uhry which opened for a month, October 17 to November 17, at the Hartford Stage in Connecticut.

By today's standards, what happened to young Mortara was shocking. But to judge anything, all the evidence must be presented—not just some of it. On this score, Kertzer is a failure. Neither he nor any of his "artistic" copycats have much interest in asking some important questions.

Why was Mortara baptized in the first place? Because the servant girl thought he was dying and was in need of salvation. Why was he taken from his family? Because it was the considered judgment of the Church at the time that a baptized Christian could not be raised in a Jewish home. He had to be removed lest the Church be party to apostasy. The validity of Baptism was also being tested. And so what happened to this poor kid? As he grew up he developed a

father-son relationship with Pope Pius IX. He even became a priest.

"Evelyn" is a movie starring Pierce Brosnan that is based on an allegedly true story. It is about a father who fights the Irish government and the Catholic Church, which took custody of his children after his wife abandoned them. Set in 1953, the film details the horrid conditions the kids lived under. In this respect it is reminiscent of "The Magdalene Sisters," a film that portrays the brutal lifestyle afforded wayward young women at the hands of the nuns who cared for them.

None of these "real-life" stories carry any meaning when ripped out of historical context. When Edgar Mortara was taken, slavery was legal in the U.S. and the English had just finished starving the Irish to death. And these were good times compared to what was happening in less-civilized nations. Tough nuns, especially Irish nuns, have sometimes overstepped, but at the end of the day, it needs to be asked what would have happened to these throw-away young girls had the nuns done what everyone else in society did to them, namely shut their doors to outcasts?

It's not just some of the film-makers who are bigots; some of the reviewers are as well. Take Jami Bernard, movie critic for the New York *Daily News*.

"There's more bad news for the Catholic Church with 'The Magdalene Sisters,'" writes Bernard, "a fine and furious portrait of a real-life miscarriage of justice." She proceeds to say that 30,000 Irish women were "enslaved, beaten and humiliated in the name of cleansing their soul." Then she compared their conditions to that of a "concentration camp." Thus did she denigrate Jews who died at Auschwitz.

When twisting the facts isn't attractive, there is always the option of making up lies out of whole cloth. A new movie, "The Religion Hour" ("My Mother's Smile"), does just that. It

revolves around an atheist who is informed that his mother is about to be sanctified. The movie was dubbed by *Entertainment Weekly* as an "absurdist diatribe against hypocrisy in religion." *Variety* came right out and branded it "anti-Catholic."

"Jesus Has Two Mommies" is a gay fantasy come to the stage. It is also the favorite of Catholic bashers in Somerville, Massachusetts. For some reason, the well-heeled and exceptionally tolerant-types in this community can't get enough in the way of anti-Catholicism. On December 6-7, the bigots will turn out in droves at the Somerville Theatre.

Peter Greenaway is a celebrated screenwriter. He's also quite mad. His film, "The Baby of Macon," was recently shown in Huntington, Long Island. The movie is about a 17th century woman who claims she had a virgin birth. It is also about the way she and the Catholic Church exploited her child. The flick features full nudity, a gynecological examination, eating of afterbirth and a Church-sponsored gang rape. The Cinema Arts Centre where it was shown called it "a volatile mixture of anti-clericalism and violence." We call it names we'd rather not put in print.

So this is the state of anti-Catholicism in the "arts" for the fall of 2002. Hope the bigots chill out over the winter.