

MRS. DOUBTFIRE [1993]

by

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Daniel Hillard (Robin Williams) is an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky actor fired from his job for sticking up for his “moral principles.” At home, he is irresponsible and inconsiderate of his wife, yet loved by his children. This attitude causes his wife, Miranda (Sally Field), to seek a divorce. Bereft of his children, he disguises himself as a dowdy housekeeper, Mrs. Doubtfire, and takes a job caring for his own children. The children become attached to her (him). After a series of adventures and misadventures, his cover is blown. He finally gets a decent job as host on a children's television show (still in drag) and is allowed to visit his children daily.

Let me say, first, that *Mrs. Doubtfire* is quite a funny movie. Robin Williams’ amazing vocal talents have been supplemented by a physical comedy and timing that are exquisite. Most of the critics' comments can be easily summarized as, “Robin Williams is great, the film isn’t.” However, any film that makes \$27 million in its opening weekend deserves much closer consideration. And because *Mrs. Doubtfire* has such a deceptively simple and delightful face, it deserves close scrutiny far more than most of our holiday movie fare.

There are some really clever bits in *Mrs. Doubtfire*. For instance, the film opens with a sequence that, in multiple and simultaneous layers, predicts the action to come. Daniel is doing several voices for a cartoon. This is our first hint of multiple roles (and perhaps even multiple personalities). Robin Williams is (apparently) singing a famous aria from the Italian opera repertoire, “Figaro, Figaro, Figaro, ...” The aria, one might easily assume, is from Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, yet – and here we have another case of easily mistaken identity – it is actually from Rossini’s *Barber of Seville*. Both operas, by the way, involve a lot of mistaken identity and, in the case of the Mozart, women dressing like men.

Another nice touch is when Daniel must hurriedly pick a name for his newly invented nanny. He glances down at a paper and picks two words from a headline, “... Doubt Fire ...” This is a nice homage to the way Frank L. Baum supposedly named the Wizard of Oz: while glancing about a room looking for some hint, his eye landed on the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet whose drawers were labeled, “A-G, H-N, O-Z.” And, of course, Daniel’s adventure is like Dorothy’s: an attempt to get back home.

Yet like most good comedies, *Mrs. Doubtfire* deals with some very serious problems – the father’s role in a divorce, a father’s love for his children, and how the bitter feelings almost inevitably generated during a divorce can be healed. The film

clearly demonstrates that it is OK for a father to openly and emotionally love his children; it is OK for a father to be demonstrative in his love without fear of losing his masculinity. In addition, it deals with the problem of children being used by divorced parents to manipulate each other, often being held as psychological hostages. Dealing with these issues in a positive way seems a good recommendation for *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Yet, as I shall show, other aspects must be viewed with reservation and outright suspicion.

My fear is that, because it is so funny, *Mrs. Doubtfire* will become family fare in the usual uninspected and unreflected way that other innocent movies have. There is real danger here. For instance, the amount of toilet and sexual humor in *Mrs. Doubtfire* makes it clearly inappropriate for a very young audience, the very audience that needs the positive aspects of its messages the most. Just as in *Hook* [1992], Williams injects a mumbling, rapid-fire monologue of (admittedly hilarious) metaphors for various sexual activities. In *Hook*, these are scattered about the film in such a way that youngsters might simply not understand what is being said. In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, he goes on and on and on. The sexual implications are unmistakable and unavoidable. Parents beware, for the strange uses of these words are sure to arouse great curiosity in young children.

However, there is much more to this film to think about than a few sly (and not-so-sly) sexual innuendoes. At the center of the film is the hero, Daniel, a man irresponsible toward both his wife and his children in almost every way imaginable (but fun for his kids where his wife is up-tight). Yet when he masquerades as a woman, all his irresponsibility and lack of consideration for others suddenly disappears. The resulting bottom line of this miraculous and almost completely unjustifiable change is that the best woman in a family is a man. With his rubber mask on, Daniel cooks better than a woman, cleans better, shops better, sets standards for children better, chooses clothes better, helps the kids study better, communicates better, and most important, loves the children better than a woman.

Furthermore, this transformation is not only miraculous, it is effortless, as if a man were naturally born to be a woman better than all women. Take cooking, for instance. We see Daniel in disguise ruining a meal, sending out for food, watching Julia Child on TV, taking a few notes, and presto, he can cook. What it takes a woman (and most men) many years to accomplish is instant knowledge for Mrs. Doubtfire.

Where did all this come from? Daniel, as a man, is irresponsible toward both his wife and his children in almost every way imaginable. Mrs. Doubtfire is equally perfect in every way. *Mrs. Doubtfire* demonstrates rather than develops Daniel's idealized character. If Daniel had it in him all along to do these caring and loving things, why didn't he? I cannot believe that simply putting on a rubber mask can so thoroughly change someone's personality from a total flake to a totally responsible parent/adult. (Contrast this transition to the one in *Tootsie* [1982], a movie that begs for comparison. Dustin Hoffman's transition is one of slowly realizing how women are abused by the patriarchy and become more sensitive to their plight. It's never shown as either easy or simplistic.) Rather than showing Daniel struggling, working hard, and making sacrifices to achieve

his goal, we get instant cure. This all smacks of a very macho attitude toward psychological growth.

And, if we consider carefully Daniel's psychological growth as presented in the film, we see it has some serious flaws. His disguise as Mrs. Doubtfire satisfies *his* need to see his children, but what about his children's needs? He never reveals the charade to them so they can never feel that they have a stable male figure to guide them. He only thinks of himself, to hell with everyone else. All the things his children loved him for – his spontaneity, his wild sense of humor – are gone in Mrs. Doubtfire, yet inexplicably his children still love him even after they discover the charade. (By the way, the film portrays Daniel's infantile behavior as “good” so that the fault of the divorce lands squarely on Miranda's intolerant and up-tight shoulders.) And this is what *Mrs. Doubtfire* passes off as a good psychological transition.

Even the choice of the various characters' names supports the strength of men and the weakness of women. Daniel is perhaps the most obvious. He must brave the lion's den (presumably his wife's doing), as his Biblical predecessor, and survive. But what does this say about his wife's home? His wife's name is Miranda, from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. However, in that play, Miranda is a young, naive and innocent young girl. Thus naming a powerful business woman with great responsibilities and decisions after such a model is simply another way of robbing her of her power. Mrs. Doubtfire's first name is Iphigenia, which means in Greek, “of a courageous race.” In Greek mythology, Iphigenia was the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Agamemnon was required to sacrifice his daughter, but substituted a deer (echoed in *Mrs. Doubtfire*'s masquerades). Ancient scholars, like Hesiod, claim that she then became the goddess Hecate (the most powerful goddess in the underworld) while modern scholars believe she was, in fact, a form of Artemis (the goddess of childbirth and wild animals). You can see that even the choice of the character's names in *Mrs. Doubtfire* gives power to the men, whether dressed like men or women, and removes power from the women.

The most important bottom line of *Mrs. Doubtfire* is its message that a man is the center of a family, no matter what; without a man, a family cannot exist. It is impossible for children to grow up without the presence of a man. Despite the final reading (which to me sounds more like an afterthought apology for the viciousness of what has gone before) on the possibility of a great variety of different family structures, the preceding hour and a half has clearly validated the absolute necessity for the presence of a man in the lives of children. Unfortunately, not all fathers are like Robin Williams – entertaining, devoted, educated, acquiring decent paying jobs, becoming responsible, learning how to live within the system, clean and sober. My greatest horror is that a young woman struggling to raise a family without a father takes her children to see this film. What messages will the children get?! In this sense, *Mrs. Doubtfire* is a very destructive, negative film and should, at all costs, be avoided. Go see it; it's a funny movie, but don't take kids that might be vulnerable to its destructive messages.

Mrs. Doubtfire. Directed by Chris Columbus. Screenplay by Randi Mayam Singer and Leslie Dixon, based on the novel by Anne Fine. Distributed by 20th Century Fox, 1993.

History of Drag - Milton Berle on TV. Oriental theater - men do both roles. Trouser roles in opera - esp. Cerubino in *Marriage of Figaro*. Other films: Nuns on the Run, Divine, Jerry Lewis in One of his films, Marlon Brando in ?, *Some Like it Hot*, Catherine Hepburn as a boy, Ginger Rogers in *The Major and the Minor* doesn't change genders, she removes her sexuality by posing (unbelievably) as someone twenty years younger than she really is. Victor/Victoria. Cabaret.

Molly and Me [1945] is a relative of *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Here Gracie Fields, an actress in need of work, impersonates a housekeeper and takes over not only Monte Woolley's house, but his life also.