

House of Horrors



Philadelphia police detective “Woody” Woods (Dean Cain) makes a grisly discovery during a narcotics investigation

A new movie exposes the gruesome reality of abortion and gets its point across more easily than a documentary might

by Gerard Condon

GOSNELL: *The Trial of America’s Biggest Serial Killer* (2018) dramatizes the events that led to the conviction for murder of Dr. Kermit Gosnell on May 15, 2013. Over the course of his career he carried out hundreds, perhaps thousands, of illegal late-term abortions. *ABC News* called him, “America’s most prolific serial killer”. But this was an event that the media, as well as the political system, chose to ignore. It took the determination of Irish-American investigative journalists, Phelim McAleer and Ann McElhinney, a husband and wife team, to bring this true story to the big screen.

Police Raid

During the late-2000s, Detective James “Woody” Wood (played by Dean Cain) and his partner noticed an increase in illegally distributed prescription medicines on the streets of

Philadelphia, in the state of Pennsylvania. They suspected the “Women’s Medical Society” clinic, owned and operated by Dr. Gosnell, as the source. On February 18, 2010, they raided the premises together with the DEA (Drugs Enforcement Agency). What they discovered was a veritable house of horrors, with squalid medical facilities, chaotic record keeping, and, most shocking of all, foetal body parts stored in plastic bags. In one of the movie’s few graphic images, we see the police footage of severed baby’s feet in the lunchroom refrigerator. Bizarrely, Dr. Gosnell (Earl Billings) was unperturbed by the search, and calmly went about feeding his turtles.

This was not the first time that Gosnell had been reported to the authorities. However, his clinic had not been inspected since 1993 (by contrast, nail salons in Pennsylvania are inspected once a year). The unwritten policy of successive State Gover-

nors had been to turn a blind eye to breaches of abortion laws, for fear of provoking acrimonious debate. Even though Gosnell’s practice was obviously suspect, Detective Woods had to convince the assistant District Attorney, Lexi McGuire (Sarah Jane Morris), to take a case against the doctor. She too had been an advocate of “abortion rights”, knowing that only that view could further her political ambitions. However, she was forced to reconsider when, one day, she played with the tiny feet of her own infant, and then remembered the police footage of the aborted babies’ feet.

Shocking Evidence

The assistant District Attorney and the detective began to probe deeper into Gosnell’s activities. His staff, most of whom were not licensed for their work, confessed that the doctor was routinely delivering viable babies in the third trimester of pregnancy, well beyond the State’s legal limit of twenty-four weeks. Patients frequently picked up venereal diseases at the clinic, such was its poor hygiene. Most shocking of all, they reported that, if the delivered foetus showed signs of life, Gosnell would snip its spinal cord, at the neck, with scissors.

Gosnell’s own residence was then searched. There, police found evidence of the wealth that the doctor had accumulated from his practice. The house, too, was a filthy place (“looks like the cleaner didn’t come in this week”). Amid the gruelling discoveries at this scene floated the beautiful strains of a piano sonata: Dr. Gosnell, wearing his dressing gown, serenely playing Chopin.

Gosnell was arrested on January 19, 2011. His charge sheet included hundreds of citations for breaches of State medical practice, principally for performing late-term abortions. However, the head District Attorney, Dan Molinari (Michael Beach) insisted that the case would not be an attempt to overturn “Roe-versus-Wade” (The landmark 1973 decision of the Supreme Court, that provided for America’s liberal abortion regime). This trial, he said, would be confined to the question of the taking of newborn life.

The Trial

For his part, Dr. Gosnell retained the services of one of Pennsylvania’s best defence lawyers, Michael Cohan (Nick Searcy, also the movie’s director). He adopted the risky strategy of calling to the stand a “good” abortionist (Janine Turner), to summarise the procedure of a legal abortion. He wanted to show that while Dr Gosnell’s clinic was unsanitary, his actions did not amount to murder, no more than any abortion. Ironically, this element of the trial only exposed the horror that is at the heart of every abortion.

Notable by their absence from the courtroom was the media. They, like the politicians, preferred to turn a blind eye to the case. However, a blog-

ger, J D Mullane (“Molly Mullaney” in the movie) tweeted a photo of the empty press benches, with the caption: “Media bias? Why no coverage of America’s biggest serial killer?” The image went viral, and soon the trial was receiving the national and international attention it deserved.

Pivotal Moment

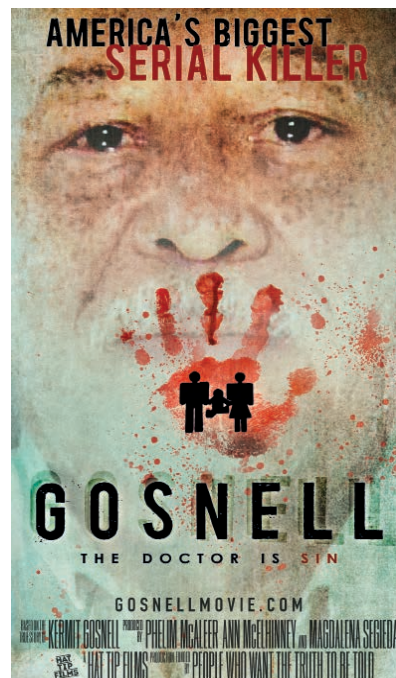
The pivotal moment of the trial concerned the case of “Baby A”. The movie opened with the decision of Betty (Dominique Edwards), one of the clinic’s staff, to take a photo of Baby A’s corpse, having initially walked away. In a reprise of that scene, the movie shows her walking back to Detective Woods, having initially rejected his invitation to submit the photo as courtroom evidence.

Thus, the movie’s most powerful sequence unfolds, with the District Attorney showing the photo of “Baby A” to the twelve jurors, in silence, one by one. Their shocked and saddened expressions said it all. On May 13, 2013, Dr. Kermit Gosnell was given a prison sentence for life, without the possibility of parole, for the murder of three babies who were born alive, as well as the manslaughter of a Burmese immigrant, whose abortion was botched.

Production Values

McAleer and McElhinney, had previously written a best-selling book based on the case. However, the *New York Times* refused to list it among its bestsellers. The movie, too, had a difficult gestation. None of the major film studios were interested. Instead, it was financed through a crowdfunding campaign that raised \$3 million from 29,000 donors. While the film was completed in 2015, it was only released last October, due to a legal action.

On the set of the movie with actor/director Nick Search and actresses Kasey Weir and Leesa Winkler Neidel



Gosnell follows the classic format of American police dramas, like *CSI* or *Law and Order*. Events that in reality unfolded over four years are condensed into 93-minutes. The production values, too, seem made-for-TV, probably because of the movie’s small budget.

There is no doubting the movie’s sense of purpose, which is pro-life. However, this message is not delivered in a preachy way, rather, the facts are allowed to speak for themselves, and in a restrained manner, as befitting a PG-13 certificate. This is an engaging movie that deserved to be made

Of the cast, Sarah Jane Morris delivers a convincing performance as the assistant District Attorney whose views on abortion evolve. Earl Billings’ is outstanding as the sociopathic doctor, who is, by turn, coy, charming and manipulative. His characterization is based on prison interviews that McElhinney conducted with the 77-year-old.

We live in a culture with mixed up standards, one that issues court-orders to protect turtles (“vulnerable creatures”, as the judge calls them), while showing little concern for life within the womb. This movie made me feel sad for the women who undergo the termination of their pregnancy, for reasons that are often not of their own making. I felt sorry, too, for the anonymous children of God who die before birth in squalid clinics like that of Dr. Gosnell. ♦

