

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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Saint Frances (dir. Alex Thompson, 2019)

On Screen

Bridget, the nanny: Kelly O'Sullivan: Major star of Chicago stages, in big and small companies
Frances, her charge: Ramona Edith Williams: Turns 8 this month; has filmed several commercials
Maya, sad mom: Charin Alvarez: Another Chicago theater staple: Goodman, Victory Gardens
Annie, tense mom: Lily Mojekwu: Also lots of local theater; *Widows* (18); *I Love Dick* (TV 17)
Jace, the boyfriend: Max Lipchitz: First screen credit; comedy veteran of Second City, iO, etc.
Isaac, guitar teacher: Jim True-Frost: *The Wire* (TV 02-08); the beautiful indie *Off the Map* (03)
Bridget's mother: Mary Beth Fisher: Pillar of Chicago stages; loved her in *Domesticated* (15)
Bridget's father: Francis Guinan: Another all-star; Steppenwolf ensemble member since 1979

Off Camera

Director: Alex Thompson: First feature; two shorts are on Prime: [Calumet](#) (14) with Austin Pendleton, and [Irene and Marie](#) (15) with Olympia Dukakis
Screenwriter: Kelly O'Sullivan: Star's first screenplay, flexing some personal experiences
Cinematographer: Nate Hurtsellers: Four features and 24 shorts; works closely with Thompson
Composer: Quinn Tsan: First feature credit; you can hear more of her music [here](#)

Recommended viewing if you liked *Saint Frances*...

[Juno](#) (2007) – More mannered in its language and design than *Saint Frances*, with younger main characters, but still a rare story (and a rarer comedy) about self-definition and motherhood

[Obvious Child](#) (2014) – Another wonderful recent comedy, set in Brooklyn and with a somewhat bawdier sense of humor, about a young stand-up comedian trying to figure out her life and make up her mind about a new boyfriend, as she decides to end an unexpected pregnancy

[Happy Christmas](#) (2014) – Scrappy comedy shot in Andersonville, centering two women about Bridget's age, one (Anna Kendrick) very much at sea, another (Melanie Lynskey) a new mom

[Henry Gamble's Birthday Party](#) (2015) – A warm, tender ensemble dramedy about a teen boy in the Chicago suburbs wrestling with his sexuality as a crowd gathers to celebrate his birthday. Kelly O'Sullivan, star and writer of *Saint Frances*, appears in the large, Chicago-centered cast.

[Princess Cyd](#) (2017) – Female-driven character study about South Carolina teen spending summer with her aunt in Chicago (luminous Rebecca Spence, cast here as the nasty fireworks lady)

[Rogers Park](#) (2017) – One more local filmmaker, Northwestern's Kyle Henry, directed this neighborhood-specific, wonderfully performed comedy-drama about two couples entering middle age, still trying to answer life's questions. Both of Frances's moms appear in this film.

Facts about *Saint Frances* you may appreciate...

O’Sullivan got started writing *Saint Frances* in hopes of conjoining two experiences she had at different times—a nannying job in her 20s, and an abortion in her 30s—and wondering if they could co-exist for one character at the same time, without reprising cliché or manifesting any simplistic psychology. She has described Bridget as sharing some of her personal qualities and life experiences, but also serving as a kind of alternate reality, whose story never “resolves.”

This was O’Sullivan’s first working collaboration with Thompson, her partner, who read drafts off and on as she wrote. At the level of narrative, she as writer-actress and he as director wanted to avoid any suggestion of a clear, clean arc, especially one that entailed a specific problem being “solved” through magical contact with a child. Stylistically, they also wanted the movie to look as bright as possible and to employ the kind of naturalistic lighting of 60s and 70s movies like *Coming Home* that allowed characters to feel their way erratically through complex situations.

O’Sullivan and Thompson were similarly determined to insulate *Saint Frances* from becoming a “topical” film or even a drama of protracted decision-making. She wanted not only to tell an honest story of abortion on screen but to make sure abortion wasn’t *the* story and to respect that terminating a pregnancy is sometimes a swift, confident decision, even if the after-effects are durable and diffuse. She also wanted to keep the film’s spirit cheerful and comic while owning up to ideas and images that media usually avoid. (Vaginal bleeding is one key example!)

Thompson and O’Sullivan employed lots of their friends through Chicago theater and art-making circles and utilized their own living spaces. This was partly out of convenience and familiarity, partly as a budget-friendly measure, but also so this story of expansive and intergenerational community could be created in a congenial environment—refusing the myth that film sets *must* be high-stress milieus. Bridget’s apartment really is the one Thompson and O’Sullivan shared at the time. Jace’s actual apartment, bedroom, and even roommate are all the actor’s, as well.

Beyond finding a smart, spirited child actor in Ramona Edith Williams, Thompson and O’Sullivan reconceptualized their whole way of shooting once they started working with her. It’s common in films that prominently feature young children to employ a lot of editing, in order to assemble a coherent performance out of the endless takes that are often required to coax the needed moods and words from a restless kid—including, often, getting them to respond to offscreen antics or emotional prompts totally different from what’s in the scene. Williams, by contrast, not only learned long speeches to the letter and could recite them on cue but stayed in character for long shots. She moved around, used props, and interacted with her environments in ways that were rewarding to the camera. As a result, *Saint Frances* manages longer shots and scenes than many movies of this type, and often employs a handheld camera that could keep up with the little star, rather than insisting on scrupulously framed shots Thompson devised in advance.

The opening party scene was not only the last thing shot but was added after early screenings made clear that audiences needed to know a little more about Bridget and understand her particular forms of mid-30s uncertainty before they could respond fully and generously to what follows.

Saint Frances opened the Chicago Critics Film Festival at the Music Box in Spring 2019 and had a brief commercial run there in March. It also won the Audience Award at South by Southwest.

Broad conversation topics about *Saint Frances*...

Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts: As you move through these clusters of questions, I'd also invite you to think about the ways the movie explicitly or implicitly relates them, or doesn't. My view is that *Saint Frances* installs fewer overt metaphors or "cause/effect" relations than many movies would impose. For example, she's not nervous about motherhood because her own mother is tough; her thinking about her abortion doesn't shift while her bond to someone else's child deepens. Which, to you, are the most interesting threads to join or compare?

Motherhood: We have little exposure to Maya's and Annie's relationship beyond what Bridget witnesses, but it's clear that these two women are living out the early stages of their shared motherhood in different ways. The film is filled with a range of other mothering models, too, from the candor of Bridget's own mom to the censorious interventions of the woman at the Fourth of July picnic to the blithe privilege of Bridget's former classmate. Meanwhile, *Saint Frances* takes care to distinguish pregnancy and motherhood as separate questions; Bridget's decision about *this* pregnancy does not expand to broad concerns about parenting in general.

Abortion: Many people have noted that romantic comedies are almost frenzied in their attention to how people finally wind up together as a couple (frequently the last thing that happens in the screenplay) but largely inattentive to the extended, up-and-down process of *staying* in a couple. That analogy came to my mind regarding *Saint Frances*'s approach to abortion, which cuts out almost all the will-she-or-won't-she buildup that movies on this subject often emphasize but underlines the extended physical effects and wider relationship implications of having ended a pregnancy. What were your responses to how the movie handled this topic—especially coming after *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*'s claim that most art studiously omits it?

Millennials—or, You Know, “On the Cusp”: So much ink and chatter have been expended lately on what “millennials” are like, collectively, and even who counts as a millennial. (Most current students, despite often being tagged this way, are too young by demographers' standards.) Did Bridget's personality or predicaments reinforce, challenge, or complicate any ideas you've had or overheard about people and especially women in her age group? Did anything stand out as especially unique compared to related stories on film or television? What seemed most universal or most era-specific about Bridget, or the story as a whole?

Environment: Not just in terms of locations you might have identified but in terms of personal types, communal behaviors, social attitudes, modes of family-building, etc., did you feel that being a Chicagoan gave you any insights into the story that other viewers may not share?

Image-Making: Without going as comic-book-colored as *Juno*, *Saint Frances* sustains a sunny, colorful palette by design—and via some technically risky practices we can discuss when we talk. Did other aspects of how the film looked stand out to you? I recall an especially, almost distractingly gorgeous shot of sunlight pouring through the surrounding trees in resplendent, diagonal beams as Bridget and Frances walked home one afternoon. I thought the film might be trying too hard visually at that moment, but then as the characters near the house, they hear Maya and Annie arguing so loudly that Bridget wisely decides to circle the block once more. Did you spot other subtle ironies, where shots “say” one thing and story another?