

Solange De Santis

On Broadway, *Doubt* explores faith

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Those who work with children today face a vastly-changed world. As recently as a decade ago, a sports coach, a church worker or a parent volunteering to escort a class trip did not face police record checks. No one talked of installing glass panes in office doors - to give one example - as a way to prevent even the possibility of physical or sexual abuse. There were few procedures to follow when an accusation surfaced and, in the church context, the authority of clergy - as viewed by the laity - was close to absolute.

This is the world of 1964 faced by Sister Aloysius, principal of St. Nicholas School in the Bronx and the main character in John Patrick Shanley's play *Doubt*, now selling out nightly on Broadway. Winner of both the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award, *Doubt* presents four unforgettable characters caught in an intriguing detective story, a collision with faith and morals and an exploration of the uneasy spaces between certainty and fear.

When we first encounter her, Sister Aloysius is attempting to put some starch into Sister James, a young teacher who naively thinks a boy wouldn't intentionally give himself a bloody nose to get out of class. Both are members of the order of Elizabeth Seton and wear the full black habit and distinctive black bonnet. As magnificently played by Cherry Jones, Sister Aloysius' eternally-pursed lips regard humanity with a somewhat jaundiced attitude, but her stern manner leaves no doubt that her first concern is the students. She knows the names of every member of Sister James' class and she knows who stands first, second and third in marks. She also dismisses art and dance as "a waste of time" and criticizes Sister James for loving one subject - history - above others and for "performing" in her classes "as if on a Broadway stage." Her point is that "the best teachers do not perform, they cause the students to perform."

In Heather Goldenhersh's portrayal, Sister James stands in quivering awe of Sister Aloysius, but also has enough backbone to defend her more-friendly approach to education. She also trusts and respects Sister Aloysius enough to tell her that she thinks a new, charismatic priest at the school, Father Flynn, may have made advances to a boy in her class, Donald Muller, who is the first black child to attend St. Nicholas. Sister Aloysius has also suspected Father Flynn, played with aggressive bonhomie by Brian F. O'Byrne, and she begins to set a trap for him.

Complicating the situation is the fact that "men run everything," that the monsignor is a guileless man who will believe whatever Father Flynn chooses to tell him and that Father Flynn denies anything harmful took place. The principal chooses not to question the boy, believing he will never admit anything improper occurred, out of shame. And, in a riveting scene, the nun's suspicions are turned aside by the boy's mother, played with laser-sharp clarity by Adriane Lenox. Mrs. Muller certainly doesn't like the scenario presented by Sister Aloysius, but she believes that "this educated man with some kindness in him" can help her son in ways his cold, violent father won't. "One man is good to him. This priest. Puts out a hand to the boy. Does the man have his reasons? Yes. Everybody has their reasons. You have your reasons," she tells the upright nun, who is shocked.

Though this brilliant, tight, 90-minute play takes place in a religious environment, there are no certainties. Is Father Flynn guilty? Is Sister Aloysius a righteous protector of children or is she a warped persecutor? Her world is changing in the significant year of 1964, when the Second Vatican Council opened the Catholic Church to such new ideas as celebrating the Mass in local languages instead of Latin. She passionately cares about the students' wellbeing, but doesn't believe in being pals with the kids. "They are terrified of you," says Sister James. "Yes, that's how it works," dryly replies the principal. But the younger woman and the priest embody a new, fresh approach to education. Which is better?

The play's central situation is particularly timely. The Catholic Church in the United States

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is facing serious abuse scandals. In Canada, the Anglican church is still facing the fallout from allegations of abuse at the now-defunct residential school system for Indian children. But Mr. Shanley's purpose is not to analyze pedophile priests, although it is clear that even the suspicion of abuse leaves all four characters deeply changed. The play opens with a sermon by Father Flynn, whose first line is "What do you do when you are not sure?" It ends with an expression of doubt from that pillar of certainty, Sister Aloysius, that has audience members excitedly debating its meaning even as they are filing out of the theatre. To this viewer, she is expressing doubt about the institution of the church. She has not spent her entire adult life as a nun - she reveals she was married and her husband died in World War II - but she has committed her life to that institution.

The playwright is also not attacking religion or faith in God, but seeking to explore whether it is certainty or doubt that is intellectually healthy, again, a timely question as religious liberals and fundamentalists debate issues concerning biblical interpretation, family life and war. For Mr. Shanley, it is the willingness to embrace doubt that leads one down the path to wisdom. "When you take a step to address wrongdoing, you are taking a step away from God but in his service," says Sister Aloysius, who proceeds, by her actions, to illustrate her words.

Director Doug Hughes keeps the action taut on a simple set that consists of three brick walls with arches, framing the stage, on which the principal's office set and a gym locker room slide on and off. Some directorial flourishes, such as a frozen-moment photo flash at the end of several scenes and an ominous musical tone at scene changes, aren't necessary. Excellent as the actors are, their Bronx accents occasionally result in swallowed words, especially at the end of sentences, which is a shame since there isn't an extraneous word in this entire play.

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