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## REVIEW: See 'Doubt,' Montana Rep production that strips matters to bare essence

By JOE NICKELL

In a quiet moment of John Patrick Shanley's tempestuous play, "Doubt: A Parable," the priest, Father Flynn, explains to the young and impressionable nun, Sister James, his motives for including an imaginary story in his latest sermon.

"You make up little stories to illustrate. In the tradition of the parable," he tells her. "The truth makes for a bad sermon."

For a play with expansive ambitions, this is a remarkably concise statement of thesis, not to mention meta-thesis of the theatrical enterprise itself. If any line separates church sermon from theatrical performance in real life, it is here wiped away in a script that advances drama through lecture and lectures through drama.



As intoned by actor Brendan Shanahan in Montana Repertory Theatre's darkly simmering production, those words carry a naïve simplicity that nearly untethers them from their own gravity. Tall and arrow-straight, his hands loosely clenched at his robed hip bones, Shanahan glides through the production with the emotional temperance one expects of a man of the cloth, though not necessarily a man of the theatre.

In his first monologue, Flynn preaches the power of doubt as a "bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty." The school principal, Sister Aloysius, would not agree.

For her, certainty and faith are inseparably bound. When she arrives at a hunch that Father Flynn's relationship with an African-American student is not entirely wholesome, she needs no proof.

She ultimately gets none, but that is no more a spoiler than the title of the play.

Many know the story already; after all, this isn't the first time that "Doubt" has been cast upon the stage in Missoula. In 2008, local actor Seth Bloom organized an ambitious and fine three-week run of the show at the Crystal Theatre.

Yet many of us - and certainly most people who will see Montana Rep's production when it tours the nation this spring - still only know of "Doubt" from the film version of 2008, which starred Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffmann.

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**With its large cast and on-location setting,** the film paints a broader and more naturalistic haze of gray upon the black-and-white matters of habit and frock that swirl beneath the stormy surface of the drama.

With its cast of four and its single, bifurcated set, Montana Rep's production strips the matters to their bare essence. The play feels at once more removed from reality and more sharply illuminated than the film - a parable from the pulpit, as the title states plainly.

Within that conception, Shanahan's upright unflappability makes some sense. In an odd twist, we come away equally unconvinced by the sincerity of his protestations of innocence and his acknowledgment of fallibility.

Similarly, Seattle actress Suzy Hunt's almost uniformly unsympathetic portrayal of Sister Aloysius offers few shadings to suggest a real person. She draws laughs for her over-the-top condemnation of "Frosty the Snowman," but the humor is lost on her. Her compassion? "Nowhere you can get at it," she spits. She may seem more present in her character's habit; yet Hunt's Sister Aloysius is, if anything, even further removed from the ambiguities and color of real life.

Color plays a pivotal role in the drama, and it comes to the stage in a salmon-colored dress worn by Sarina Hart, the only actor to reprise a role from the previous Missoula production.

As the mother of the boy whom Sister Aloysius believes the priest has victimized, Hart is pitch-perfect in her single scene. "It's just til June," she cries over and over, begging the principal to ignore her intuition, amplifying her agitation with each protestation. For her, truth is secondary to practicality.

Sister James, meantime, wishes for simplicity itself. UM student Caitlin McRae is a picture of idealism in the role, her sweetness tempered by a healthy curiosity about the motives of her elders.

One may find it tempting to boil these characters to their essence. Yet it is in the subtleties of Shanley's script that one finds its profundities. "Doubt" is a daring play because it is a nuanced play, with no clear answers in the end. It simultaneously preaches and disavows principle, states fact and obliterates all certainty.

It is topically timely, yet in its underlying lessons, it is as timeless as any great drama.

Have no doubt, it is a show worth seeing.