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Without a Doubt, Tennessee Rep Delivers a Sure-Fire Hit

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By Chad Young, managing editor

DOUBT

Think you're astute in deciphering the truth? Are you up for putting your teen's logic and reason to the test? If your answer is yes, then a trip to TPAC's Johnson Theater is in order to see Tennessee Repertory Theatre's current production of John Patrick Shanley's Tony Award- and Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Doubt*.

Set in a Bronx, New York Catholic school in 1964, *Doubt* is a brilliantly written drama that casts a heavy dose of suspicion on a central character without absolute proof of any wrongdoing.

Stoic, hard-nosed School Principal Sister Aloysius (Rona Carter) accuses church priest Father Flynn (Jesse James Locorriere) of misconduct involving a 12-year-old male student and altar boy (who is also the school's first — and only — black student). When well-intentioned teacher Sister James (Jenny Littleton) shares her concerns with her superior about the boy's recent, disturbing behavior — including coming back to class from the Rectory with a strong smell of alcohol on his breath — Sister Aloysius goes on the rampage to oust Flynn, confident of the worst despite tangible proof.

An intense cat-and-mouse chase ensues with the audience continually on the edge of its seat trying to make sense of what's true and false. Shanley's prowess in challenging his audience's decision-making ability is at the forefront all along the course. Accusations against the priest fly high, but for each allegedly incriminating example of misconduct, a reasonable rebuttal comes forth. In the end, nothing is proven either way, forcing the audience to draw its own conclusion, which isn't easy.

This powerful show encompasses a myriad of societal issues, from the stark reality of how effortlessly one person can cast sure-fire judgment on another human with disregard for the truth to mankind's ability to prioritize the lesser of two evils.

The latter is powerfully evident when the boy's mother, Mrs. Muller (Delali Potakey), visits the principal's office. When Sister Aloysius informs the mother of her suspicions and suggests the boy go elsewhere for his own safety, the mom's response is astounding. Making known the outside dangers her son experiences, she clearly lets the principal know that even if this alleged crime is true, it's better than alternative situations. Despite her short stage time, Potakey gives one of the show's most powerful performances.

René Copeland's fabulous direction offers up some of the best acting seen on The Rep's stage. As always, Littleton's emotional investment in her role is evident. She masterfully portrays the meek and tormented young nun who only wants to do the right thing ... while deeply questioning the authority figure she is sworn to be loyal to along the way.

Locorriere perfectly captures the angst of his character, who may be the wrongly accused or the guilty man trying to cover his tracks. Locorriere delivers a believable role regardless of which side of the coin you face.

Carter is perfectly cast in her role. She portrays her rigid character to the hilt, making the audience sympathize with her quest to protect a child while conversely loathing her for making gut-instinct accusations without real evidence, especially when she admits her own deception.

Carter's final scene is emotional and extremely human. Her meltdown at the end admitting "I have doubts" regarding the outcome of the conflict, is riveting. Carter provides the real rub for the audience here. As Father Flynn states in the play's opening line, "What do you do when you're not sure?"

Best suited for ages 14 and older, *Doubt* provides an enormous thought-provoking discussion point for you and your teen that will likely continue for days. No doubt, you'll both learn something new about yourselves.