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## Suspicious Minds

# The Rep takes on Pulitzer-winning play about clergy sexual abuse

by Martin Brady  
*Nashville Scene*

### **DOUBT**

Even without clergy sexual abuse scandals, Catholics in the U.S. face a challenging public image—their cultish ways are viewed with some suspicion, and their patriarchal hierarchy, links to the Vatican and official stance on social issues are all easy targets of criticism. For those of us Catholics who feel our religion gets a bad rap, John Patrick Shanley's Tony- and Pulitzer-winning 2004 play *Doubt* won't provide any relief, but it provides a keenly focused historical view of church politics, played out in dramatic microcosm.

The new Tennessee Repertory Theatre production is certainly well done—yet another notch in the belt of director René Copeland, who keeps mounting well-chosen works with stellar casts. *Doubt* is a tightly constructed play, brimming with controversial ideas and endowed with riveting dialogue, written by the same canny craftsman who gave us *Moonstruck*. To his further credit, he presents intellectual and emotional ideas that keep his audience guessing to the very end.

The setting is Shanley's childhood neighborhood: a Catholic parish in the Bronx in 1964, in the midst of the significant Second Vatican Council, whose spirit of reform infused the church with progressive approaches to its liturgy and social culture. St. Nicholas School is run by a nun who fulfills the bygone stereotype: middle-aged, educationally traditional, set in her ways and somewhat prickly. The parish priest represents the “new” church: He's all about relating to parishioners, coaching the basketball team with energy and pride, and also taking an interest in the kids—in particular a new transfer, Donald Muller, the school's only African American.

If, like me, you were raised Catholic, you may find yourself squirming in your seat as Shanley's tale unfolds, mainly because you know where it's headed: priest as possible pedophile. But the playwright, who happens to be Catholic, has every right to address the issue, and Catholicism's modern-day *bête noire* definitely makes for grabby stage fodder...

In Shanley's script, an apparently sincere nun suspects the worst of a superficially well-intentioned priest figure. An intense journey of discovery ensues. Is the good sister onto some convincing circumstantial evidence? Has she jumped to slanderous conclusions? Or is she simply a frustrated and bitter woman, resentful of her church's male dominance and suspicious of the new post-Vatican II openness?

Shanley presents the debate as a point-counterpoint roller-coaster ride. His message is apparent—sexual abuse in the priesthood goes back many years and was never sufficiently rooted out by the powers that be. But in this scenario, he cagily leaves open a window for the titular doubt.

Veteran actress Rona Carter is the stern-faced school principal Sister Aloysius, the meatiest role of her recent Nashville career. The casting is sound, and Carter gives a consistent portrayal of a character who may seem alien by today's standards: She recoils at the encroachment of ballpoint pens into the classroom, conducts her own imposing inquisitions and is a strict disciplinarian. Carter could pull back a little on her tendency toward melodrama, though nuance might be harder to negotiate here, given the play's subject matter. In her sober conviction, Carter creates much more than mere caricature, and she even gets some welcome incidental laughs. It's a fine performance.

Jesse James Locorriere is the controversial Father Flynn, and he brings a strong presence to the role. He deftly sidesteps the initial accusations of misconduct and even turns the tide in his favor for a while, leaving viewers room to wonder if he hasn't been unjustly indicted. Locorriere plays it straight-up: He's not a menace as far as we can perceive, and his impulse to do good as a priest appears heartfelt. Suffice to say that his fate is dealt with in the typical fashion of the times, which means quietly, and presumably without addressing any underlying problem.

Jenny Littleton is the young Sister James, caught between her enthusiasm for teaching and Sister Aloysius' efforts to expose Flynn with her assistance. Littleton's initial naïveté evolves into a growing cynicism, her character functioning as a kind of fulcrum that balances the competing interests of the lead players.

Finally, there's a notable cameo by Delali Potakey as the mother of the black student. In her single extended scene with Carter, Potakey embodies all the righteous concern of a woman of her station, and she presents a convincing and moving argument for the risks she must take as an African American parent in the racially charged time period.

Gary Hoff's set is a subtle re-creation of the typical parish grounds of the era, and Trish Clark provides the costumes, including the distinctively authentic nun habits of the Sisters of Charity.

Doubt runs 90 minutes without intermission, and if it tends to provoke discomfort, well, that's partly why it's great theater. The rest can be attributed to Copeland & Co.'s thoroughly professional skills.