

## A Battle of Wills Threatens the Stern Hierarchy of a Catholic School in *Doubt*

By [Alan R. Hall](#)

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[Theatre in the Park](#) takes its audiences on a trip back in time with John Patrick Shanley's explosive play, *Doubt*. The year is 1964; the country is still in mourning for a fallen president; the Civil Rights movement finds a stalwart leader in Martin Luther King, Jr; and in a small Catholic church in the Bronx, a war is being waged. With a simple cast of four, we witness a battle of wits and wills. The stern and fierce nun, Sister Aloysius Beauvier (Lynda Clark), takes on the mantle of protector of her school in St. Nicholas Church from a perceived danger. She views, with an ironclad certainty, the pastor of the church, Father Brendan Flynn (David Henderson), as a threat to the school where she is principal, and finds herself alone in a war where even the hierarchy of the church stands against her.

Sister Aloysius attempts to bring into the struggle a young nun. She teaches the boy that the principal fears Father Flynn *might* have molested. She tells Sister James (Michelle Wood) to be on the lookout for anything unusual in her class. Dubious, Sister James agrees, but cannot imagine what she is to be looking for. But an incident Sister James witnesses, where the boy, Danny Muller, is taken from his class to the rectory by Father Flynn, makes her wonder. A week passes before she can bring herself to tell Sister Aloysius, but tell her she does. This simple and probably innocent event is exactly what Sister Aloysius feared might happen.

What this event brings about is the very crux of the play. Sister Aloysius calls Danny's mother, Mrs. Muller (Rasool Johan), and tells her what Father Flynn might have done. Mrs. Muller, surprisingly, wants none of it. To hear Danny tell it, Father Flynn can do no wrong; he is a father figure in a situation where Danny needs one desperately. Mrs. Muller almost pleads with Sister to leave it alone. By this time, Sister Aloysius has confronted Father Flynn with Sister James as a witness. Even Sister James is content and satisfied with Father Flynn's explanation, and Sister Aloysius feels the walls starting to close in around her.

Director Ira David Wood III directs this play with an understanding that we, as observers, are never to know the full truth of the matter; we can't know whether the good Father is a victim of Sister Aloysius' wrath or exactly the monster she claims he is. We learn that he feels guilt over *something*, but we never learn what it is. And the truth is not important; what is important is that Sister Aloysius remove him from this school. And even after an explosive war of words with the Father himself, she remains undeterred — despite the fact that the Father can bring the iron power of the Catholic Church down upon her.

TIP presents *Doubt* in an old but tried-and-true method of changing scenes by rolling set pieces on and off the set. There are only three settings: Sister Aloysius' office, the small garden inside the gates of the church, and the pulpit from which Father Flynn gives two sermons. Both Henderson and Clark must master Bronx accents, which they do with aplomb. To hear the preacher speak in this accent from the pulpit is at first almost comical — but Henderson manages it so well that we soon accept it as real. The battle that takes place leaps off the stage as palpable between Sister and Father. Only Sister's iron will keeps her on a course she feels she cannot waver on. When the two people she believes must become allies fall on the side of the Father, Sister Aloysius faces *Doubt*. How she reacts to this situation is the very meaning of the Parable that the playwright sets down for us.

Lynda Clark performs Sister as having had a family, a tragedy, and a history that makes her hard. Sister James remarks upon it; Clark defends it as reality, that a constant vigilance must be kept to teach and to guard her students. They all fear her; that is the way she wants it. It has worked for her for so long that she has come to trust it as sound. When that certainty falters, doubt comes crashing in. It is a force that nearly crushes her. In his second sermon, Father Flynn tells of a sailor lost at sea, and the doubt he must face of being rescued. His parable is one of faith; that we must trust that what we are doing is right. It is a sermon that Sister Aloysius takes very much to heart.

This is a compact play, both in scene and in structure. But it packs the wallop of a vial of nitroglycerine. In two potent scenes of confrontation, we learn what makes Sister Aloysius so certain, and also the very real possibility that that certainty may destroy her and her school. *Doubt* is a powerful and volatile war that leaves the viewer drained. But this production is tight and strong and savagely real, and well worth the ordeal.

Theatre in the Park's production of *Doubt* concludes its two-week run April 15-18. See our theater calendar for details.