

## Theatre in the Park's Doubt: A Parable

By Byron Woods

Since at least the fourth century B.C., it's been one of the theater's highest callings: to present a culture's most pressing dilemmas in productions that diagnose, evaluate and seek remedies for those quandaries.

It's not the easiest of tasks, yet, over the past week, two noted regional companies have grappled with differing difficulties in staging what's been called the theater of the *polis*: a largely praiseworthy production of John Patrick Shanley's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Doubt* at Theatre in the Park and a much more cautionary result by Hidden Voices, which closed last Saturday in Carrboro.

The Triangle has entertained *Doubt* before, in a 2008 production at PlayMakers Rep featuring Julie Fishell and Jeffrey Blair Cornell. Indeed, the nearness of scheduling between the two raised questions when Theatre in the Park placed it on its slate in the spring of 2009. Having seen both productions, I now know the necessity for the second.

The recent headlines from Ireland, Germany and Rome concerning the Catholic Church's responses to pedophilia among priests couldn't have been predicted when the show was scheduled just under a year ago. Still, they place a particular urgency—and responsibility—upon this production that argues against sensationalism. Thankfully, director Ira David Wood III and his talented cast live up to the challenge.

Shanley's script examines a nun's suspicions in 1964 about the friendship between a local priest and a 12-year-old boy at the Catholic school where she serves as principal. On its surface, *Doubt* appears to ask—but never unambiguously answers—this question: Did the priest, Father Flynn, engage in sexual behavior with the child?

But Shanley pulls back just far enough to raise a larger circle of questions: What differentiates an investigation from a witch hunt or a vendetta? What level of proof authenticates guilt? If a different level is required to exonerate innocence, why?

Concerning Sister Aloysius (commendably played by Lynda Clark), the largest questions involve the possibility of spiritual corrosion in her certainty—not doubt—of Father Flynn's sin. The questions particularly befit her, a widow of a World War II soldier: How *does* one maintain faith in the good while facing and fighting the evils in the world? What happens when that faith expires—without our notice?

This Theatre in the Park production reminds us that a company taking on contemporary issues must remain a fair broker in the process. If it pulls a punch in favor of any side in an argument, the even playing field is lost, and all stances represented in a production are potentially compromised as a result.

Rasool Jahan provided sterling support in the role of the student's mother, Mrs. Muller. But on stage with three well-seasoned veterans, promising young actor Michelle Wood demonstrated comparatively limited emotional range and believability as Sister James.

Director Wood and actor David Henderson keep Father Flynn's potential guilt or innocence a matter of conjecture—more so, in fact, than the 2008 PlayMakers production. In preserving our doubts, they keep *Doubt* from becoming a comparably one-dimensional ecclesiastic whodunit. Shanley's after bigger game here. Wood's fidelity to that pursuit lets us consider the dilemma of justice, and the apparently high price those who pursue it must pay.