

Doubt Director's Note Oklahoma State 2018

"The Dead Sleep Well"

~Title of a Kurosawa film

"We sail within a vast sphere, ever drifting in uncertainty, driven from end to end...Let us therefore not look for certainty and stability. Our reason is always deceived by fickle shadows; nothing can fix the finite between the two infinities..."

~Blaise Pascal

John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt: A Parable* has been captivating audiences since its Broadway premiere in 2005. The production won a Tony for Best Play and was later made into a popular film starring Meryl Streep and Philip Seymour Hoffman.

While the primary storyline of this play is inherently intriguing, even in an "off-putting" sort of way, it is but the framework upon which Shanley builds his broader thematic discussion. The primary theme in this play is eponymously evident: the concept of doubt. However, by contrast, this play also explores the notion of certainty, not to mention more complex ideas about established rules of order and due process.

The mechanism for these explorations is not cloaked in nuance and theatrical sleight of hand, but, rather, subtitled to emphasize its importance in the play.... "A Parable". Parables are stories constructed to teach certain lessons and speak to ideas. They are also tools of various leaders, including Catholic priests.

So this play is a parable, with a character that speaks in parables, who is a part of a broader parable about far-reaching thematic concepts. While, on paper, that reads like a nightmare of self-awareness obfuscated by artistic hubris, it is, in reality, perhaps the most profound way to help these characters endow the playwright's ideas. While the more polemical amongst us will see this tactic as undercutting the very institution our primary characters serve, I would instead posit that it is only *through* this approach that the ideas can be most clearly communicated with an audience. Additionally, this isn't only a story for Catholics or the ordained or religious people in general. Rather, it is a story for *anyone* who has struggled with the twin afflictions of doubt and certainty.

What makes this play so successful is not only the plot, which is intriguing and ever changing, as more information is unveiled in each scene; but also Shanley's ability to drill down to the bedrock of our social anxieties. To do that, he tells a story where our characters double as archetypes to help us more easily digest complex

messages. And even before the elements of his plot re-emerged into the social fabric of current events, his ideas had taken up residence in our psyches, as they are the same questions we ask ourselves daily. These fights with our inner selves have been going on since our ability to reason and our desperation for certainty only grows stronger with each generation. To help us in the battle, Shanley presents this parable to re-state the terms of the engagement and help us better train ourselves for a battle that forges on without end as each individual drafts their better angels to vanquish the demonic foe of doubt. He presents these ideas in a contemporary two-act play. The first act is the play to be performed in the theater. The second act takes place on an individual basis as you discuss this play and the story with others who have shared in this communal experience. I hope this new look at the field helps each person in their individual battle. The power of Shanley's storytelling will hopefully clarify these themes in our everyday lives. And, to borrow from another powerful literary masterpiece, enable us to "slip the surly bonds" of Earth's doubts and "rise to the high untrespassed sanctity" of certainty, stretching our fingers to the heavens to touch the face of God.

On behalf of the cast, crew and the department of theatre at Oklahoma State University, I hope you enjoy John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt: A Parable*.