John Patrick Shanley’s... 

Doubt, a Parable

Study Guide for the 
BVU Theatre 2012 Production

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Doubt</em>, an Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Patrick Shanley</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchy of the Catholic Church</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters of <em>Doubt</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sisters of Charity</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Priest's Clothing</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Time of Doubt</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director’s Notes</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themes of <em>Doubt</em></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions for Discussion</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

This study guide is designed to help students of Buena Vista University and the members of the Storm Lake community better understand the context and background relating to Buena Vista University Theatre’s production of *Doubt: A Parable* by John Patrick Shanley.

Buena Vista University Theatre

The works performed by the Buena Vista University Theatre Department are selected to enrich the understanding and to enhance the world view of both the students involved in the production as well as members of the audience. The cast and crew of each production are committed to performing to the highest standard of excellence possible.
Doubt, a Parable, takes place in 1964 in a Catholic school the Bronx, New York. The story begins when uncertainty strikes Sister James, a young sister who recently started teaching at the school. She is concerned that the relationship between a priest, Father Flynn and a student may have become inappropriate and confides this fear to the principal, Sister Aloysius. Learning this concern, Sister Aloysius becomes determined to find out the truth about what happened and to protect the boy.
John Patrick Shanley

Born on October 3, 1950 in the Bronx, New York, John Patrick Shanley would later use his childhood experiences as the inspiration for his 2004 show *Doubt, a Parable*. Shanley grew up in a neighborhood very similar to that of the play that was comprised primarily with Irish-Catholic families. Shanley's education began at St. Anthony Catholic school which was run by the Sisters of Charity; the order of sisters portrayed in the play. Once Shanley had finished at St. Antony's was enrolled in another Catholic school, which was run by priests. Shanley caused as much trouble as he could resulting in his dismissal.

Shanley still had two years left of high school remaining, but instead of staying in the Bronx he transferred to a private school in New Hampshire, where he began to write. His new found skill would bring him to new heights, resulting in his being accepted to New York University. Shanley attend NYU for a time, then took an intermission in his schooling when he enlisted into the Marine Corps, and served in the Vietnam War. Once his service was complete he returned to NYU and graduated with a degree in writing.

After graduation, Shanley's writing took off. He wrote several full length and one act shows that were produced in New York. Although he was writing a great deal, he did not truly gain recognition in the theatre community until 1983 when his show *Danny and the Deep Blue Sea* was produced. This lead to other writing successes including the movie *Moonstruck* which stared Cher and Nicolas Cage. *Moonstruck* for which he received the Academy Award for best screen play in 1987.

After *Moonstruck* Shanley continued to write plays and screenplays but none of his work reached *Moonstruck* standards with critics until *Doubt, a Parable* was released on stage in 2004. *Doubt* won numerous awards including a Tony for best play and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The success of *Doubt* on stage then lead to the movie adaption of *Doubt* starting Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Amy Adams in 2008. John Patrick Shanley today lives in New York and is still writing stage plays and screen plays.
Hierarchy of the Catholic Church

The Pope
At the time of the play the pope was Pope Paul VI

Cardinals

Bishops

Monsignors
A monsignor is the highest ranked priest in a parish

Priests

Monks

Nuns and Sisters
Characters of *Doubt*

**Sister Aloysius:** The principal, Sister Aloysius Beauvier, ...is in her fifties or sixties. She is watchful, reserved, unsentimental
— *Stage Directions Doubt*

**Sister James:** She is in her twenties. There’s a bit of sunshine in her heart, though she’s reserved...
— *Stage Directions Doubt*

**Father Flynn:** A priest, Father Flynn, in his late thirties...He is working class, from the Northeast.
— *Stage Directions Doubt*

**Mrs. Muller:** Mrs. Muller, a black woman of about thirty eight. She’s on red alert.
— *Stage Directions Doubt*
The Sisters of Charity

Founder of the Order
Mother Seton

Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton was born August 28, 1774 in New York City. Mother Seton lived her whole life for Christ but had a very full life before taking her vows. She was married and had five children, however, when her husband died in Italy she came back to America and became the founder of the Sisters of Charity. With her base as founder of the Sisters of Charity she started a free Catholic school for girls. In 1809 Mother Seton became a certified sister after taking her vows and pronouncing, “Vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience binding for one year.” Mother Seton lived her life for God and died January 4, 1821, she was only 46. More than 150 years after her death Mother Seton was canonized, and her effect on the Sisters of Charity is still a strong influence in America.

The Habit

Each order of nuns has a distinctive form of Clothing known as the habit. The Sisters of Charity habit that was used until the late nineteen sixties was what was used in the play Doubt. The habits were mostly black. This was due to Mother Seton’s husband’s death. Seton was in Italy, and thus took on traditional mourning clothing of an Italian woman. When coming back to the United States this look became the traditional habit for the Sisters of Charity.
A Priest’s Clothing

There are many different garments that a priest wears while leading mass. The colorful robes which Father Flynn wears are called chasubles. There are several colors of chasubles and each is worn for a different time in The Church’s calendar.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White with Blue</td>
<td>Festival Days such as Christmas and Easter. Also used for Weddings, Baptisms, and Confirmations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Green and Gold</td>
<td>Ordinary Time, used when other colors are not appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>Worn during Advent, Lent, and Funerals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Worn on Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Pentecost, and Saint Festivals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Time of Doubt
(1963-1964)

Nov. 1963: John F. Kennedy was Assassinated

Jan. 8 1964: LBJ declared a war on Poverty

Feb. 2 1964: The Beatles arrive in the U.S.A.

July 2 1964: The Civil Rights Amendment was added to the Constitution

July 16 1964: The Harlem Race Riots began in New York

Dec. 11 1964: Martin Luther King Jr. won the Nobel Prize for Peace
Vow: Vows are taken by people of the church to profess their faith and become part of a religious order.

Mortal Sin: A mortal sin is when a person has sinned deliberately and thus destroy their soul.

Saints: There are two meanings of the word saint. The first describes someone who is a follower of Christ and the second describes a person has lived and performed many charitable and heroic acts of faith.

Rectory: The Rectory of the church is where the priests reside and do academic work.

Emissaries: An emissary is someone who is an agent of the Church on a specific mission.
There are so many voices vying for our attention these days. Our elected representatives and those running for office, the political pundits and experts of every stripe, news anchors, talk show hosts, and celebrities, and yes, even teachers. On the radio, on the television, on the internet. So much talk. So much conviction. So much noise. Where is the silence of listening? Of weighing and discernment? Why must we always be certain of what we believe, if we can’t even allow for the space to wait, to explore, to examine and measure what we know and what we don’t yet know? I hope this play will remind us to untangle the voices so we can hear the truth spoken from many sources.
Themes of *Doubt*

**Doubt:** Doubt, and the impact of the absence of certainty, is by far the major theme in *Doubt*. In the play, each character experiences doubt. For Sister Aloysius it is about whether she is right or not regarding the relationship between Father Flynn and Donald Muller. For Mrs. Muller it is whether she is doing the right thing for her son. Uncertainty in the play is not only felt by the characters thought. It is also felt by the audience as well. As Father Flynn says, “Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty.”

**Certainty:** Certainty is the opposite of doubt; in fact certainty is beyond doubt. The problem with certainty is how does one know you actually have it? Several times in the play the characters feel certain, but lingering doubts persist.

**Proof:** In a play about doubt and certainty the question of proof arises. There are four different perspectives in this play; however, no one character has enough proof to convince the others that they are correct. There is one way to find out the truth, and that is by asking Donald Muller, the boy who has supposedly been molested by Father Flynn. But as Sister Aloysius says, “He’ll deny it.”
Questions for Discussion

1. Much of this play is about doubt and certainty; what do the concepts of doubt and certainty mean to you?

2. Sister Aloysius and Sister James have very different teaching styles. Whose do you think is more effective and Why?

3. Both Mrs. Muller and Sister Aloysius are fighting for Donald’s welfare, who do you think is right and why?

4. Why do you think the playwright ended the play as he did?

5. Do you think that Father Flynn was guilty or innocent? Why?
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*Doubt, A Parable* by John Patrick Shanley

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Page_12
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I wouldn’t mind being wrong but I doubt I am.

—Sister Aloysius

*Doubt, A Parable*