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Ongoing intrigue of Shanley's 'Doubt'

By Staff Report on February 11, 2010 12:00 am



Director Ben Randle was clear about one thing before staging the emotionally rich theater hit "Doubt" at New Conservatory Theatre Center in The City – leave the baggage at the door.

And we're not talking Louis Vuitton.

Randle is referring to the buzz and acclaim John Patrick Shanley's play has received over the years: the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Best Drama, Tony Awards (Best Play, Best Actress), as well as last year when the work became a major Oscar contender.

The issue: Do audiences have preconceived notions about what they'll be seeing?

"I think that is something you truly have to look at, acknowledge and put somewhere and unload it," he says. "The way I did it was focusing on what I had to play with, and then what I can then bring to it, and not be intimidated by the success that came before it."

Theatergoers can see Randle's creative vigor at work at New Conservatory through Feb. 28.

It's hard to forget, or perhaps even fully wrap one's mind around, Shanley's creation. In it, Sister Aloysius, a principal of a Catholic school in the Bronx in 1964, boldly makes assumptions when she suspects a young priest, Father Flynn, of "improper relations" with a male student.

The sister's claims are somewhat of a mental springboard for audiences to dive right off of: Do any of us really know what others do behind closed doors and are we ever immune to leaping toward the most extreme conclusions?

"The plays works on multiple levels and it's so brilliantly written and specific, and particular to one moment in one neighborhood's history, in one nation's history," Randle says. "It says a lot about the nature of discussion and how we behave with one another. And that's so rare."

For this production, Randle maneuvers the talents of Scarlett Hepworth (Sister Aloysius), Roselyn Hallett (Sister James) and Andrew Nance (Father Flynn) in the more intimate setting of NCTC's Walker Theatre.

As for the work's allure, he says audiences seem to be fascinated with the fact that the play never resolves itself.

"People have seen it so many times and are so energized – they still don't know what really happened," he adds. "I think that kind of involvement with the piece is powerful."

IF YOU GO

Doubt, A Parable

Presented by New Conservatory Theatre Center

Where: Walker Theatre, 25 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco

When: 8 p.m. Wednesdays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays; closes Feb. 28

Tickets: \$18 to \$40

Contact: (415) 861-8972, www.nctcsf.org

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