

August 25, 2008

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No doubt about Emerson group's 'Doubt'

“What actually happens in life is beyond interpretation. The truth makes for a bad sermon. It tends to be confusing and has no clear conclusion.”

This quote from John Patrick Shanley’s Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Doubt*, is perhaps the most profound statement the play makes. Reality, as fact, is far too inconvenient, and in most cases, creating cunning substitutes for the truth is much more satisfying.

The new theater, Emerson Theatre Collaborative (ETC), based in Mystic, CT, is presently offering a noteworthy production of Shanley’s dramatic query on the altar of the Union Baptist Church.

The audience enters from the back of the church and is seated in the chorus pews looking straight down on the production. Some chairs are positioned on the minimal stage so those seated there serve direct witness to the event before them.

Essentially, the play is set at St. Nicholas Church and School in 1964 Bronx, around the time the Roman Catholic Church held its Vatican II examination. While questions on how the Church should deal with the shifting world were being discussed, life’s complications still forged ahead, causing eyes to open a bit wider and, if we were being honest with ourselves, see what was hiding, or being deliberately hidden, in the periphery. Pragmatically, it could still be set in today’s modern society. It outwardly questions religious sanctions, and covertly challenges what we generally hold as truth.

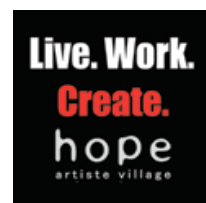
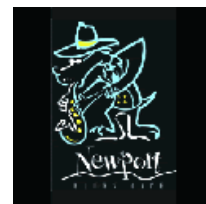
Director Albert Cremin uses symbolism to its max in this production. From the dead crow at the base of an austere crucifix, to the red roses held to the heart of an uncertain nun, he creates moments of intentional notice.

Emma Palzere-Rae plays Sister Aloysius, the strict principal of the parochial school, with solemnly stern conviction. Palzere-Rae’s controlled performance allows us to automatically recognize and fear the proctor with her adamant adherence to the rules. Yet it is in her character’s more caring persona that we come to appreciate her depth as a polished actress.

Heidi Harger serves her character of Sister James well with the passionate naiveté of a novice. Although initially effective, I would’ve liked to have seen a bit more progression from the idyllic to the hardened by the end of the play. Still she makes you want to believe in what should be true.

Stephen Daniel Sherman gives a respectable rendition of the problematic priest, Father Flynn. Not that he doesn’t give it his best effort, he does; he is just a bit young for the role of a man who has been bounced from parish to parish over the years, and therefore his credibility as a seasoned cleric is challenged.

Mrs. Muller is the only character in the entire piece that has no doubts about herself, or her status as a Negro mother in 1964. Camilla Ross’s interpretation of a woman who must blindly abide social injustice and take whatever steps necessary to survive is intentionally disturbing, and convincing.



All in all, ETC's first production is worth seeing, if not only to see a sturdy production of *Doubt*, but to show support for this fledgling troupe, and to encourage their efforts to bring intelligent theater to local venues.

BY GERI SERENO

Emerson Theatre Collaborative's inaugural production, Doubt: A Parable, by John Patrick Shanley, runs August 21, 22, 23. All performances are at 8p.m. Union Baptist Church, 119 High Street, Mystic CT. Tickets are \$18 (\$16 for students and seniors) and can be obtained by calling 860-705-9711. Proceeds will benefit Noank Baptist Group Homes, Inc., serving the youth of southeastern Connecticut. Additional information is available at EmersonTheatreCollaborative.org.

