

ARTS COMMENTARY

Doubt: 'When you are lost, you are not alone.'

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I don't know how you spent Christmas, but my day included a trip to the movies to see "Doubt."

I know to some, that might seem a peculiar way to spend part of Christmas, to not only see a movie that examines the nature of doubt but one in which a priest may be molesting a boy.

But I'd long been wanting to see it, and Christmas Day was the day it opened.

I've seen the play on which it's based three times — once on Broadway with the original cast (including the amazing Cherry Jones and Brian F. O'Byrne) and twice at the Florida Repertory Theatre last season, with a different, but equally as powerful cast.

And I know Gulfshore Playhouse plans to stage a production in Naples in February.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning play by John Patrick Shanley also received the Drama Desk Award and the Tony Award for Best Play. And it's no wonder: it's extremely well-crafted. It lingers with you long after you've left the theater.

"Doubt" is set in 1964, in the Bronx. Sister Aloysius, principal of a Catholic elementary school, suspects Father Flynn of taking liberties with Donald Miller — the school's first black student. The boy's teacher, a young, good-hearted Sister James, has seen some unusual behavior, but nothing that's indisputable. But Sister Aloysius doesn't need proof to start her witch hunt.

"I have my certainty," she declares.

On a very elemental level, you can look at the movie as a mystery: Did he do it? Is the priest guilty?

That's left up to you to decide. (And that left one online reviewer unhappy, because everything isn't tied up neatly and explained at the end. I suspect she probably hated the ending of "The Sopranos" too.)

Many say they ping-pong back and forth, first believing the priest, then the nun, then the priest again... And a case can be made for both.

In a time when it's public knowledge that so many priests have molested children, and the church



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merely shuffled them off to other parishes, it's easy to believe Father Flynn's guilty.

And in a time when the church still seems to lack compassion for gays, it's easy to see Sister Aloysius as guilty. (She believes Father Flynn is gay, and therefore, also a pedophile.)

But "Doubt" works on a variety of other levels too. It not only causes you to examine what you believe, but why.

The movie is powerful. It fleshes out the play a little more, showing us the school, the children, the other nuns, the congregation, the Bronx neighborhood.

Mr. Shanley, who wrote the screenplay and directed the movie, has kept most of the dialogue, placing some of it in different environments. He's also expanded on the theme of wind — wind as a destructive force, as the voice of God, as an agent of change.

The benefit of film is that not only can it show you wide, panoramic shots, but close-ups. And I found myself mesmerized by the faces of the four major actors: Meryl Streep, Amy Adams, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Viola Davis.

It's no surprise all four have been nominated for Golden Globes, as well as for Screen Actor Guild Awards and Chicago Film Critics Association

tion Awards.

When I interviewed Mr. Shanley last year, he called doubt "the black sheep of emotion and ideas. Doubt doesn't reduce down, it expands," he said. "I see doubt as a positive force. Certitude shuts all the doors."

And in his play's opening sermon, he has the priest address "the secret of (an) alienating sorrow."

"There are those of you in church today who know exactly the crisis of faith I describe," Father Flynn says. "I want to say to you: Doubt can be a bond as powerful and sustaining as certainty. When you are lost, you are not alone."

There are those whose faith allows for doubting, for struggle, for questioning, and those whose faith doesn't.

Last year, I attended a friend's funeral. She was only in her mid-40s, intelligent and talented, but the last years of her life had been filled with tremendous struggle. She had difficulty coping and began drinking. There was talk of possible drug use.

Her memorial service was packed with family, friends, colleagues. (Sometimes I think we should hold these services when people are alive, so everyone can see how loved they are, how

many people's lives they've affected.)

What I remember from this service is how saddened everyone was by such a young life being so needlessly and suddenly cut short. And how the minister who led the service didn't address her struggles at all.

It would've been comforting to hear him acknowledge her pain, her grappling, her inner torment. But he didn't. He just gave a glowing eulogy and glossed over the difficulties of her day-to-day life.

Perhaps he did so out of respect to the family. But it didn't seem honest to me. It felt as if he were whitewashing the facts.

He claimed he knew her, but I had a hard time believing that.

And his comments didn't help anyone sitting in that church that day who were, themselves, struggling, including those wrestling with the fact and circumstances of her death.

During that time, I could've used a sermon like the one Father Flynn gives in "Doubt" — something that acknowledges the dark night of the soul, the struggles that we all, each and everyone of us, go through.

Something honest, something real, instead of religious platitudes. ■

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