

THEATER REVIEW: Actors, director lift production into a higher realm

By Mark Hughes Cobb Staff Writer

For a city of just under 100,000, there's a lot of theater here. The regularly producing companies -- Theatre Tuscaloosa, Tuscaloosa Children's Theatre, the Actor's Charitable Theatre and the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance -- produce four to eight productions per season, each, so sometimes, a show might make return visits. For example, Theatre Tuscaloosa put on "Hairspray" in 2014, four years after the ACT had it at the Bama Theatre.

This week, UA recreated John Patrick Shanley's riveting "Doubt: A Parable," in its Allen Bales Theatre. Due to sensitive subject matter -- a nun accuses a priest of molesting a boy in the Catholic school they oversee -- Theatre Tuscaloosa held a reading in advance of its 2009 production, and a "talk back" after a show, featuring the cast and religious figures including a Benedictine Sister from Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman. At the same time, the film starring Meryl Streep and Phillip Seymour Hoffman opened in multiplexes. "Doubt" won Tony and Pulitzer prizes for off-Broadway and Broadway runs, 2004 to 2006.

So there's a tiny "seen that" when a title returns. To shrug it off, think how Johnny Cash transformed Trent Reznor's "Hurt," or how Al Green turned the Bee Gees' sodden "How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?" into a last-breath elegy. The analogy holds: Shanley's prose, lyrical, lush and rhythmic, lifts what could be a tawdry mystery into higher realms.

Shanley wrote in a preface that doubt is courageous, dangerous, important; that " ... conviction is a resting place and doubt is infinite ... " Only four people appear. The boy is the invisible heart. What happened is crucial, but equally: why? What should be the fallout? Did old-school Sister Aloysius (Ava Buchanan), empowered by conviction, do right taking on Father Flynn (Blake Williams) and the patriarchy of the church? As with stories of such art, everything's in motion, everything's in doubt, and while there is an ending, it's paradoxically open-ended.

Tom Alsip, a UA master of fine arts directing candidate, uses the thrust of the AB to bring the open-minded post-Vatican II priest into the audience (never fear: It's not to force singing or dancing. Wrong show for that) for sermons, which, per the title, stand as parables. His opening remarks set the time -- 1964, in reference to JFK's assassination as "last year" -- which adds horror to the notion that abuse may have been going on much longer than many think. But his obvious compassion opens Flynn up as the guy you want to like. Williams, an MFA acting student, makes a man stolid in nature, yet energized with youthful vigor and light. No pun intended for the formally garbed, but nothing is rendered black and white, despite the fortress-like, stony set designed by Charles Moncrief, a medieval gray wall looming.

Buchanan, a long-time favorite at Theatre Tuscaloosa making her first appearance on a UA stage, shows

start to finish why it's crucial to cast age-appropriate. A talented younger actor could play it, after a fashion, but the knockout combination of Buchanan's steel-beam rigidity brought to bear against the Flynn's of the world, matched with her utter commitment to values she was raised on, and flavored with the gradual, petal-pulling reveal of the human underneath, make hers an established actor's work, unmatched by anyone of lesser caliber. She's a terror, as Aloysius usually is, but can also bring us along on an Al Green journey.

Undergrad actors Cheyenne Ford, as the boy's mom Mrs. Muller, and Sarah Grace Valleroy as young Sister James have the grace to stand up and fight, even when they're in doubt. Muller carries off an especially tricky twist with emotional heft; sympathies will again be set swinging. Valleroy's James is our entrance point, as the most pure, undamaged spirit, the one with the least conflict, who still dares thrust herself into the maelstrom. As Buchanan must, she expresses volumes through body language and the cares of a changing face, as that's all that's shown.

Alsip's got this in hand, pointedly placing Blake as Flynn closer in proximity, and keeping Buchanan's Aloysius, more often than not, behind a stark, clean desk. Only as the facade begins to crumble does she move forward, into a suggestion of life outside, where Valleroy is there to, in one last twist, guide her mentor.