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Doubt: A Parable

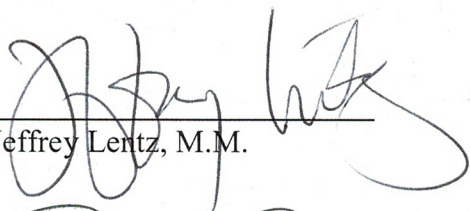
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Candidate for the degree

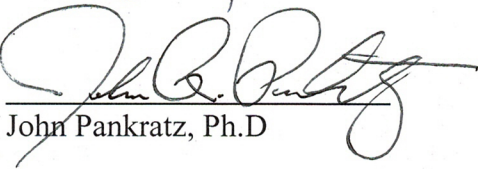
Bachelor of Arts

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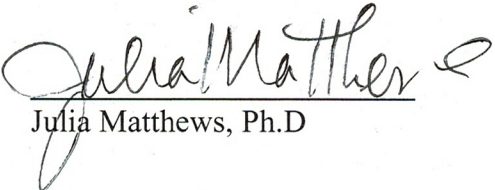
Departmental Distinction in Theatre



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Doubt: A Parable

Alexis Jenofsky

Albright College- Departmental Distinction Thesis

April 2017

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In the spring of 2016 I engaged in an independent study in directing with professor Jeffrey Lentz, during which I researched many well-known directors and acting techniques in preparation to direct my own production on our main stage. As I approached the end of my junior year, I arranged a meeting with the theatre faculty who suggested that I explore the idea of directing John Patrick Shanley's Pulitzer Prize and Tony award winning play *Doubt, A Parable*. I was immediately drawn to this play for reasons of both form and content. Shanley constructs his play as a parable -- a story viewed through the lens of a religious context, offering his audience a lesson in morality and the consequence of our choices. *Doubt, A Parable* challenges audiences to face the issue of sexual assault in the American Roman Catholic Church, a subject that, until recently, had been cloaked in secrecy for decades. Shanley offers an introduction to the world of his play, describing it as "... *going through some kind of vast puberty. The old ways were still dominant in behavior, dress, morality, world view, but what had been organic expression had become a dead mask.*" The faculty soon realized that my excitement and eagerness to produce this show deserved a spot in our main stage 2016-2017 season for my departmental thesis. Without a doubt, I accepted the offer!

The opportunity to direct a full-length production was one the most rewarding yet challenging experiences I have had during my Albright College career. I am very grateful that I have had many past opportunities directing short plays on our main stage. Ironically, you would think that working in a familiar space would bring a sort of comfort as I began this new experience. However, it was the complete opposite. I was very uncomfortable in the beginning stages of my process. I felt as if

I was a new face to our theatre. I could not identify the space and the space could not identify me. For those who have not experienced this before it is as if you are traveling to a new place for the first time and continue to get lost. The time leading up to auditions I constantly doubted myself. At times I felt that I was more nervous than those students who would be auditioning.

Actors made their way into the room one by one, time felt unreal, this was actually happening. For a second I scanned the room, left to right. Immediately I observed a brilliant group of creative individuals alongside me. These individuals were in the room to support me. I was not alone in the process. I was never alone in this process. Once I recognized that I was not alone that fear of doubt was suddenly gone. Auditions could finally run smoothly and I could give my full attention to those who were auditioning.

As it came down to casting time, it became very difficult. I had to really separate the fact that some of the students auditioning were my good friends. As awesome as it would have been to work with some of my best friends to that is not what it was about. It was about what worked best for the show. Like any other normal human being I feared that my friends would be upset with me because I didn't cast them. This was the case for about an hour to two (because actors are dramatic) after the cast list went out but shortly after those friends just became an addition to my amazing support system. They wanted nothing but for me to succeed and understood that it was not a personal attack to crush their dreams.

The four actors I choose were picked very strategically. I had specific qualities that I was looking for immediately after student Rachel Spause auditioned

for the role of Sister Aloysius. Spause owned the room in her audition in which no one else compared. This made the process simpler because it was all about who could pair well alongside her. If I were to give a piece of advice to a new student director in regard to casting, it would be to go in the room and imagine that you have never met these people before. Imagine you have no idea what they are capable of.

Once I finally had a cast, the fun started to begin. We began our rehearsal process in a classroom type setting. Shanley's piece is very text heavy and required a lot of sit down work. In Anne Bogart's book, *A Director Prepares*, he explains that, "The actor must use his imagination to be able to answer all questions (when, where, why, how). Make the make-believe existence more definite". That being said I believe it is extremely important to understand the words on the page in order to successfully understand the character. During each text rehearsal, we discovered something new and exciting within the text. Thankfully, our production had a very well knowledge dramaturge, Garrett Solomon. Solomon provided us all with packets that included information about the time period, playwright, catholic church... etc. Whenever we did not understand/questioned something in the script, Solomon was right on top of researching it. Not only did this work really help the actors succeed but I can truly say that it helped me as a director succeed. We spent approximately one and a half weeks in the classroom. Knowing we only had about three weeks to stage this show, I had no doubt it would piece together beautifully.

Throughout the rehearsal process, I had to attend production meetings. I have attended production meetings many times in the past as a stage manager,

assistant director, and even an assistant to the set designer. This time entering the room as the director of the show was very different. My job as director was to make sure that we as a production team had the same vision for our production and to ensure that all needs (set, costumes, props... etc.) were being met. At times I did find myself to struggle at these meetings because of my status as a student. My production team consisted of not only students but also faculty members who have been here for many years. There were many times that an older member of the team would overstep and tell me what they thought I wanted/should have. I had to constantly remind myself that if I did not agree I had to speak up. I was very understanding though because it is human nature for faculty to overstep. I don't see it necessarily as a lack of trust but more of I am a student and they only want to see this project succeed.

The most important lesson I took away from these meetings was to listen. As famous Broadway casting director, Michael Shurtleff said, "Listening is not merely hearing. Listening is reacting. Listening is being affected by what you hear. Listening is active." It was crucial to listen to each individual's ideas full out and understand them. I took each idea and thought of the possibilities (good and bad). For example, sound designer, Nate Rothermel had the idea of using a sound box to create a real phone sound on stage. Our technical director, Wayne Vetteson did not agree with that idea and thought it would be a good idea to have the sound release from the speaker. Immediately I knew I didn't agree with that, however, I listened to his reasoning and agreed to try it out. If I had shot his idea down in the very beginning

that would have put a strain on our relationship and could possibly have affected the production more as time went on.

Looking back on our production I am very proud of the art we produced. I believe a huge contributor to that was the choice of our set. Working alongside set designer, Cocol Bernal, is one heck of an experience. Unlike many other scenic designers, Cocol develops her ideas from inspiration from other pieces of art. Painter Hieronymus Bosch soon became the inspiration of our production. We didn't necessarily use Bosch's exact work but the spirit of his work was found in our panels. Cocol described it as, "the contrast between modern stained glass window used to represent Father Flynn's space, and Sister Aloysius' bleeding Christ. It's there between Sister James' red roses and the gothic window. And lurking between the interstitial spaces, you can sense the menace of Hieronymus's beasts." Our set was very minimalist and not quite realistic. Instead of creating a backdrop that showed a catholic school office, we dug deeper into the minds of the characters and developed panels that represented the thoughts in their mind. This challenged our audience greatly to think and explore these characters more in depth.

I can sincerely say I have matured as a student but even more importantly as an artist. My skills in collaboration, listening, understanding, and building an ensemble have grown tremendously. In the future, I hope the theatre department is able to provide more opportunities like mine.

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Directors Note:

I invite you into a world of uncertainty, into the world of Doubt, A Parable. This Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award-winning play by John Patrick Shanley refuses to stay silent about the questions that we don't dare to answer. He throws us into the turbulent world of America in the early 1960s, when old traditions were being replaced by new approaches. Our main characters, Sister Aloysius and Father Flynn, stand together as the personifications of two clashing worlds that fight for relevance.

Shanley constructs his play as a parable, a story viewed through the lens of religious context in order to offer the audience a lesson in morality and the consequences of our choices. Doubt, A Parable challenges audiences to face the issue of sexual assault in the American Roman Catholic Church, a subject that, until recently, had been otherwise cloaked in secrecy for decades. Standing at the polar ends of this argument are Sister Aloysius, the school principal and nun for whom order and discipline are the price we pay for our steadfast belief in God, and the young priest, Father Flynn, who asks us to question what we have been taught to believe and to welcome the internal struggle that comes from imagining a deeper meaning of faith. As Shanley points out in his preface, "We've got to learn to live with a full measure of uncertainty. There is no last word." In the world that Shanley has created, everyone is searching for an answer.

I find that the energy of this world sends my mind and my heart in the motion of a circle, as there is no clear end of the line. It is all undetermined and continuous. I therefore asked our designer, Cocol Bernal, to create a visual world for

the production that employed the shape of a circle as the foundation of the design in the hopes that this shape might challenge you to explore your own thoughts and feelings as you, in just a few moments, get caught up in the constant motion and emotion of Doubt, A Parable.

Enjoy!

Alexis Jenofsky '17