

**“DOUBT”**

**A REFLECTION**

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze and reflect on the creative process I used in the direction of the West Texas A&M production of 'Doubt'. I first received the script I was to direct in early June. I was aware of the recent movie version and knew that it was produced to some acclaim. I had never read any of John Patrick Shanley's works; I approached 'Doubt' with a completely blank slate.

My initial reading gave me a basic understanding of the show. The superficial elements of the characters and the scandal that drives the action of the play were readily apparent. Subsequent perusals revealed additional layers of possibilities involving Father Flynn's innocence and external influences. Finally, after discussing set designs with Shawn Irish, I solidified my concept to one specific approach from which to build. The action verb phrase that I chose as the spine of the play was 'to uphold the ways of the Catholic Church'. Set in the aftershocks of the Second Ecumenical Council, each character has a different concept of the ways of the Catholic Church. The scandal results from their conflicting views. Considering the local mindset, I directed the show as if Father Flynn was innocent—with only two exceptions—in order to focus on the message behind the show: the impact of Vatican II. The script holds many more opportunities to explore his guilt; however I deliberately directed those scenes to reflect his innocence in contrast with the damning power of Sister Aloysious' accusations, the looming set, and the audience's preconceptions.

As the production meetings slowly got under way, the lights, sound, set, and costumes of the show grew to accommodate the story by using selective realism to change locations and seasons. Coming from a Catholic background, I believe I did far less research into the environment of the play than normal. My research turned more towards the historical events directly preceding the setting of the play and how the author was reflecting these events in a

modern perspective. Among the tumultuous events of the '60s, the two that impacted the environment of this play most were Vatican II and the Civil Rights Act. These two events single handedly altered the face of the Catholic Church in a way that, even today, we cannot fully understand. While acceptance of African- Americans varied between congregations, many fundamental traditions and beliefs of the church were vastly altered. As a result, many who still favored the old traditions looked upon those who championed the new ways as foolhardy and even sinful. With this background in mind, I set about casting the show.

Sitting on the opposite side of the audition table was certainly a mind opening experience. As an actor, I spent hours agonizing over preparations for and the anticipation of auditions. And while all that work was good for me, I never truly realized how much of the casting process relies on appearance. Appearance was not the sole factor in my casting. Certainly, there were other individuals with similar looks that had the capacity for certain roles. But how my cast looked *together* was what finally determined who received the role. Each individual was very talented and capable of performing their part, but their aesthetic chemistry onstage made the show. Personally, I believe this to be the greatest revelation this experience has given me. To look not for 'who could perform this role best', but 'what group could perform this play the best.' I am certain that with further experience, my view will grow to encompass deeper factors of the audition process, but for my current level, this was a significant breakthrough.

Now armed with actors, I began the rehearsal process. My rehearsal plan was this: first week, read through and table work, mostly consisting of research on the Catholic Church before and after Vatican II. On the second week we blocked the show by scenes. During the third week we developed character relationships, focusing on pairs and trios, and ending with a run

through. That weekend my actresses also met with several nuns from St. Ann's Sisters of Poverty convent that I had contacted earlier. While I was unable to go with them, it provided my actors valuable insight beyond normal research. The fourth week we began working off book with line call. This is where my carefully constructed plan changed. After two nights of running half of the show, my actors suggested that running the full show would help them more than running halves every time. Despite some outside medical complications that caused our schedule to change anyway, we reworked the rehearsal schedule and continued. We also altered several rehearsals after going off book with no line call during the fifth week of rehearsing. I asked, and my company agreed, that returning to do some scene work would be more beneficial than endless run throughs. With this in mind, the Wednesday of the 6<sup>th</sup> week became a scene day. The end of week 6 culminated in the cue to cue.

I would like to take a moment and discuss production meetings and technical developments before we discuss cue to cue. Throughout this process I met every Monday with my stage manager and designers. We made decisions about coordinated efforts, purchases, and kept each other updated on how each aspect of the show was proceeding. The technical aspect I worked the most closely with was sound. As both my sound designer and I were new to this side of theatre. She and I worked mostly on finding clips that reflected the tone and environment we desired. We tweaked, altered, and completely changed sound cues right up until opening night, which, I believe made the outcome truly reflect the show and guide the audience through scene transitions. The set was also a great asset, as I was lucky enough to have the foundation and furnishings of my set in place very early in the rehearsal process. The finished piece was simply phenomenal, inspiring my entire concept for the show. The costumes were also well researched and designed; they blended well with the production. Lighting was my next technical epiphany. I had instructed my actors to include a window in a specific spot on the set during blocking. They

referenced it physically throughout the show enough to signal its existence to the audience.

During a rehearsal in which my lighting designer was observing, it struck me that a window gobo could be used to show the window's presence. Dumbfounded, I inquired of my designer if such a thing could be arranged. She agreed, and amused, returned the next day with a selection of gobos to choose from. I learned to never underestimate what technical theatre can accomplish as an aspect of the play.

The culmination of the two processes was cue to cue, where for the first time, all of the technical and acting aspects were brought together. In preparation, two days prior, we held a paper tech compiling every designers cue to one copy. Also, the night before cue to cue, we set levels for sound and lights. This entire process was quite new to me, and I found it very useful in accomplishing goals and overcoming unforeseen obstacles. The cue to cue itself ran fairly smoothly, though for my own part, I found it to be a lesson in patience. Aside from "yes" or "no" decisions, exactly what a director prepares for during a cue to cue still remains unclear to me.

This brings us to the first dress rehearsal. While I still observed and gave notes, I tried to begin removing myself as a director and let the show take it own path. This proved difficult. I was used calling out corrections; now I could only watch and try to scribble notes in the dark. This difficulty was nothing, however, compared to opening night. I believe the most difficult thing I had to do as a director was sit quietly and watch as an audience member. The only analogy that comes to mind is parents watching their child drive off to college, hoping you raised them well and fervently praying that they'll be alright. Can you imagine how I felt at strike tearing down my wonderful set?

This brings us to the conclusion of my experiences during 'Doubt'. In reflection, this experience taught me how much I still have to learn. This brief glimpse into directing has given

me much to consider and work on. Diverse methods of interpreting a script still remain dark to me. With more experience and research I could find better ways to articulate my interpretation of a script to designers and cast. The conclusion of this production left me bewildered and in the weeks since I turned to research to learn how to even analyze what I had done. Even now I do not feel confident that I could give a concise analysis of my process. However, I believe this documentation will serve both as a reference and foundation for future growth and research.