



**THE ENGLISH THEATRE
OF HAMBURG**

presents

DOUBT A PARABLE

by
John Patrick Shanley

STUDY GUIDE

Premiere on 13th February 2025

Preview performances at reduced prices on 10th, 11th, and 12th February 2025

Tuesday – Saturday 19:30

selected Sundays 14:30

Wednesday/Friday 11:30 (Matinee performances weekly alternating)

THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF HAMBURG

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The English Theatre will premiere **DOUBT** on 13th February 2025, with the usual preview performances at reduced prices on 9th, 11th and 12th February. You can use the cover of this publication to advertise the play in your school or workplace. Bookings have already started. Teachers who wish to preview the play before bringing a group of Tstudents to the theatre should contact marketing@englishtheatre.de

About the Playwright

John Patrick Shanley was born in 1950 and grew up in the Bronx, New York. The Irish Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Charity were responsible for his early education. Later he attended New York University. Although he had already written several successful plays, it was **DOUBT** that really took New York by storm in 2005, running for 525 performances on Broadway. In that same year, **DOUBT** won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Broadway's Tony Award for Best Play. He wrote and directed the film version of **DOUBT** starring Meryl Streep and earned a nomination for an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay. He is the author of more than 23 plays which have been translated and performed around the world. Other plays by John Patrick Shanley include **DANNY AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA, DIRTY STORY, FOUR DOGS AND A BONE, PSCHOPATHIA SEXUALIS, SAILOR'S SONG, SAVAGE IN LIMBO, OUTSIDE MULLINGAR** and **WHERE'S MY MONEY?** The author has also written extensively for TV and film. His credits include the teleplay **LIVE FROM BAGDAD** and the film **MOONSTRUCK**, starring Cher and Nicholas Cage, which won three Academy Awards.

About the Play

This remarkable American play won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Broadway's Tony Award for Best Play after premiering in New York in 2005. It was later filmed with Meryl Streep in 2008 and was revived on Broadway just last year to critical acclaim. The play is serious, at times humorous, and highly suspenseful. It has been called a drama, a morality play and thriller all in one.

The setting is a Catholic church and school in the Bronx, New York in 1964. Twelve-year-old Donald, the only black boy in the school, starts behaving strangely and is caught with alcohol on his breath. The principal of the school, Sister Aloysius, believes that the boy is being molested by his teacher, Father Flynn, who has been giving Donald a lot of special attention. With some very questionable evidence to go on, but armed with experience and moral certainty, Sister Aloysius sets about to have the priest removed from the school. A fellow teacher, as well as the boy's mother, are sceptical of her action. Is Father Flynn guilty, or is he a caring teacher being accused by a courageous nun fiercely protecting one of her pupils?

Audiences are left to answer the question for themselves. For while the plot deals with sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, this is not the subject of the play. The author is concerned with something more nuanced, involving the complexity of truth and the nature of certainty and doubt. He points out that his play is a parable, meaning that the story is being used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson, much as Jesus did in the Bible. Here the lesson seems to be that there are serious consequences in being too certain about anything. Having some doubt is the safer course to take.

"A breathtaking work of immense proportion. Positively brilliant." (Entertainment Weekly, New York)

"Moral certainty never seemed so suspect as in John Patrick Shanley's evocative and beautifully crafted thriller." (Variety)



SUMMARY

Setting: St. Nicholas, a Catholic church and school in the Bronx, New York, in 1964.

Scene One

Father Flynn, a priest in his late 30s, is standing in the church pulpit giving a sermon. His theme is doubt. He begins by asking the question, "What do you do when you're not sure?" He relates his theme to the feeling of despair which many people experienced after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy the previous year. He points out that this despair was not necessarily a negative thing because it brought people together spiritually. To clarify his point, Flynn tells the story of a ship-wrecked sailor, who, lost at sea and clinging to a raft, has only his knowledge of the stars for navigation. After days of floating on the waves, he begins to have doubt about the course he has set for himself. Has his memory of the stars, the "Truth" he once knew, failed him? Father Flynn likens the sailor's despair to the crisis of faith which he knows many of his listeners have experienced. His message to them is that they are not alone at such times, and that the doubt they are feeling can bind them to God just as much as certainty can.

Scene Two

Sister Aloysius, the principal of the school, is working at her desk in her office. She is middle-aged and of the order of the Sisters of Charity. There is a knock at the door. It is Sister James, a young nun in her twenties who teaches eighth grade. She has come to enquire about one of her pupils, William London, who was sent home with a bleeding nose. Sister Aloysius warns the young nun that children sometimes injure themselves to get out school, and that such incidents must be viewed with suspicion. In her opinion, teachers who are too kind and understanding with their pupils are weak, lazy and just want to be liked. "Every easy choice today will have its consequence tomorrow. Mark my words," she says. She brings Sister James to tears by criticizing her method of teaching History. In her view, the young nun tries too hard to make the subject interesting and entertaining. She performs for the students rather than causing them to perform academically. Sister Aloysius has no

patience with teachers who speak with pupils informally and seek to become their friend. "It's more important that they have a fierce moral guardian," she says.

Their conversation turns to Father Flynn and his sermon the previous Sunday. Sister Aloysius is suspicious as to why he chose to speak about doubt. She asks Sister James if Father Flynn is in doubt or if he is concerned that someone else is in doubt. She also wants to know if Sister James is always present when Father Flynn, who teaches Religion and Physical Education, is instructing her pupils. She is concerned, she says, about certain "matters" in the school, but stops short of voicing her suspicions. She tells Sister James that she must be alert and pay attention to her pupils at all times.

Scene Three

Father Flynn is talking to some boys at the end of their Physical Education class. He is holding a basketball and reminding them how best to shoot it into the basket. The important thing is not to tense up, he says. He demonstrates how they should breathe, unlock their knees, move their hips, etc. while shooting the ball into the basket. It is obvious that he has an open, friendly relationship with the boys. But he has noticed that several of them have dirty fingernails, so he lectures them on the matter of personal hygiene. He shows them his fingernails which he keeps long but clean. To make a lasting impression on the boys concerning this matter, he invents a story about a boy who put his dirty fingernails in his nose and mouth, and, as a result, died of spinal meningitis. Before letting the boys go, he invites them to join him in the rectory for some cookies and conversation.

Scene Four

Sister Aloysius and Sister James are in the church garden. Sister Aloysius wants to know how Donald Muller, a new pupil in Sister James's class, is getting along. He is the only black boy in the school, and for that reason Sister Aloysius has been expecting to hear that he is being hit and bullied by the other boys. Sister James replies that nothing of the kind has occurred because Father



Flynn has taken a special interest in Donald and has become the boy's protector. Unlike Sister James, who prefers to believe the best about people and their motives, Sister Aloysius is suspicious of the priest's behavior. She has already had to deal with a similar situation in a school where she was previously employed. She believes that Father Flynn is taking advantage of the boy's vulnerability to molest him. She asks if Sister James has seen anything that would lead her to suspect that this is the case. The young nun remembers that one day, after a private talk with Father Flynn in the rectory, Donald returned to class with alcohol on his breath and behaved strangely. Although Sister James is not sure that the incident is of any importance, Sister Aloysius is convinced that the priest got the boy drunk in order to molest him. She begins planning her strategy for having Father Flynn removed from St. Nicholas church and school. She has no hope that her immediate superior, Monsignor Benedict, will help her since he and Father Flynn are close friends. The Monsignor would simply believe whatever Father Flynn tells him. And, according to the rules of the Catholic Church, a nun cannot go to a higher authority with such allegations. The boy himself, she believes, will be too ashamed and intimidated to say anything. Her only recourse, she concludes is to confront Father Flynn herself, and for that she says she will need Sister James to be present as a witness.

Scene Five

Sister Aloysius has invited Father Flynn and Sister James to her office, ostensibly to plan the coming Christmas Pageant. When they arrive, she gives them tea. During their discussion, Sister Aloysius asks about Donald Muller's participation in the pageant. She insists that the boy should not be given any preference when the roles are passed out simply because he is black. She mentions this, she says, because she knows that Father Flynn has singled the boy out for special attention, going so far as to have a private meeting with him, after which the boy returned to Sister James's class behaving strangely. She demands an explanation from the priest. Father Flynn turns to Sister James. "How did he act strangely?" he asks her. After hearing that it was only her "impression" that something was wrong because the boy laid his head on his desk, Father Flynn, feeling attacked by Sister Aloysius, starts to leave. He stops, however, when

Sister Aloysius says in a loud voice, "There was alcohol on his breath." Father Flynn explains that Donald, an altar boy, was caught drinking the altar wine by the church caretaker. When he (Flynn) heard about it, he sent for the boy. In tears, Donald begged him not to remove him from the altar boys, which is the usual punishment for such behavior. Flynn admits that he took pity on the boy and told him that if no one else found out about it, he would let him stay on as an altar boy. He assures Sister Aloysius that the caretaker will confirm what he has told her.

After Flynn leaves, Sister James is relieved that everything has been cleared up. But Sister Aloysius is still convinced that the priest has molested Donald. "These types of people are clever," she says. "They're not so easily brought down." Sister James wants to know how Sister Aloysius can be so sure she is right. The nun replies, "Experience." Hoping to find allies in her effort to expel Flynn from the school, Sister Aloysius phones the boy's parents to ask them to come to her office for a talk.

Scene Six

Father Flynn is in the church pulpit again giving a sermon. It is not surprising, after his meeting with Sister Aloysius and Sister James, that he has chosen to speak about gossip. He tells the story of a woman who gossips about a man she hardly knows, thereby damaging his reputation. Afterwards, she feels guilty about what she has done, so she goes to confession to ask for forgiveness. But her confessor, Father O'Rourke, will not let her off so lightly. He tells her to go home, take a pillow up to her roof, cut it open so that all the feathers fall out, and then return to him. When she returns, he tells her to go back to her roof and gather up all the feathers. "Well," she says, "it can't be done. I don't know where they went. The wind took them all over." "And that," said Father O'Rourke, "is gossip! Once it has gone out, it cannot be taken back."

Scene Seven

Sister James, deep in thought, is sitting on a bench in the garden when Father Flynn enters. She tells him that she cannot sleep because, like the woman in his last sermon, she feels guilty about gossiping about him. She does not know whether to believe him or Sister Aloysius. He claims that Sister Aloysius's accusations are false. They



are the product of a poisoned mind, he thinks. Whenever she sees him talk in a human way to the children, she immediately assumes that there is something dirty going on. He feels terrible because he had to remove Donald from the altar boys due to all the gossip, and now he has to avoid private contact with the boy for the sake of appearance. As a result, Donald is devastated. Flynn complains about Sister Aloysius's lack of understanding and warmth for the children. "That black boy needs a helping hand or he's not going to make it here!" he says. It is his belief that Donald drank the altar wine because he has problems at home. Sister James admits that Sister Aloysius has destroyed her joy of teaching by forcing her to be more formal with the pupils. She cries a little. "I feel that everything is upside down," she says. Father Flynn comforts her by pointing out that there are times in life when we all feel lost and that she is not alone with it. Before leaving the garden, Sister James tells the priest that she believes him, not Sister Aloysius.

Scene Eight

Mrs. Muller, Donald's mother, comes to Sister Aloysius's office. She is a black woman around 38 years of age. She explains that her husband couldn't come with her because he had to work. When the conversation turns to Donald, she readily accepts the fact that her son's removal from the altar boys was just punishment for drinking the wine. Her husband, she says, gave Donald a beating for it. She believes that the school has been a bit too much for Donald because he is the only black pupil there. She thought he would have a lot of trouble with the other boys for this reason, but thanks to Father Flynn's close, protective relationship with Donald, this has not happened, she says. When Sister Aloysius tells her what she suspects is going on between her son and the priest, Mrs. Muller is defensive and skeptical. She knows that her son admires and respects Father Flynn, and Sister Aloysius can give her no real evidence of improper behavior on the part of the priest. She also senses that the nun may be on a witch-hunt. Her main concern, she says, is that Donald graduate from St. Nicholas in a few months so that he can get into a good high school. And, for that to happen, she believes the boy's continued relationship with Father Flynn is essential, even if it is not entirely proper. Sister Aloysius is shocked by Mrs. Muller's attitude. The

boy's mother explains that she is only trying to protect her son. If Donald's relationship with Father Flynn were made public, she is afraid the boy would suffer terrible consequences. He would be blamed by a community that is already against blacks. It would also cause problems between him and the other boys in the school. And he would surely receive another beating from her husband, who already suspects that Donald is homosexual. She, too, senses that her son is "that way" and that he may even have welcomed an intimate relationship with Father Flynn -- if, in fact, there is one. Sister Aloysius finally realizes that she can expect no help from the boy's mother.

MRS. MULLER: Well, what did you want from me?

SISTER ALOYSIUS: Nothing. As it turns out. I was hoping you might know something that would help me, but it seems you don't.

MRS. MULLER: Please leave my son out of this. My husband would kill that child over a thing like this.

SISTER ALOYSIUS: I'll try.

MRS. MULLER: I don't know, Sister. You may think you're doing good, but the world's a hard place. I don't know that you and me are on the same side. I'll be standing with my son and those who are good with my son. It'd be nice to see you there. Nice talking with you, Sister. Good Morning."

After Mrs. Muller goes, Father Flynn comes to Sister Aloysius's office. He is furious. He assumes that Sister Aloysius has shared her suspicions regarding his behavior with Donald's mother. He points out that, according to the rules of the Church, she should have gone to Monsignor Benedict, the pastor of St. Nicholas, with her allegations. He also reminds her that she has no real evidence to support her accusations against him. She replies that she is certain that she is right about him because she contacted the school where he previously worked and found out from a nun there that he had a history of molesting boys. She demands that he leave St. Nicholas at once or she will go to a higher authority in the church than Monsignor Benedict and report him. She then quickly leaves the office. Realizing now that he can no longer stay at St. Nicholas under the circumstances, Father Flynn goes to the phone, dials, and asks for an appointment to see the bishop.



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Scene Nine

Sister Aloysius and Sister James are talking in the church garden. Sister James still cannot believe that Father Flynn did anything wrong. She reports that Donald is heartbroken because Father Flynn is no longer teaching at the school. The priest resigned from St. Nicholas and was moved by the bishop to another church and school, St. Jerome's, with a promotion to pastor. Sister Aloysius reveals sadly that she lied to Father Flynn about his having a history of improper behavior at a school where he previously taught. In her mind she stepped away from God

when she did this. But she is glad that her bluff worked, because she is certain that the priest would not have resigned if he were not guilty. She is in despair, however, over the ultimate consequence of her action. She realizes that the priest is now in another church and school, in a higher, more powerful position where he can more easily continue his crimes -- if, in fact, that is his intention. "Oh, Sister James! I have doubts! I have such doubts!" she says. She is bent with emotion as Sister James comforts her.

THE END

Multiple Choice Questions

1. The play takes place at St. Nicholas, a Catholic church and school (a. in 1964, b. a few years ago, c. at the present time).
2. Father Flynn opens the play with a sermon about (a. intolerance, b. helping the poor, c. doubt).
3. Sister Aloysius disapproves of teachers like Sister James and Father Flynn because they (a. are too strict with their pupils, b. give their pupils too much homework, c. are too open and friendly with their pupils).
4. Father Flynn lectures the boys in his class about (a. doing their homework, b. keeping their fingernails clean, c. coming to class on time).
5. Sister Aloysius suspects that Father Flynn has (a. married secretly, b. molested a pupil, c. drunk the altar wine).
6. After being accused of improper behavior by Sister Aloysius, Father Flynn gives a sermon on (a. gossip, b. the importance of religious education, c. the afterlife).
7. Sister James believes that Father Flynn (a. is guilty of molesting Donald, b. has done nothing wrong, c. needs to shorten his sermons).
8. Mrs. Muller knows that her son Donald (a. admires and respects, b. is afraid of, c. avoids contact with) Father Flynn.
9. Mrs. Muller (a. supports, b. is against c. understands) Sister Aloysius's effort to remove Father Flynn from the school.
10. Father Flynn (a. stays at St. Nicholas despite the allegations against him, b. takes up another profession, c. is moved by the bishop to another church and school with a promotion).
11. At the end of the play, Sister Aloysius (a. has doubts, b. is satisfied, c. is thrilled) about the ultimate consequence of her action.

For Discussion or Written Work

1. Without any solid evidence, Sister Aloysius is certain that Father Flynn is guilty of sexual misconduct with Donald. What is the basis of her certainty?
2. Father Flynn passionately defends himself against Sister Aloysius's allegations. Do you think his explanations are reasonable? Do you think he is guilty?
3. Describe the reaction of Donald's mother to Sister Aloysius's claims about an improper relationship between Father Flynn and her son. Does her reaction surprise you? Can you understand why she reacts the way she does?
4. Sister James is torn between whether to side with Father Flynn or Sister Aloysius. Why do you think she finally believes Father Flynn?
5. Why, at the end of the play, does Sister Aloysius have doubts about removing Father Flynn from St. Nicholas church and school?
6. The author calls his play a parable. Can you describe what the parable is?

Answer Key

1. a, 2. c, 3. c, 4. b, 5. b, 6. a, 7. b, 8. a, 9. a, 10. c, 11. a