

SCRATCHPAD

'Doubt' provokes moral outrage, inspires discussion

By **ERICK BENDEL**
FOR COAST WEEKEND

John Patrick Shanley's "Doubt, A Parable," a play showing in Nehalem and the subject of this issue's cover story (see Page 8), is an unsettling piece of theater, and not simply because it involves whether a priest molested a boy at a Catholic school.

It is unsettling because it compels the audience to track their own moral judgments and sense of cer-

tainty. Why are we inclined to believe one party over another when the evidence doesn't privilege either one? What prejudices color our perception of events for which we weren't present?

Our instinct is to respond to the plot twists with moral outrage that we often don't know where to direct.

At first, we feel confident that Sister Aloysius, who accuses Father Flynn of

child abuse, is probably incorrect, and may be seizing on an opportunity to rid the school of a bothersome priest whose progressive attitudes, she believes, threaten the institution. Then we're not so sure.

We believe the head nun is firm in her convictions and almost possessed by a pathological certitude — about everything from her allegations against Father Flynn to her

faith in God — until we don't.

We think we know how the alleged victim's mother will react to the news that her son, Donald Muller, may have been "interfered with" — until she reveals that the boy's life has been one long crisis, and forces us to ask: Is it really worse to have a caring priest show an interest in him, even if it is sexual, than to be regularly beaten by a father who despises him (possibly for being gay), or relocated

to a different school where white students may kill him because he is black?

And we think the priest is innocent, and that we've been judging the situation fairly, distinguishing the just from the unjust, until we don't know what to think.

The play contains so much weighty matter — traditional vs. modern values, segregation vs. integration, homosexuality vs. pedophilia, doubt vs. certainty — that it's tempting to

wonder if the playwright kept a checklist of hot-button issues on hand while he composed it.

The reason it works as absorbing drama is that the issues are kept in close-up, played out as the personal story of adults whose decisions will determine the survival of Donald Muller — a child who is always offstage, but whose presence is felt in every scene, haunting characters who claim to have his best interests at heart. **CW**



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Actors rehearse a scene from the play 'Doubt' at the Performing Arts Center in Nehalem.

PHOTO BY COLIN MURPHEY

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