

# Disagreeable but Not Ridiculous - Doubt: A Parable



Doubt as a philosophical concept has a bad reputation in traditional religion, and its advocates have tended to be heretics and apostates. Voltaire, one of history's most famous agnostics, said, "Doubt is disagreeable but certainty is ridiculous." Rarely has that aphorism been more eloquently expressed than in John Patrick Shanley's play *Doubt: A Parable*, a sparse and intense period piece set in a Catholic grade school in the Bronx of 1964. It is an indisputably great play, having won just about every possible major accolade in drama, including the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award.

Using only four characters, the play almost entirely consists of a series of dialogues between two of them at a time with the particular exception of an opening monologue on the subject of doubt as an element of faith. Sister Aloysius (Linda Monchik) is the universally feared school principal, carefully suspicious of everyone and everything, including those who keep their fingernails too long or adopt the modern ballpoint pen, but her cynicism is grounded in a worldview that the best way to protect her beloved pupils from a cold and unfeeling society is to make sure that rules are respected and followed. Father Flynn (Michael Zola), who delivers that opening monologue about doubt, is a newly assigned priest who is her polar opposite, seeing the remedy for a cold and unfeeling society as being a friend to the pupils. Sister James (Lauren Faith Odenwalder) is a young and idealistic teacher who observes interactions between Father Flynn and a 10-year-old boy that may or not hint at sexual impropriety, but whose naivety is shaken by the inability to unimagine what the mind has once imagined. The mother of the boy (Tammy Brown) sees herself as trapped in a situation where there are no good options and whose love for her son, although real, is coldly pragmatic at the expense of all else.

The cast is very solid and Monchik as Sister Aloysius is outstanding in a role that relies entirely on acting skill to make the character sympathetic, a true challenge to use pacing, manner, and expression to convey internal anguish motivated by the conviction that people can be gravely harmed by being insufficiently suspicious. Inexpertly handled, the character risks becoming a cartoonish parody, but her motive is expressed in one of her most quoted lines from the play: "When you take a step to address wrong-doing, you are taking a step away from God, but in His service." Zola as Father Flynn is effectively physical and imposing whether teaching basketball or defending himself in argument, able to command respect. Odenwalder as Sister James alternates between bouncy innocence and despairing loss of that innocence, unable to deny possibilities that force her to reconsider her trust in anyone. Brown as the boy's mother is the embodiment of 1960s scrupulous decorum, down to her lady's gloves and Jackie-O style pillbox hat, in contrast to what she discloses to us of her personal circumstances.

Of course, we know that this play written in 2005 four decades after its setting in 1964 is informed by allegations of child sexual abuse by priests that came to be widely reported in the intervening period, but that is not its subject. Rather, it is the epistemological question about how we can really know anything, and to what extent imperfect or incomplete knowledge morally obligates us to either take or not take action, and who among us are worthy of trust. Sometimes the consequences of doing the wrong thing will be horrific, but so will be the consequences of doing nothing.

One of *Doubt's* greatest accomplishment as a dramatic work is that audience members tend to identify with and project themselves onto whichever of the four characters most closely shares their own preconceptions and worldview. Director Ed Rondeau gets this perfectly, having made something of a small specialty of taut psychological conflicts, including his superb *Equus*, also with The Players in 2011. This is the sort of play that will cause enthusiastic and animated disagreements among friends who see it together. No matter which character an audience member makes a subconscious choice to follow, their perceptions will be subjected to aggressive questioning by the others, inevitably leaving doubt.

*Doubt: A Parable is performed by The Players at the Barker Playhouse, 400 Benefit St, Providence, on Fri, Oct 18 (8:00pm), Sat, Oct 19 (8:00pm), and Sun, Oct 20 (2:00pm). For tickets or information, telephone 401-273-0590, e-mail theplayers1909@aol.com, or visit playersri.org/.*

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## **A Behanding in Spokane: 'Tis But a Scratch**

# Epic Theatre Company offers a black comedy by Martin McDonagh

Cutting off hands evokes numerous metaphorical allusions beyond inherent squeamishness, ranging from the *Gospel of Matthew* to *Llamas with Hats*, but it's puzzling what playwright Martin McDonagh intends by introducing us in his opening scene to Carmichael (Dave Pizzelli), who has not only been looking for his missing hand for 27 years but walks across the stage carrying Chekhov's gun in his remaining one. Set entirely in a fleabag hotel room whose décor has not been updated since a portrait of John F. Kennedy was hung on the wall, we soon meet nebbishy desk clerk guy Mervyn (Nick Bebel) and a young, weed-selling, constantly bickering, interracial couple, Marilyn (Emily Frattarelli Surabian) and Toby (Kevin O. Peterson), who have some "business dealings" with Carmichael. In the course of the next 90 minutes in one act, a lot of chickens come home to roost.

Carmichael wants his severed hand back - although as is repeatedly pointed out to him he has no practical use for it - and he wants everyone within earshot to hear his account of how the hand came to be severed. While this could seem gory, instead it is played cartoonishly for black comedy; producer Kevin Broccoli aptly introduced the play as "like the Coen brothers and Quentin Tarantino collaborating on a Three Stooges short designed to offend everybody," although it would be difficult to imagine *Blood Simple* and *True Romance* as vehicles for Moe, Larry and Curly. Extensive use of racial epithets, including "nigger" and "cracker," pervade the dialogue, and soon severed body parts are flying like cream pies in the face.

Carmichael dominates the action, so Pizzelli has a substantial challenge in carrying the play in the role of a character whose motivations are never really explained and whose moods whipsaw as his anger alternately explodes and subsides. Carmichael is a monomaniacal man consumed by an obsessive grudge, but his severed hand is something of a MacGuffin. The true looney is passive-aggressive Mervyn who sees the whole situation as an opportunity for a little excitement, even if that involves gunshots, hostage taking, arson, apes and bad puns; Bebel plays him with a pitch-perfect degree of milquetoastiness and delivers the play's best soliloquy. The bickering couple, Marilyn and Toby, are literally prisoners trapped in someone else's life.

As is typical for McDonagh, plot, while present, takes a distinct back seat to character. The real focus of the play is an exploration of the inconsistent and often contradictory perspectives of each participant in an increasingly absurd situation, brought out with very witty black comedic dialogue. McDonagh is best known for a series of stage works set in his ancestral Ireland and for his screenwriting, notably including *In Bruges*. His stock-in-trade is characters seriously disturbed as a result of traumatic

occurrences that may be as easily irrational as rational, as easily surreal as comprehensible. *Behanding* director Rob Roy also previously directed the Kafka-esque *The Pillowman* by the same author at Rhode Island College.

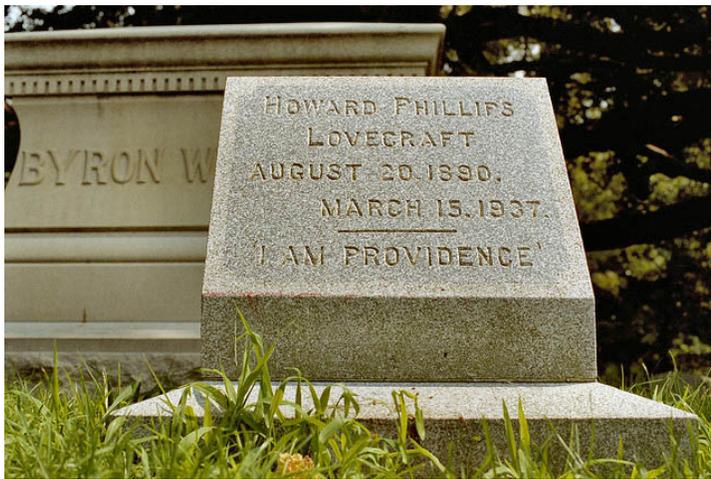
Unfortunately, no matter how well performed, *Behanding* is not the tightest play in terms of narrative structure. We are left wondering how reliable or unreliable is anything we have been told by the characters, each of whom has their own ax to grind, which is certainly deliberate but nevertheless unsatisfying. More importantly, we are intentionally left unsure how much each of these characters bears responsibility for his or her own predicament and how much is due to impersonal and uncontrollable fate.

There is a rather wide philosophical gulf between *Matthew 18:8* ("Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire") and *Llamas with Hats* ("My stomach was making the rumblies that only hands could satisfy"), but it's not clear on which of these shores McDonagh is trying to run aground. That said, even if the destination is unclear, the journey is interesting. No sacred cows are spared in this look at America by an Irish outsider who quite likely has come to see our culture through the lens of Hollywood movies, even if made by the Coen brothers, Quentin Tarantino, and the Three Stooges.

*A Behanding in Spokane* from Epic Theatre Company inaugurates their new space with the Artists' Exchange Theatre 82 and Café at 82 Rolfe Square, Cranston, RI, on September 20, 21, 27, and 28 at 7:00pm. For ticket information, visit <http://www.artists-exchange.org/abehanding.html>

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## **We Are Providence: The H.P. Lovecraft Community**



Obscure for all of his life and only slightly less obscure for decades after his death in 1937, horror writer H.P. Lovecraft, like one of his fictional creatures, quietly waited under the earth of Swan Point Cemetery in Providence for an auspicious time when the author's reputation, if not the author himself, would re-emerge. Presciently tapping the anxieties that would come to define science fiction in the age of atomic warfare and primitive space exploration, Lovecraft received his first biographical treatment in 1975 by fellow legendary author L. Sprague de Camp.

It was de Camp's book that Carl Johnson would find when he decided to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Lovecraft's death on March 15, 1987. He noted the favorable confluence of the Ides of March date falling that year on a Sunday with a full moon. Johnson, now an historical interpreter and guide at Slater Mill Historic Site, is a local native who said that his ancestry ties his family to Lovecraft at several points - including that Johnson's maternal grandfather and Lovecraft's maternal grandmother were first cousins - discovered that his own Wayland Square residence was about halfway between the Phillips family home on Angell Street where Lovecraft lived for much of his childhood and the Barnes Street house where Lovecraft lived in his later years.

Johnson said that he wrote in *East Side Monthly* and the now-defunct *Providence Eagle* inviting the public to gather at Lovecraft's grave site. "I expected a dozen horror fiction fans, but my phone started ringing. One hundred people attended," he said, including Lovecraft biographer and editor S.T. Joshi. Johnson and his twin brother Keith continued the tradition of dramatic recitations, poetry readings and songs annually until 1992. After a hiatus, the commemorations recommenced in 1998, moving to the Ladd Observatory of Brown University where Lovecraft had been a frequent visitor and keen amateur astronomer. Presided over by Christian Henry Tobler as master of ceremonies, Johnson said that "folks are encouraged to dress in vintage or gothic attire, and many do." The 2013 event drew about 140.

One of the consistent presenters has been poet and small-press publisher Brett Rutherford, who moved to Rhode Island in 1985 in what he termed a "Lovecraft and Poe pilgrimage" partly influenced by de Camp's book. Although Rutherford said he has been a science fiction fan since age 6, in the late 1950s at age 15 he read *The Colour Out of Space* in an anthology and it "threw me for a loop, because it wasn't like anything else." He said he wrote a letter to Lovecraft's friend and fellow writer August Derleth "who wrote back very kindly. I never told him I was only 15, because I was too stupid and proud to tell him I was just a kid." He said that he still has Derleth's letter.

Rutherford is the author of a 1993 biographical play about Lovecraft, *Night Gaunts*, named after the term Lovecraft used for his childhood night terrors. Performed several times at the

Providence Athenaeum with Carl Johnson in the role of Lovecraft, Rutherford said that his play still attracts interest from as far away as Germany where it was staged in 2006, and that a college radio station in Massachusetts performed it on-the-air for Halloween in the 1990s. According to Johnson, a photograph of him in costume and makeup from the play is often erroneously misidentified as Lovecraft himself, including at least twice by *The Providence Journal*.

At the commemorations Rutherford usually reads "The Tree at Lovecraft's Grave" (an allusion to Lovecraft's own early short story "The Tree") that he described as "an American Transcendental poem" he considers one of his best. Incorporated into his collection *Whippoorwill Road: The Supernatural Poems* (now in its 5th edition), its elegiac tone was enhanced when the actual tree that was its subject was cut down. "Many people imagine Lovecraft as being this grim, depressed person with a dark view of life, but the gothic is an entertainment, walking on a tightrope over a dark view of life," he said. "I call this 'the smile behind the skull.'"

Some of that smiling has been done by Thomas Broadbent, who annually organizes a "birthday bash" at Lovecraft's grave site on the Sunday closest to his August 20 birth date, "with a birthday cake, balloons, readings and a jolly good time." Lighter in tone and typically with better weather than the March commemoration, the purpose is, he said, to "honor Lovecraft and give him the birthday party he never had." The event typically draws about 50.

Broadbent's interest was piqued decades ago when he was 14 by his older sister who gave him *The Colour Out of Space* - the same short story that originally caught Rutherford's interest - to read, which he said was "creepy even though I didn't quite get it. At 14 you expect all horror to be like a horror movie." He administers an active Facebook discussion group, "Lovecraft Eternal," with about 1,000 members, and is among a number of subscribers to the "H.P. Lovecraft Bronze Bust Project" to commission a work by sculptor Bryan Moore that will be installed at the Providence Athenaeum in August 2013.



"Locals held Lovecraft rather in scorn" and "were somewhat embarrassed by him," Rutherford said, but this has changed at least since the Library of America edition of Lovecraft's works in 2005 effectively made him part of the literary canon. "One thing Lovecraft truly did love was Providence," Rutherford said, adding that he personally knows "at least a dozen visual artists, writers, poets and students" who, like him, moved to the city at least partially because of their interest in Lovecraft. Broadbent said he was pleased with the decision of the

Providence City Council, reported by the Associated Press on July 17, to designate the intersection of Angell and Prospect Streets as "H.P. Lovecraft Square."

Informal societies humorously took their names from monstrous characters in Lovecraft's fiction, Rutherford's "Cthulu Prayer Society" and Broadbent's "Esoteric Order of Dagon," comprising "pockets of admirers who didn't know each other," as Broadbent described them, "who would just sit in cafés and chat." As a committed scientific materialist and atheist, Lovecraft likely would have found these facetiously named societies amusing, but according to Rutherford, people would sometimes take them seriously as a religion, which he found ridiculous. Distributing the CPS newsletter to a library, he said he was once told, "You people are nuts!"

In addition to regular monthly meetings at a bar, the CPS went on field trips, including until 2009 annual picnics in Lincoln Woods where Rutherford, relying on letters describing the view of the horizon and terrain, said he was able to identify the exact spot on a rock ledge where Lovecraft liked to sit while writing. According to Rutherford, Lovecraft (who did not drive) recounted his visits by means of "a couple of trolleys and a bus."

Some of the scorn and embarrassment about Lovecraft, as Rutherford phrased it, is undeniably due to the overtly bigoted views expressed in his fiction and even more so in his voluminous letters. Rutherford said, "I certainly don't forgive, but I understand," and he believes that Lovecraft's relatively insulated and isolated life led him to profess theoretical principles that he often flouted in practice. "In his loyalty to his friends, he came to see people whose intellect he respected," Rutherford said. "Even when I show his prejudice [in *Night Gaunts*], I am able to show him as human. His wife Sonia, who is Jewish, gets to break through, and she has to be an exception." Johnson said that Lovecraft's views were probably fairly common for his era and circumstances, even if "horrifying by our standards." Broadbent said, "Lovecraft's racism gets under my skin a lot, but I ignore it as much as I can."

Lovecraft's consciously archaic and dense style has put off some modern readers, but many also find the literary style part of the attraction and consistent with his view of the universe as unfeeling and indifferent. Johnson, noting that Lovecraft despised seafood, "felt the ocean was sinister and foreboding. He reasoned that what frightened him would frighten and fascinate his readers, and he was right." Asked to explaining Lovecraft's appeal, Johnson said, "He brought his own nightmares onto the printed page. He was a truly haunted mind despite his sense of the objective and the rational." Broadbent said, "Lovecraft's style, what he wrote about - horror, fantasy, science fiction, isolation and alienation, gothic literature - he combined that with a whole new aesthetic." Rutherford said, "Lovecraft becomes pop culture at this point, no longer a rarefied taste," citing the plethora of cinematic films based on his fiction. "He appeals to the Transcendental in me, the same thing that makes me love Whitman and Rilke."

**Asked to suggest an excerpt that best captured his sense of Lovecraft, Rutherford chose this stanza from his "At Lovecraft's Grave," written for the 50th anniversary ceremony:**

We smile,  
keeping our secret of secrets,  
how we are the gentle ones,  
how terror  
is our tightrope over life,  
how we alone

can comprehend  
the smile behind the skull.

*The author thanks Kyon Piche for research assistance.*

Further information:

Rutherford's *Whipporwill Road: The Supernatural Poems*: [poetspress.org/reaper\\_catalog.shtml](http://poetspress.org/reaper_catalog.shtml)

Lovecraft Eternal group: [facebook.com/groups/331924010190535](https://facebook.com/groups/331924010190535)

Lovecraft Bronze Bust Project: [facebook.com/LovecraftBronzeBustProject](https://facebook.com/LovecraftBronzeBustProject)

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## You Look into Fuddy Meers, and Fuddy Meers Look Back into You

The Contemporary Theater Company (CTC) lives up to its name with 2013 summer-season opener *F*



*uddy Meers*, written in 1999 as a first professional work by playwright David Lindsay-Abaire. Unlike his more well-known 2006 *Rabbit Hole* that won a Pulitzer Prize and was turned into a film, *Fuddy Meers* is a genre-defying black comedy and domestic drama about one of the most dysfunctional families to hit the stage since *Hamlet*.

The opening night performance ended with a standing ovation from the audience, but it is a difficult play to summarize because everything is a potential spoiler. In the first scene, protagonist Claire (Meghan Rose Donnelly), who wakes up every morning with no recollection of who she is and has to be briefed about her own identity by her husband Richard (Spencer Curry), has her usual morning routine disrupted by a Limping Man in a ski mask (Tyler Greene) who suddenly appears in Claire's bedroom, tells her she is in great danger, and convinces her to run away with him. Richard and teenaged Kenny (Charlie Santos) quickly give chase, correctly anticipating that they will find Claire at the home of her mother Gertie (Valerie Tarantino). In a succession of farcical incidents, the various parties in transit encounter a police officer (Steph Rodger) and Millet (Sami Avigdor), a strange man who uses a sock puppet on his hand as a means of communication. The audience shares Claire's childlike bewilderment, figuring out what is going on through a fast-paced chain of events.

A play about perfect people would be boring. There is something wrong with just about every character, sometimes obvious and sometimes not, significant acting challenges capably met by a uniformly excellent cast. Claire, of course, has no long-term memory, and Donnelly portrays her in tone and expression as an innocent blank slate putting together the jigsaw-puzzle bits of her life throughout the day and acquiring insight and wisdom along with the audience. Gertie has had a stroke, and her speech is difficult to understand - the play's title is the closest she can come to "funny mirrors" - and Tarantino pulls off a difficult role without ever being allowed to speak a clear line of dialogue. Millet's sock puppet has its own personality and gets into battles of will with its puppeteer, so Avigdor manages surprisingly convincing, if occasionally violent, arguments with his own hand. The Limping Man has quite a lot to do physically despite his limp and numerous other problems, but Greene carefully avoids turning his character into what could too easily degenerate into a B-movie cliché.

Fuddy Meers is well-suited to the intimate setting of CTC's new (just under a year) black-box space in downtown Old Wakefield. Donnelly doubles as scenic designer, recreating the archetypal home of one's parents that always looks two decades older than the modern world. Director Christopher J. Simpson, who is also the company's artistic director, wisely keeps the action as close to the audience as the stage will allow and invests faith in his cast. He deserves a lot of credit for taking advantage of his creative freedom to stage a modern work that is not particularly well known, but is in fairly conventionally straightforward narrative style, although CTC also successfully has presented more radically modernist plays such as *Eurydice* in 2011 (which also starred Donnelly in its title role).

Far more upbeat and overtly comedic than *Rabbit Hole*, and relying on bizarrely implausible characters and coincidences reminiscent of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, by no means is *Fuddy Meers* light and fluffy theatrical summer fare, either. By the end of the play, enough skeletons have been let out of closets that the audience sees that there really are no shiny happy people.

*Fuddy Meers* is at the Contemporary Theater Company, 327 Main St, Wakefield, RI, June 28, 29, July 5, 6, 7, 11, 12 and 13 at 7:00 pm. For ticket information, call 401-218-0282 or visit [ContemporaryTheaterCompany.com](http://ContemporaryTheaterCompany.com).

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# Surrendering To Wonderland

By Michael Bilow



I greatly enjoyed Epic Theatre Company's performance of *Alice in Wonderland*, a version of Lewis Carroll's classic created by The Manhattan Project, and even saw it a second time. It's not at all for everyone, though. The Andre Gregory/Manhattan Project model is at the edge of experimental theater; it's probably the most famous thing Gregory did as a director.

It assumes a familiarity with the basic original work, at least a familiarity with the original characters: a white rabbit, a hookah-smoking caterpillar, a mad hatter, a dormouse, and so on. Some of the jokes rely on this familiarity, such as why the mouse has a French accent.

I've long considered the Andre Gregory stage version from the 1960s to be the most interesting (and my personal favorite) interpretation of the story. It conceptualizes the books as a kind of internal psychological experience about the subjectivity of perception, or colloquially, as analogous to an acid trip. The intention of the theatrical work is to make the audience call into question the reality of their own senses.

This is an incredible challenge for an actor and a very ambitious project for an acting company. Andre Gregory was trying to kick away all of the usual props that keep the audience anchored. Epic does this by knocking around a single overhead light to keep it in motion, having actors throw objects to each other, and asking actors to assume weird postures of physical interaction where characters lie on top of each other to play elements such as a table or a mushroom.

The film *My Dinner with Andre* is an exploration of Andre Gregory's whole philosophy of theater, which is very different from that of a typical director. He is known for seeing theater as a transformative experience for the actors and regarding the audience as participants, or at least people along for the ride. Another film involving Gregory, *Vanya on 42nd Street*, is literally about a company of actors who decide to perform a Chekhov play over and over again in a theater, for no audience, in order to explore it for themselves.

People coming into an Andre Gregory theatrical work who are expecting the kind of linear narrative

that has been going on since Aristotle are going to be really bewildered, just like the art critics who looked at Miro or Magritte and wondered, "Why does this woman have a flower growing out of her head?" or "Why is the sky wearing a bowler hat?" These questions miss the point, which is to show things in a way that unnerves the mind, making the viewer aware of the unreliability of the senses and of the assumptions that underlie the apparent familiarity of the world of experience.

When Epic announced a few months ago that they were going to take on Alice, I was really excited. It takes cojones. Trinity MFA recently performed both Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and Rivera's *Marisol*, both of which are similarly intended to unnerve the audience, although both of those use the device of a main character who serves as a proxy for the audience, observing the strange environment from a place of stability.

Alice, with a protagonist who is only seven and a half years old, has no such anchoring proxy. Her mild protests - "One cannot believe impossible things" - are famously met with admonitions - "I once managed to believe six impossible things before breakfast." Setting the play in what is implied to be a mental hospital with the actors wearing identical medical scrubs reinforces this, especially the opening scene where medications seem to be dispensed. Do the pills make the characters crazy, or do they keep them from being crazy? Can they ever know? Is there a difference?