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UIS play looks at questions of duty, faith

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On its surface, "The Runner Stumbles" is a murder mystery about whether a priest killed a nun.

Milan Stitt's play, which opens Friday in a production by UIS Theatre, digs much deeper than that, looking at questions of faith and duty, to oneself and God.

Director Missy Thibodeaux-Thompson, an assistant professor of theater at the University of Illinois Springfield, said the story has a timeless quality.

Based on a true story from rural Michigan in 1911, the story unfolds in flashbacks. It opens with Father Rivard (Dug Hall) in jail, accused of murdering Sister Rita (Ellyn Thorson).

"On the one hand, it's this murder mystery. On the other hand, it's this — we'll say forbidden romance," Thibodeaux-Thompson said. "But is it that? What is it?"

Father Rivard and Sister Rita were forced to live in close quarters because the nuns Rita would have been living with were suffering from a contagious disease.

The two struggle with feelings they're developing for each other. Whether they act on those feelings is one of the mysteries in the plot, but it's not really central to the story.

In its review of a 1979 production, the New York Times wrote of the play: "Did Father Rivard kill Sister Rita?" may be its ostensible question, but there are more pressing ones. The play runs deeper, disturbingly, if not profoundly, into religious and psychological levels."

Thibodeaux-Thompson elaborated: "It's also about that struggle between a belief system, a dogma, a church, a religion, versus what's right for you as an individual."

That struggle, between one's duty to the church and one's duty to oneself, is at the heart of the conflict between Rivard and Rita. Or more accurately, between Rivard and Rita on the one hand, and their feelings for each other on the other hand.

Hall, a 26-year-old senior in communications, said his character lives in a "world of dualism."

"At present day, he's no longer a priest — he defrocked himself," Hall said. "Playing that has been interesting as far as where he is mentally in the future versus the past."

The role requires Hall to be both a younger version of Rivard in 1907, when he first encounters Sister Rita, and the more defeated man on trial four years later.

"He used to be a very young, energetic priest, but he was pushed away from being like that by the senior priest," Hall said. "When Sister Rita comes along, he's pretty much succeeded at suppressing that. He's very rigid now. And then Sister Rita is what he used to be."

Thorson, 18, said her character is full of life and exuberance, though within the rules of being a Catholic nun in the early 20th century.

She said wearing the large nun's habit that's part of her costume, which covers her entire head save her face from just below her eyebrows to her chin, is one of the most challenging things she's ever done.

"Nuns are pretty awesome. I can't believe that they can do that every day," Thorson said. "I've had to practice with it on way before any of the other characters. It changes your freedom to move."

Hall said he was raised in a Methodist family in an area with a lot of Catholics, but nowadays he's an agnostic.

"While he is very pious, the future (Rivard)" — the one seen at the beginning of the play — "is not anymore. He has his belief structure completely torn apart," Hall said.

When both a character and the actor playing him have both lost — or shed — their religious faith, it can be tempting to draw parallels. But Hall said he doesn't believe in "Method acting," in which performers use incidents from their pasts to fuel the emotions of their characters.

"I think that cheapens it. It's (called) acting for a reason — you're acting," Hall said.

Learning the rituals

Thibodeaux-Thompson said she was surprised to learn that there was a great deal of anti-Catholic bias in the United States in the early 20th century. That mood is reflected in the play.

The Catholic church is on a hill above the town it serves, and the characters sometimes derisively refer to the Catholics being "up there" and the others being "down here."

"A couple of characters will call them, 'You R.C.s. We don't like you R.C.s — you Roman Catholics,'" Thibodeaux-Thompson said.

Jim Bonacum, a biology professor at UIS, is the only faculty member acting in the play. He's also the only cast member with a Roman Catholic background, Thibodeaux-Thompson said.

He and a few Catholic members of the crew, along with dramaturge Tom Irwin (the local musician and Illinois Times contributor), provided the rest of the company with advice about the rituals and other aspects of the Catholic religion.

"We've had to learn how to use a rosary, which is so complicated," Thorson said.

Thibodeaux-Thompson said they also had a series of e-mails about whether to include, "For thine is the kingdom ..." in the Lord's prayer — the doxology has been included and omitted at different times in the church's history.

"I hope that we are as accurate as possible," Thibodeaux-Thompson said.

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