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Review: Faith, ideals, humanity themes of 'The Runner Stumbles'

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Although the UIS Theatre's production of "The Runner Stumbles" is set a full century ago, when Catholic Church rituals and practices were much more structured and Catholics were struggling to gain acceptance in America's predominantly Protestant culture, its themes and plot elements remain timely.

On one level, "Runner", which plays today, Sunday, and April 29-May 1 at the University of Illinois Springfield Studio Theatre, appears to present familiar, almost stereotyped, images of a tradition-bound, repressive Catholic Church and backward, suspicious small-town residents, blended with a traditional murder mystery. But on a deeper level it is about the eternal struggle to reconcile faith, reason, and emotion and aspire to high ideals without losing touch with one's humanity.

Directed by Missy Thibodeaux-Thompson, the two-act drama by Milan Stitt -- based on an actual court case -- takes place in a Michigan logging town in 1911, where the former Catholic parish pastor, Father Rivard (Dug Hall) is on trial for the murder of a young nun, Sister Rita (Ellyn Thorson) four years earlier.

The action alternates between Father Rivard's trial in the present and flashbacks in which he and other characters recall Sister Rita's warmth and spontaneity -- and her sharp contrast with Father Rivard's emphasis on order, doctrine, and unquestioning faith.

The priest and the nun determine to keep the parish and its school open despite obstacles such as poverty, drought, forest fires, disease, and strong anti-Catholic prejudice among the townspeople. However, those demands, combined with the expectations of their church superiors and their own struggle to understand their feelings toward one another, eventually lead to a tragic conclusion.

Hall presents Father Rivard as an earnest man who has sought solace from loneliness and loss in work, study, ritual, and solitude. Thorson, meanwhile, communicates Sister Rita's innocence, sincerity, and her growing conviction that her vocation should not separate her from the world completely. Unlike Father Rivard, who buries himself in writing a theological tome, Sister Rita finds conversation and relationships with others "as essential as breathing."

The supporting cast includes Nancy Cole as Mrs. Shandig, the priest's housekeeper and a convert to the Catholic faith; Jim Bonacum as the monsignor who communicates the bishop's expectations to the priest and the young nun; Jennica Danner as Erna Prindle, a parishioner who seeks Father Rivard's counsel in dealing with her mother's imminent death; Ben Beams as Toby Felker, Father Rivard's attorney, who regards the priest's faith with a mixture of distaste and fascination; Dwight Langford as the prosecutor; and Kaitlyn Best as Louise, a trial witness.

Special credit should be given to lighting designer Adam Grogan for his very effective use of shifts in lighting to signal scene changes, since the play uses only one set and relatively few props. Also, Tom Irwin and Christopher Ray, sound designers and engineers, use traditional Catholic hymns to add to the atmosphere before the play begins and during intermission.

Elaine Spencer can be reached through the Metro Desk at 788-1517.

Want to go?

"The Runner Stumbles," presented by UIS Theatre

When: 7:30 p.m. today, April 29, 30 and May 1; 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Studio Theatre, University of Illinois Springfield

Admission: \$14

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