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## Virginia Stage Company's season-opener: Casting "Doubt"

By CARRIE WHITE, The Virginian-Pilot

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For Chris Hanna, "Doubt" is a sure thing.

For a big occasion, the opening of the Virginia Stage Company's 29th season, the VSC's artistic director is rolling out a big play. "Doubt" just ended a wildly successful, 525-performance run on Broadway while winning just about every best-play award possible, including the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award.

"Doubt" is set in a 1964 Bronx Catholic school. The principal, Sister Aloysius, grapples with her conscience, her faith and her doubts when she suspects Father Flynn, one of the school's young priests, of molesting an eighth-grader.

"This play is like a tennis match," said Hanna, who's also directing it. "Every five minutes the audience flip-flops over who is telling the actual truth."

With such a strong play, which has a preview tonight and opens Friday at the Wells Theatre, getting the right cast was critical, Hanna said.

"I needed actors who could drive like a BMW - in other words, stop on a dime and do a 180-degree turn if they needed to."

All actors have a "natural essence" that makes a first impression, he said. For instance, Tom Hanks is likable, "and it's a stretch for the audience to believe he is bad. In 'Doubt,' if you cast an actor who doesn't have a 'gray zone' - who can't be both believed and disbelieved or liked and disliked - there's not much you can do to create them. Think Meryl Streep versus Glenn Close. Glenn Close is always going to play strong women. Meryl Streep - who incidentally is playing Sister Aloysius in the upcoming film - can play anyone."

The "Doubt" cast comprises four veteran actors with extensive theater, television and film credits: Susan Pellegrino as Sister Aloysius, Joe Hickey as Father Flynn, Kim Staunton as the mother of the boy at the center of the allegations and Stephanie Cozart as Sister James, a young nun just undergoing initiation.

"I cast all four actors because they are capable of being chameleons. Within a scene you can change your mind about who is telling the truth," Hanna said.

So how did he find those four chameleons?

For any VSC production, the director will send an independent casting director "director's notes," explaining which qualities the director wants for certain parts. Thus begins a three-to-six-month casting process.

"For Father Flynn, I asked for sincerity and real vulnerability," Hanna said. "I wanted somebody naturally likable. I cast Joe Hickey because he has an Everyman quality and can be a priest-next-door type in a happy neighborhood. Some actors have a natural sense of being guilty, like Treat Williams or Al Pacino. I didn't want that."

Harriet Bass, based in New York, has done casting for VSC for 10 years and works for other theater companies, television networks and moviemakers. She forwards the director's notes to agents, who submit clients' names. Bass typically culls the list to about 20 actors per role.

"She knows my tastes as well as what the actors can do," Hanna said. "She's like a matchmaker. She sits through the entire audition process, so she knows the actors' abilities - you learn about actors from the roles they don't get as well as from seeing them on the stage."

During the "Doubt" auditions in New York City, each actor read with an actor on the VSC payroll, not with another actor auditioning for a part. That keeps the auditions "even."

Hanna, who had the final say over the casting, does not usually accept videotaped auditions. "During the audition, I like to ask each actor for an adjustment - rereading a part with another type of emotion, for instance. This way, I can see the actor's range and how well he follows direction. I can also see how they are as an actor and what their process is when they are onstage. You can't do that in a videotape."

However, he did cast Staunton to play the mother from her videotape.

"Kim lives in Los Angeles, but she's a Juilliard graduate," Hanna said, referring to The Juilliard School in New York. "I used to teach there, so I know their process and am familiar with its graduates. Besides that, she's very talented."

Principals are cast first and with an eye toward their compatibility. When a show has a "ringer," the other actors may be cast to complement the star. With "Doubt," the major roles were cast almost simultaneously: "We thought Susan Pellegrino and Joe Hickey would be great together. They are both equally charged."

Casting for this play, he said, "went very smoothly. Because the show just stopped running in New York, people wanted to be a part of it here. I went into this process knowing I'd get well beyond the minimum just because of the show. Actually, this is Susan's first job outside of New York in 12 years - and because she wanted to play Sister Aloysius."

"None of the characters are who we take them for at first - just like real life," Hanna said.

He's confident this cast will keep audiences in doubt.

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