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THEATRE

Review: Agnes of God

In the opening lines of *Agnes of God*, the good Dr. Martha Livingstone (Kim Anderson) addresses the audience directly, explaining how, as a child, she kept going back to the theater to re-see the movie *Camille*, always praying that this time Greta Garbo would overcome consumption and live. Though she never did, Livingstone still clung to the belief that somewhere in the vaults of Hollywood there lies an alternate last reel, where she did in fact live. You don't have to be a genius to realize that this story will play more than a minor part in the theme of this archetypal example of seventies theater. This is the type of play that poses more questions than it answers, refuses easy identifications and pulls back from the neatly satisfying conclusions of the well-made play.

Agnes of God is a three-woman one-set piece that pits modern psychology against faith and theology. Based on a real life incident in upstate New York in 1976, the plot concerns the attempts of court-appointed Livingstone, a strong-willed psychologist with an enmity toward the Catholic Church, to discover why the young Sister Agnes (Jani Davis), a naive, almost blissfully devout young nun, would bear and then strangle a child. What makes everything so much more difficult is the fact that Agnes has no recollection of even her pregnancy, let alone the infanticide, and the only real witness to anything is the con-

vent's Mother Superior Miriam Ruth (Nancy Julian), a witty, protective elderly woman (sort of a feminine version of *Going My Way's* Father Fitzgibbon), someone Livingstone identifies with "the enemy."

Anderson portrays Livingstone as a gutsy, independent modern woman. Dressed in a business suit and tie, she is very much the aggressor, practically attacking Ruth and ready to pin all Agnes' problems onto her and the Church. Anderson's delivery is a touch stagey and over-articulated as are her actions. Her stiff posture and studied poses are in sharp contrast to the very easy, natural characterization of Julian, who becomes the amiable but tough Mother with seeming ease. Perhaps this is because Mother Ruth is a more likeable character; she doesn't represent the Church (an easy target) as much as she does true spiritual faith. A pragmatist and a humanist, Ruth understands the prejudices against the Church and is not ready to let someone heap the sins of a few bad parochial schools and a couple of didactic nuns onto the Catholic faith. Livingstone enters the play with a gripe; Mother Ruth enters with a deep faith and years of understanding channeled by an acute common sense.

In the center of this struggle of wills and beliefs is the achingly innocent Agnes, a woman of 21 with the heart and emotional stability of an adolescent. We learn that she was kept secluded by her abusive mother during a *Sybil*-like childhood. Never having been out in the real world, she went directly to this convent at the age of 17,

a veritable child intellectually. As such, she plays an important role for both Livingstone and Ruth. For the doctor, she is the younger sister who likewise entered a convent without having done much maturing and died because of the didactic piety of a Mother Superior who refused to allow the ailing girl to go to a hospital for her acute appendicitis. For Mother Ruth, Agnes is the innocent, touched by God. A naive young woman who sings with the voice of an angel, who is addressed by a wisp known as "the Lady," and who, most startlingly, suffers from the stigmata, Agnes is Ruth's modern miracle. As portrayed by Jani Davis, Agnes truly is a very simple, childlike woman, a person who knows only and cares only for God and Jesus Christ.

At just under two hours, including intermission, *Agnes of God* is a well-paced, intriguing play that highlights the clash of personalities with its austere set and simple but effective lighting by Faber DeChaine. Director Eileen Kearney sometimes plays the "theater in the round" bit a little too forcefully (the arena theater is surrounded by seats 180 degrees around) by deliberately playing to the sides and thereby blocking off characters from the audience in the front. Otherwise the direction keeps the play right on course, allowing a little movement for pace purposes but otherwise highlighting the characters and ideas over any contrived action.

I do have one criticism of the play, but it is directed at the script, not the presentation. Playwright John Pielmeier makes it look as though he spreads the guilt around fairly evenly, but in actuality he finds a scapegoat that is all too often abused—the Mother. Both Livingstone and Agnes suffer from miserable childhoods and bad mothers—Livingstone blaming hers for inundating her with the Catholic religion. I expected better of a play which poses itself as a work that questions easy answers. Otherwise, the play is well-written, with a fair amount of food for thought and a nice clash of ideals. Though at times predictable, it is for the most part challenging and intriguing.

—Sean Axmaker

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