

Agnes a religious whodunnit

by louise allen

faculty writer

Agnes of God by John Pielmeier is a religious "whodunit" set in a convent. Directed by Robert R. Pevitts, this work is now playing at the Clark County Community College. Pevitts, in his director's note to the audience, writes: "Agnes of God is a play that deals intelligently with questions of religion and psychology. We see the real tangible world at odds with the realm of the spiritual and supernatural. Why is it important to believe in something? To love?" Perhaps we need a miracle to resolve these universal questions.

The plot is simple enough. A newborn infant is found strangled to death by its umbilical cord and tossed into a wastepaper basket. Sister Agnes (Destiny Esposito), a young nun and mother of the child, is suspected of murder. The court ap-

points a psychiatrist, Dr. Martha Livingstone (Jeanne Dubuque), to see if Sister Agnes is able to stand trial. Mother Miriam Ruth (Kathryn Sandy O'Brian), as the nun's spiritual advisor, tries to protect her protegee from the cruel world out there. She is not successful.

Beside the question of murder, there is another matter to be discussed. Who is the father of the child? The possibilities are several: an angel of God, a field hand, or the priest. The priest is immediately ruled out. He only sees Agnes during Confession. Destiny Esposito brings an aura of innocence to the role of the postulant, Agnes, that is reflected in her ethereal face and white habit. It is difficult to believe that such a one "touched by God" would be capable of murder. The more the audience finds out about Agnes, the more we realize the extent of her insanity. Is it possible in this day of "Dan Rather

and Phil Donahue" for a young girl to have no knowledge of what being with a man would encompass? But this seems to be the case. Agnes was sheltered by her alcoholic mother until 17; then at the death of her mother she enters the convent. Agnes hears voices from another world and sings for a Lady. She describes her sexual encounter in mystical terms: an angel visited her, lay on her and spread his wings; she felt a heaviness under her and the stars exploded. Destiny Esposito, as a newcomer to the theater, does a remarkable job even though her voice at times lack the angelic timbre the role requires.

Dr. Martha Livingstone turns up more clues through a series of psychiatric inquisitions that has Sister Agnes spewing out in a frenzy her hatred and love for her mother. Under hypnosis Agnes admits to being sexually abused. Again it is difficult to imagine how Agnes could work herself into such religious hysteria that blood gushes from the stigmata wounds in her hands. Jeanne

Dubuque makes her dynamic hard-hitting psychiatrist seductive in an earthy way. As a fallen away Catholic she chain smokes throughout the sessions, revealing her own war with the Church. Her sister died of untreated appendicitis in a convent; therefore, she no longer believes. Dubuque dresses like an absent-minded intellectual in unsuitable shoes and a skirt straining at the midriff. But this detracts little from her capable acting abilities.

As the feisty Mother Miriam Ruth, Kathryn Sandy O'Brien adds vim and vigor to this marvelous character portrayal. Mother Superior "can smell an ex-Catholic a mile away." Dr. Livingstone and she jokes about the saints' preferences of cigarettes as if they were around. Mary Magdalene would be a likely candidate for the "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" brand. Despite her lapses into humor, Mother Miriam is spiritually astute. She states: "In the medieval ages the church burned heretics and sold indulgences. Now the

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government takes care of that."

In a scene reminiscent of *Eguus*, Dr. Livingstone probes with her scalpel the psyche of the young nun and is in turn subjected to interrogation. The doctor finds she has her own deep-seated guilts. It is an example of "physician heal thyself!" Intermittently, the eternal question of science versus the supernatural rears its ugly head. Science probes, cuts, dissects, but finds no soul. The age of miracles is past.

Suppressed clues are thrown across the convent's path. One is that Mother Superior is later discovered to be the sister of Agnes' mother. The older nun had been married for 20 some years before she entered the convent. In fact, all three of the characters seem to be hiding unholy skeletons in their closets. At the end of the mystery, Dr. Livingstone makes her own Confession. Unlike the optimistic movie version, the play ends on a harsher note of stark reality.

The stage setting was bare but effective: a room in a contemplative convent. Thin guaze curtains reveal Agnes' image who she is singing against a mosaic picture of a saint. The set design and lighting were by Douglas Talley and Kristen Talley, respectively. Nancy Reyes was responsible for costumes.

Agnes, boasting no historical figures or elaborate costumes, relies on sheer talent, and as such has been one of the best theater pieces I have seen in Las Vegas this season. Robert R. Pevitts, with a fine interpretation, has saved this controversial play from becoming a tawdry production. Las Vegas has reason, indeed, to be proud of this *Agnes of God!*

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