

'Agnes' weak on mystery, but strong performances shine

by *Michelle Hoffman* - Jun. 7, 2010 04:00 PM
Special for the Republic

There would be a jumbo hole in the entertainment sector had the Catholic church never existed - no other religion provides such a bottomless source of material for novelists, screenwriters, comedians and playwrights.

'Agnes of God'

When: 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays (June 4-6, Friday-Sunday, June 18-20, July 2-4, July 16-18).

Where: Scottsdale Desert Stages Theatre (Actor's Café), 4720 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale.

Admission: \$22 advance (\$25 day of show), \$20 seniors and students.

Information: www.desertstages.com , or **480-483-1664**

Plus, the costuming is a snap (although nuns haven't worn habits in decades).

"Agnes of God," which runs alternate weekends through July 18 at Scottsdale Desert Stages Theatre, is a whodunit about a mentally disturbed nun accused of infanticide.

Based on a true story, the kicker is that by the time the curtain drops, you'll wonder if rational thought and religion can co-exist, specifically, the possibility of saints and miracles.

The drama in "Agnes" waxes and wanes (the dialogue can be overly florid, and solving the murder gets trumped by religious philosophy), but there are some mighty fine performances here that keep all of it entertaining.

A novice nun, Agnes (a superb Chelsey Richard) is found on the floor of her room and bleeding, a strangled newborn dumped in a nearby wastepaper basket. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure this one out.

A psychiatrist is sent by the courts to

You want drama? Got it. Satire? Check. Scandal? Sheesh, just pick up a newspaper. Ruler-wielding nuns never had such a loftier place than in the arts.

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determine if Agnes is playing with a full deck in order to stand trial. Enter Dr. Livingstone (Shari Watts), an ex-Catholic with so much baggage she could use a porter.

From her sessions with the shrink, we find out Agnes has blocked out the birth, hears voices, thinks babies come from angels' lights, and utters phrases like "Suffering is beautiful."

So she's definitely missing a few cards. But we don't get to the bottom of things because of a protective Mother Miriam Ruth (an equally fantastic Janis Webb) who has a personal stake in Agnes' welfare and therefore butts in every chance she gets, pushing the idea that Agnes' pregnancy was divinely conceived.

Livingstone doesn't buy it, and it's difficult to think anyone in the audience would. But Mother Miriam's well-crafted rationalizing (thanks to Webb's credible performance) holds just enough water to draw us in and keep us there.

By Act II, Livingstone is done fooling around and hypnotizes Agnes. Turns out, Agnes had a "mommy dearest" for a mother who heaped on all sorts of abuse and continues to harass Agnes from the grave (hence, the voices).

The warring philosophies between doctor and mother superior take over and this becomes the main conflict rather than solving the murder.

Presumably, the intent of playwright John Pielmeier would be not to convince the audience of the possibility of miracles, but rather to sympathize with those devout enough to believe in them. If so, then the play succeeds.

View from the balcony

Script: The lives of these three women, brilliantly revealed little by little, keeps us interested beyond the murder mystery. The weakness comes in the Dr. Livingstone character. Her motivation starts to skew toward wanting to cure Agnes. But Agnes' mental illness is so pronounced, it would seem more plausible that a psychiatrist (a therapist with a medical degree) would lean toward the reality of only being able to control the delusional thoughts and hallucinations by medication.

Acting: What keeps this trio from being the most dynamic cast to trod the boards is that Dr. Livingstone (Shari Watts) is too emotionally attached to her patient, her questioning too eager for a seasoned psychiatrist who, most likely by that point in her career, has seen it all. A more methodical and steady approach to her patient would be more believable.

Set: The entire play takes place in Dr. Livingstone's office. Against the backdrop of charcoal walls sit just two wheat-colored club chairs and an end table. The elegant

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simplicity allows the fantastic performers to fill up the rest.

Michelle Hoffman can be reached at michelle.hoffman@cox.net.

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