

HOT



STUFF

Agnes of God at Desert Stages Gives Birth to a Great Performance

By Robrt L. Pela

published: May 27, 2010

The debate raging through John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God* concerns the veracity of miracles and the possibility of virgin birth. In a series of monologues and flashbacks, it tells a story that's often ambiguous and deliberately vague. But in its Desert Stages production, one thing is very clear: The young woman playing the title role has created an enormously moving performance. Pielmeier's

Heather Butcher



Rosary's baby: The cast of *Agnes of God* emote.

Details:

Agnes of God continues through June 18 (on alternating weekends with *Art*) at 4720 N. Scottsdale Rd. Call 480-483-1664 or visit

www.desertstages.org.

Subject(s):

[Agnes of God](#), [Desert Stages](#), [Agnes of God](#)

1982 play (the title is a reference to the Latin phrase "Agnus Dei" or "Lamb of God") is a richly layered drama that folds elements of murder mystery into a dissection of Catholic Church doctrine and a cunning commentary on American morals. It tells the story of a young novice, Agnes, who has recently given birth in the convent where she's lived for four years. Agnes claims she didn't know she was pregnant, and insists she never gave birth. She has no memory of how the baby, found dead in the wastebasket in her room, got there or how it was murdered. She says she's a virgin and has never had sex. She's been assigned a court-ordered psychiatrist, Dr. Martha Livingstone, who is sometimes brutal in her investigation of the mentally ill girl. Mother Superior, who may or may not know what happened, meddles in the therapy sessions, dogging Martha about her atheism and her personal motives for taking this case.

This is a special kind of triangular relationship, one made up of a pair of monster mothers and a bereft woman. I found Shari Watts' performance as the therapist too actorly and smug, but an attractive vulnerability by the actors portraying the nuns saves them from being fiendish, particularly young Chelsey Richard, who captures an enormous range of ideas and emotions with big, saucer eyes and a plaintive wail in her voice.

Janis Webb's light, occasionally whimsical take on Mother Superior is off-putting at first, but the character — herself a mother of two daughters who don't speak to her — is written that way. She's a bromide to the overwrought therapist with whom she shares so many scenes and the deeply troubled girl she's trying to protect, and her droll approach not only provides contrast but captures the true grit of a dismal life trapped in a convent.

Terry Helland's direction is workmanlike and unremarkable, at least until he and his cast reach the long, shocking scene in which a hypnotized Agnes reenacts the birth of her child. Before that astonishing sequence, several long, static scenes serve only to point up how much of the play is given

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over to diatribes and theological rants. But the mystery at the heart of this play, and the performances that propel it, have turned a dogmatic debate into a thoughtful entertainment.