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Mother may I? - ‘Agnes of God’

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(photo courtesy of Some Theatre Company/Elaine Bard)

Some Theatre Company presents challenging piece

ORONO - Faith is a powerful thing. Faith can often help soothe even the most painful of wounds and give direction to even the most aimless among us. But sometimes, not even faith is enough. And when something happens to twist or subvert that faith, the end results can be truly tragic.

So it is with the titular novice in John Pielmeier’s “Agnes of God.”

Some Theatre Company is presenting their production of this powerful and challenging play at the Keith Anderson Community House in Orono. The show - directed by Elaine Bard - runs through March 5.

Agnes (Logan Tripp) is a young novice at a convent who finds herself at the center of a tragic whirlwind that she doesn’t entirely understand. She was found bleeding in her room, a newborn infant discarded and deceased in a nearby wastebasket. Agnes has no memory of the events leading up to the baby’s demise and seems unclear on the circumstances of the pregnancy itself.

Dr. Martha Livingstone (Moir Beale) is the psychiatrist tasked by the court to determine the young nun’s fitness to stand trial. Her testimony will decide whether Agnes is charged with manslaughter or murder ... or found mentally incompetent.

Mother Miriam Ruth (Nancy Nicholson) is the Mother Superior of the convent and a constant companion to young Agnes, accompanying the girl to her appointments with the doctor and generally determined to ensure Agnes’s safety at all costs.

It’s up to Dr. Livingstone to try and piece together an accurate picture - not only of what happened that fateful Saturday, but events that took place in the months and years previous. All of it in an effort to unlock the truth hidden away in Agnes’s confusion.

However, Mother Miriam has motivations of her own. It is her firm belief that Agnes is truly special, touched by God in a way unlike anything she has ever encountered. And that faith leads in turn to a belief in the possibility that there is something more to Agnes’s story - something that borders on, well ... the unbelievable.

Dr. Livingstone and Mother Miriam are set against one another - the woman of science versus the woman of faith, the staunch atheist versus the bride of Christ. But as the darker truths from Agnes’s past slowly start to bubble to the surface, it becomes clear that neither woman is right and - in some ways - both are very, very wrong.

There’s a lot about “Agnes of God” that is inherently challenging. This is not a feel-good story; it is sad and complicated and bleak. The questions that it raises are complex ones, packed with an unsettling ambiguity. And of course, there’s the fact that the three actresses performing it never leave the stage - they must find ways to tell this story dynamically while still embracing the fundamental issues at its core.

Beale does good work in presenting Dr. Livingstone’s matter-of-fact façade while also gradually exposing the cracks. She’s tasked with much of the heavy lifting here; between her many expository monologues and her meetings with both Agnes and Mother Miriam, she’s not left with much time to breathe, but she manages

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most of it with aplomb. She’s too young for the part, but save for a few script-specific moments, she largely overcomes that.

There’s a surprising amount of grey area in Nicholson’s Mother Miriam. Despite the seeming black-and-white nature of convent commitment, Nicholson does good work in delving into the shadows in the middle. There’s a no-nonsense quality to the performance, which she combines with a mama-bear ferocity in her devotion to Agnes. More often than not, it works.

As for Agnes herself, she’s perhaps the least developed of the three, despite being named in the title. But rather than be thrown by that lack of definition, Tripp leans into it. Her Agnes is a wide-eyed cipher, equal parts empty vessel and unsettling zealot. She creates a sense of absence within Agnes that is compelling to see, and while she occasionally skates up to the line of over-the-top histrionics, she never crosses it. She strikes a delicate - and necessary - balance.

Some Theatre Company has made unconventional use of the space, creating a thrust stage with seating on three sides and building some striking and unexpected lighting designs. Those choices - particularly the thrust - lead in turn to some staging challenges for Bard, with the three performers tasked with engaging audience members despite sometimes showing them their backs. It’s a credit to dynamic choices that it’s rarely even noticeable - particularly as the piece builds to its second-act climax.

“Agnes of God” will not be for everyone, but then, theater shouldn’t always be for everyone. It is a powerful and thought-provoking piece, one very much intended for mature audiences only. It’s a bold choice from the folks at Some Theatre Company.

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