

'Agnes' not only stands up to the test of time; she completely overpowers it

[BY DOMINIC P. PAPTOLA](#)

[Theater Critic](#)

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You don't see a whole lot of plays about Lutherans. Or Episcopalians. Or Mormons. Catholics, however, always seem to be in vogue for playwrights. From the featherweight "Nunsense" musicals to the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Doubt," it's not hard to find a Roman collar, a nun's habit or some reference to the Vatican onstage.

Mary Finnerty, who's directing Park Square Theatre's production of "Agnes of God," has been doing prep work for the play since way before the St. Paul theater scheduled John Pielmeier's drama about three women at very different points in their faith lives.

"I think I started my director's work on this play when I was 8 years old, going to St. Albert the Great elementary school," said Finnerty, who is also Park Square's education director. "I'd help the nuns after school dust the altar rail, clean the church. We had to work in silence, and I wore my uniform and my little beanie."

The director, baptized Mary Margaret Ann Finnerty, grew up Catholic, fell away from the faith for a period of years and then returned to the church in the early 1990s. She describes herself today as an active Catholic whose faith has its share of blessings and frustrations.

Her own experience with Catholicism gives her some insight into the script, which was first produced on Broadway in 1982 and made into a successful film in 1985.

The story is that of a young nun of the play's title who gives birth to a child and then asphyxiates it. Dr. Martha Livingstone

is tasked to determine whether Agnes, who claims the Holy Spirit impregnated her, is competent to stand trial. The protective Mother Superior of the convent stymies those efforts in a drama in which motivations are questioned and faith tested.

Though the playwright is Catholic, some productions have been knocked for the way they treat the faith. But for Finnerty, the play is less about Catholicism than mysticism and faith and passion and family and boundaries and believing in something no matter the consequences.

"Honestly, I don't think the play has generally been done very well," she said. "I don't see it as an anti-Catholic play. These are three women who have very different approaches to their faith. Martha has been harmed deeply by the church. Agnes had a difficult life as a child and has found great beauty in convent life. Mother Superior's faith has faltered at times, but she's very strong at the top of the play."

Considered a cracklingly contemporary play when it first hit the regional theater circuit in the 1980s, the drama has, in the intervening decades, evolved into a period piece.

"I set the play in 1982," Finnerty said. "I think that's very important. The smoking in the play is so prevalent. The techniques the psychiatrist uses are far more aggressive than they are today. But there's more to it than that. This was before many of the church scandals. It was a time when more nuns were still wearing habits, but a number of religious orders within the church were cracking. There were a lot of people leaving the church, a lot of dark comedy like (Christopher Durang's) 'Sister Mary Ignatius (Explains It All for You)' being written."

How well does the play stand up to the test of time?

"I think it means more today than when it was written," she says. "It seems less trite. We're a more spiritual people. We've been through more. And this whole notion of believing what we believe no matter what somehow rings more true."

Dominic P. Papatola can be reached at dpapatola@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-2165.

What: "Agnes of God"

When: Through Nov. 11

Where: Park Square Theatre, 20 W. Seventh Place, St. Paul

Tickets: \$36-\$33

Information: 651-291-7005 or parksquaretheatre.org