

**StarTribune.com** | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

## 'Agnes' delves into mysteries of heart and soul

**Belief and disbelief clash in a searing drama that tests our desires to get answers to every question.**

By [Graydon Royce](#), Star Tribune

Last update: October 29, 2007 – 7:45 AM

To much critical frustration, playwright John Pielmeier offered more questions than answers in "Agnes of God," his 1980 play about three women wrestling with the role of God in a tragic event. Arbiters sniffed about intellectual vacuity and manipulation, reflecting their dissatisfaction with the piece's resistance to reason.

Funny thing, audiences disregarded the notices and made "Agnes" a 17-month hit on Broadway. Now populist taste is never an ironclad defense, but my experience is that Pielmeier's play carries an honest pain, an aching perplexity over the psychic space within us. He is saying these are mysteries of the heart and soul rather than the head.

Director Mary Finnerty's gripping production of "Agnes," which opened Friday at Park Square Theatre in St. Paul, charges straight into the script's muddy soul. Finnerty and her excellent cast offer no anodyne for the play's agony and its unwillingness to offer neat solutions. She moves her actors around Rick Polenek's attractive and useful set with a hair too much fuss, but that is a quibble only.

Alayne Hopkins, with raw authenticity and exquisite pain, plays Agnes, a young nun accused of killing her infant. Psychiatrist Martha Livingstone (Colleen Hennen) is assigned to assess the woman's mental capacity for trial, and Mother Miriam Ruth (Linda Kelsey) interjects herself to shelter -- some would say smother -- Agnes. The dramatic flywheel revolves around the child's conception, and whether someone other than Agnes is culpable in the death.

As the play evolves, we find all three characters are suffering. Livingstone has turned from God for what seem very good reasons. Hennen slowly gains her feet in this performance, but when she does, the steely exterior peels away to reveal a complex, wounded woman. Kelsey gives Miriam Ruth an initial toughness, which makes her too obvious a villain but in the denouement feels necessary.

Hopkins made me want to cry. She takes the role of a woman who was abused by an alcoholic mother, abandoned by her father and shuttered in a convent, and makes every tortured step an organic and fully inhabited reality.

While we're handing out compliments, Mike Kittel's lights and Katharine Horowitz's sound provide crucial accents in Finnerty's staging.

If there is a flaw in Pielmeier's work, it is his tidiness in answering the whodunit. Even with that nod to rationality, though, "Agnes" allows us to ponder whether life exists in our bones and marrow -- or the unknowable ether. And that is very satisfying.

Graydon Royce • 612-673-7299

Graydon Royce • [groyce@startribune.com](mailto:groyce@startribune.com)

© 2007 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.