

Arts & Culture

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THEATER

Agnes of God: a stirring show of science versus religion

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

There was a time after it was first released that everyone seemed to be doing *Agnes of God*. It was an ideal play – one unit set, three meaty roles for actresses and a fascinating mystery story at the center. Everyone did it, and perhaps they overdid it, because I have not seen a production in the last decade.

Silver Spring Stage is kicking off a big anniversary season – their 40th – by reviving John Pielmeier's play. It's a slam bang production and it shows that the script has not gone out of fashion. In fact, with its central theme of science versus religion, it is probably more relevant right now given current events than when it was first produced.

The Agnes in question is a young nun, extremely naïve and sheltered from the world, who has a real problem. She gave birth in the convent and the baby was found murdered. Was Agnes responsible or was someone else involved? Dr. Martha Livingstone, more into science than religion, is assigned to determine if Agnes is capable of stand trial. Mother Miriam Ruth is in charge of the convent where Agnes resides and is often on stage, but is she there to assist in the investigation or to interfere with it?

Suffice to say that all three characters have past issues to confess. At times both the Mother Superior and the psychiatrist have their own agendas. This is not all black and white as it may seem; the atheist scientist and the devout nun may be different sides of the same coin instead of polar opposites. Whatever, it leads to some bruising confrontation scenes between



PHOTO BY NEIL EDGELL

(Left to Right) Laura Russell (Mother Miriam Ruth), Jaclyn Young (Agnes) and Lori Murray Sampson (Dr. Martha Livingstone)

the two women, and moments when they are more honest and friendly. But in the end it all revolves around that central question – what really happened to Agnes and is she innocent?

Lori Sampson plays Livingstone with steely resolve but shows vulnerability when alone, while Laura Russell plays Mother Miriam as a devout nun who really wants to believe, but with doubts (remember those Mother Theresa letters in the news recently?). The two actresses are more than well matched for their

big scenes together.

Jaclyn Young may have the trickiest role as Agnes, a young girl of childlike simplicity and devotion who still goes through some harrowing scenes as she remembers what happened to her in the doctor's office. It is a demanding role that runs to extreme emotions but Young successfully pulls it off.

Director Megan Dreisbach keeps the pacing tight and constantly moving forward. She and her talented cast lead us through the tricki-

er moments of the play – the hypnosis scenes and a stigmata event. This and Pielmeier's tightly constructed script will have you guessing right up to the final scenes. Don Slater's simple unit set and Chris Curtis' lighting effectively move us through the various locales and time frames of the play.

A word of warning, it is a crucial element in the script that one of the characters smokes like a chimney during the first part of the play. It is herbal cigarettes so no nicotine is in the air but it still gets a little foggy up there for a bit, but all is well by the second act.

Despite the characters being shades of gray, their science versus religion argument is often black and white. Frankly both are found wanting at times given the highly unusual aspects of the case, but boy do those confrontation scenes ring out on stage. Since *Agnes of God* was written a lot has happened in the news, from the Terry Schiavo case to the Intelligent Design battles in various school districts. This debate is not going away any time soon, which makes the strong production at Silver Spring Stage more relevant than ever.

Agnes of God continues at Silver Spring Stage through Oct. 14. For more information on the current show or the 2007-2008 season, call 301-593-6036 or visit their Web site at www.ssstage.org.

Agnes of God
Silver Spring Stage
★★★★

Rapunzel lets down her hair at the Puppet Co.

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

The Puppet Co. down at Glen Echo kicks off the school year with two interesting feats. First, how do you tell the story of *Rapunzel* using just one performer? Secondly, how do you tell the story at all – it is not the longest Grimm fairy tale out there, and the ending is tricky.

The Puppet Co. does a very good job with this tale by sticking closely to the source material. They keep things lively by making Rapunzel's parents a silly couple. The witch next door is more comical than threatening most of the time, but the basic tale remains intact. They also keep things humorous, as that joking Jacques Ibert background music makes clear.

Eric Brooks, the newest member of the Puppet Co. staff, starts the performance talking with the audience. For a lot of people who re-

member Rapunzel simply for the "let down your hair" plot device, there is a fascinating background to this tale, which the production goes into detail.

For instance, what sort of name is Rapunzel anyway? Turns out to be a type of radish, which is crucial to the initial plot. I am not going to spoil the story, but a lot happens before the title character appears on the scene. Much of the humor is watching Rapunzel's poor father getting it from both sides – his nagging wife on this side of the wall and the scheming witch on the other side of the wall. Adding to all of this is cool special effects suggesting thunder and lightning whenever the witch's name is mentioned.

Simple set pieces, designed by Allan Stevens, take us into the more familiar part of the story, with a grown up Rapunzel in a tower, the overly protective witch/mother figure and the longing Prince. Again humor is the keynote here, with the witch getting into all types of

scrapes as she enters and leaves the scene. Living next door to a witch cannot be easy, especially one as accident prone as this one.

The ending poses the greatest challenge, as the Puppet Co. does it quickly and efficiently without dwelling on it too much. Suffice to say that the witch discovers that her daughter is planning to escape with the Prince and she takes matters into her own hands. And we are talking a lot more than just grounding her adopted daughter. In one aspect the ending is one more in a series of mishaps for an accident-prone cast of characters. Plus what happens to the witch is both comical and justice well served.

Brooks does a very nice job of moving all of these characters around with enough quick changes that you realize later that there are never more than two characters on stage at a time. He really milks the humor in the first half well, because without the comic antics, this prologue to the main action could seem just exposition.

Instead it is a highlight of the show well before we get to the familiar story proper.

Strange but most people know the "let down your hair" portion of this story and very little else. How did this character get into such a fix in the first place, and how does she get out of it? As in most versions of this story, the title character is the least interesting character up there – the parents, the witch, and even the Prince are far more interesting. And in the Puppet Co. production these secondary characters really make the show work.

Rapunzel continues at the Puppet Co. at Glen Echo through Oct. 7. For tickets, call 301-320-6668.

Rapunzel
Puppet Co.
★★★