

Writtle Cards' Agnes of God

WRITTLE CARDS – AGNES OF GOD, JUNE 9, 2007

Director Nick Caton

Reviewed by Stewart Adkins

This three handed piece by John Pielmeier is a serious work that addresses those troubled bedfellows of religious faith, guilt and innocence. Innocence and religious faith were demonstrated in abundance by Agnes, in a debut performance by this young actress. Her profession of innocence of the crime of killing her new born baby, together with her protestations that she did not know how the baby was conceived, were well played. The mingling of her unquestioning faith with the visions of her dead mother juxtaposed the metaphysical and psychological in the minds of the audience, leading to genuine equivocation about her baby's origins. Her recreation of the pangs of birth while under hypnosis and her complete puzzlement about what was happening to her were totally convincing and really rather moving. I did not find Dr Livingstone as convincing. Notwithstanding her feat of memory for learning this part in three weeks, for which praise is due, Livingstone was insufficiently earnest in my view. Here was a very attractive woman playing a role which, by her own admission, should have been plain and dowdy. Recall her own guilt that her sister Marie died (my memory may be incomplete but "she should not have died, she was the pretty one"). Add to that guilt her distain for the Catholic church, within whose strictures she had grown up and within whose care her sister died. Had Livingstone had her hair scraped back, worn severe spectacles and plainer, unattractive clothes this may have given this actress the uncomfortable edge she needed to soliloquize with a little more anguish and to question Mother Miriam Ruth with more bite. This is not to say that the performance was poor or unenjoyable; it was neither but it could have been so much better. With so little help from staging (there was none, simply two chairs and a table in front of a black cloth) and scene changes being marked by simple blackouts and the eerie voice of Ewan Macgregor singing Agnus Dei, the complete burden of pulling off this production was in the hands of the three actors. Mother Miriam Ruth, just like Livingstone, was not as she seemed. She did not fit the stereotype of the nun since she was not a virgin; indeed had been married and had two children. This departure from type gave this character license to be pragmatic in the defence of her protegee's innocence but murder of a newborn child was a step one would hope that even the most puritanical of the sisterhood would shrink from. Once again the play's merging of the fleshly with the spiritual, in this case the balance of argument between murder and defence of what is truly holy, is equivocal. The analogy between the story of Mary, Mother of God's immaculate conception and Agnes's experience are continued if we see Miriam Ruth's motives in murdering the child and protecting Agnes from worldly interference as mirroring the murder of Christ for what was ultimately the redemption of mankind. But Miriam Ruth was far more likely a stubborn man-hater, fleeing from the real world of which she made a mess, and determined that nothing should rock her new world, not even the illegitimate birth of a child to a novice. We saw some of this steely resolve but not the absolute ruthlessness with which I would have thought this character should be associated. This was an extremely difficult play, given the subtleties within it, and one which may have benefited from a second viewing. Writtle Cards did pull this off but without the almost electrifying performance of Agnes in Act 2 this would have been much more difficult.