

Agnes of God

By John Pielmeier

A Guide to Agnes of God

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The Story of *Agnes of God*

Science. Religion. Fact. Devotion. Do they intersect? The murder of a newborn in a convent warrants the expertise of Dr. Martha Livingstone, a court-appointed psychiatrist, to determine the mental state of the accused novice. But when she faces the pious resistance of Miriam Ruth, the Mother Superior, it inflames the doctor's suspicions surrounding the convent's involvement and leaves questions abound. Who killed the infant? Where is the father? Might the

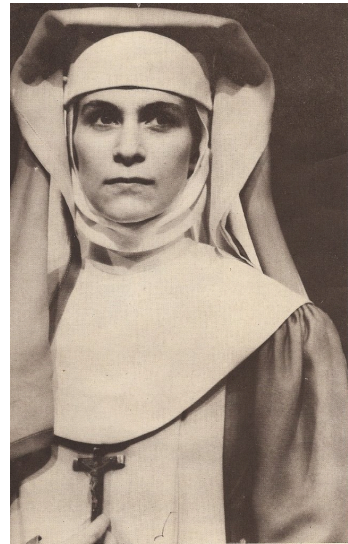


convent be behind this debacle? Livingstone's inquisition pushes all three women to call into question the true meanings of spiritual faith and the power of love.

The Play

The title “Agnes of God” is a pun based on the Latin phrase “Angus Dei” which means “lamb of God”.

John Pielmeier gives some background to how the play was thought of and written on his website, “ I had been writing for several years, not taking it seriously and supporting myself by my acting work, when I got an acting job at the 1977 Eugene O’Neill Playwrights’ Conference. I was so swept away by the work done there that I returned to New York City determined to go back to the O’Neill as a playwright. I wrote a play which made the semi-finals but not the final cut for the summer of ’78, and during that summer I did most of the initial work on Agnes. For a good while I had been looking for an idea upon which to hang a play about questions of faith – looking, essentially, for a plot clothesline. About a year earlier I had seen a headline in The Post or the news shouting “Nun Kills Baby!” I didn’t read the actual story, but something like nine months later I woke up in the middle of



the night with an “Aha!” moment. The title was obvious – a bad liturgical pun – and the cast was kept to a minimum because I felt small, simple plays worked best at the O’Neill. I wanted to challenge myself to write full, rich women’s roles, and so the psychiatrist, who at first thought was a man,

became a woman. I submitted the play to the O'Neill, as well as to Jon Jory at Actors Theatre of Louisville, where I had worked a lot as an actor”.

Production History



Elizabeth Ashley
(*Doctor Martha Livingstone*)



Geraldine Page
(*Mother Miriam Ruth*)



Amanda Plummer
(*Agnes*)



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After John Pielmeier began to write the play in the summer of 1978, *Agnes of God* premiered in 1979 at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. The Connecticut production featured Jacqueline Brookes as Mother Miriam, Jo Henderson as Dr. Livingstone, and Dianne Wiest as Agnes. The play transferred to The Actor's Theatre of Louisville in 1980 to continue workshopping with a new cast.

In 1982, the play opened on Broadway at the Music Box Theatre. It ran from March 30, 1982 to September 4, 1983. The production featured Geraldine Page as Mother Ruth, Elizabeth Ashley as Dr. Livingstone, and Amanda Plummer as Agnes. Notably, Carrie Fischer took over the role of Agnes during the run.

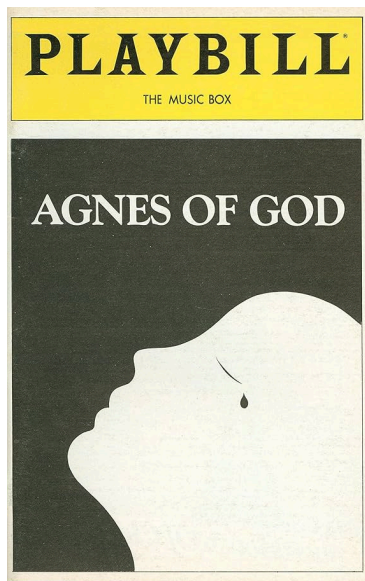
There was a 1st National Tour of *Agnes of God* in 1983, as well as a production in London that same year.

About Developing the Play

This is an excerpt from John Pielmeier's website about *Agnes of God* and its development:

"On May 1, 1979, I got a call from my wife while I was visiting my sister in Florida – I had received a telegram informing me that my play had been accepted for the 1979 O'Neill Conference. At that moment I knew my life had changed.

The play was workshopped at the O'Neill (Dianne Weist played the title role) and subsequently received an amateur production in Kingston, Jamaica, a production I went to see a week after my father passed away in October. Jon Jory, in the meantime, accepted the play for the 1980 Humana Festival, where it premiered professionally. As a result of that production, the play received something like six regional productions the following year, although no New York producers saw it in Louisville.



The second of these regional productions, at Center Stage in Baltimore, was attended by many producers, and I was put in the enviable position of having to choose between six offers for a New York production. I chose correctly, and Ken Weissman produced the play, opening it at the Music Box Theatre on March 31, 1982. It received rather mixed reviews (I have never been a darling of the critics, to put it mildly) but word-of-mouth spread, and once Amanda Plummer won a Tony for her performance, its future was assured."

Critical Reception and Awards

Critical reception of the Broadway production was mixed. The actors and directors were praised by The New York Times. The reviewer conflictingly loved the premise while they dragged Pielmeier's writing.

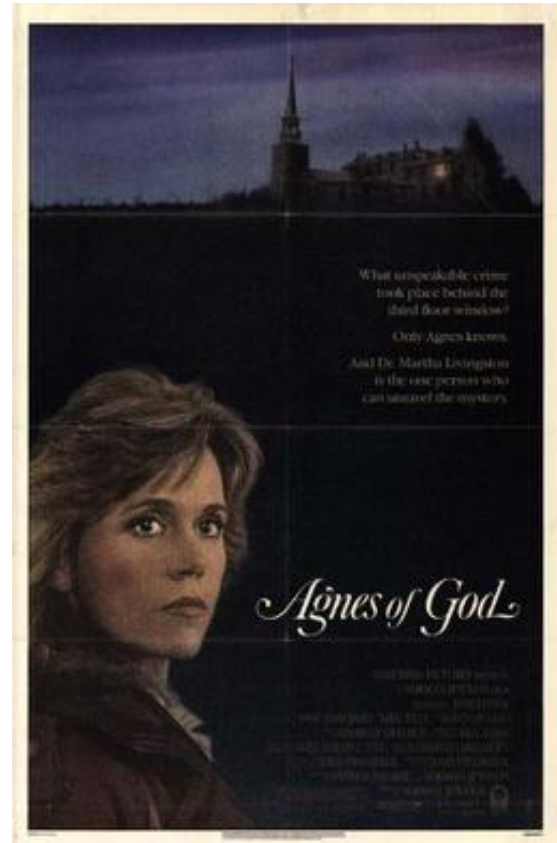
Geraldine Page was nominated for a Tony for Best Actress in a Play, but lost to Zoe Caldwell, who won for her performance in *Medea*. Amanda Plummer received a Tony Award for her performance as Agnes (Best Featured Actress in a Play).

The Film Adaptation

In 1985, a film version of *Agnes of God* was released. It starred Jane Fonda as Doctor Martha Livingstone, Anne Bancroft as Mother Miriam Ruth, and Meg Tilly as Agnes. John Pielmeier, the playwright of *Agnes of God*, wrote the screenplay.

The film's budget was 7.5 million. After grossing over 25.6 million dollars at the box office, it was considered a financial success.

Agnes of God received a score of 44% on Rotten Tomatoes based on reviews from 32 critics. Its audience score is 59% based on over 5,000 reviews. Despite being met with some mixed reviews from critics, the film did well during awards season. Pielmeier was nominated for a Writers Guild Award for Best Screenplay. Bancroft, Tilly, and Fonda all won Best Actress Awards from the Karlovy Cary International Film Festival. At the Academy Awards, Bancroft was nominated for Best Actress, Tilly was nominated for Best Supporting Actress, and Georges Delerue was nominated for Best Original Score. Bancroft was nominated for Best Actress at the Golden Globes, and Tilly won Best Supporting Actress.



About The Author: John Pielmeier



John Pielmeier is an actor and writer who began his career with the internationally acclaimed play and movie *Agnes of God*. Since then he has had three more plays mounted on Broadway and over 25 film, television movies and miniseries produced. Most recently he has written and acted in the internationally successful limited series *The Pillars of the Earth* (named the 5th Best Miniseries of All Time!) and premiered his stage adaptation of *The Exorcist* in

London's West End prior to its New York opening in 2019. His first novel, *Hook's Tale*, has recently been published by Scribner to wonderful reviews and he is currently adapting it as a one-person show for the stage.

He has received the Humanitas Award (plus two nominations), five Writers' Guild Award nominations, a Gemini nomination, an Edgar Award, the Camie Award, a Christopher Award, and his projects have won a Gemini Award and been nominated for the Emmy Award (three times) and the Golden Globe Award. He is married to writer Irene O'Garden and makes his home in upstate New York. If you want to know more, please visit his website: johnpielmeier.com.



Hypnosis and Hypnotherapy

According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, “Hypnosis is a psychological procedure that can help to change how you feel and act.

In hypnosis, you are put in a state of focused concentration that involves becoming less aware of your surroundings. In this state, you are more able to accept ‘suggestions’, also known as ‘invitations’. Your therapist will make suggestions that encourage you to move away from unhelpful beliefs towards more helpful beliefs.

For example, if you mistakenly believe that you are a bad person, in hypnosis the therapist will give you suggestions that help to change that to a more reasonable belief that you are fine as you are.” (Whalley)



Hypnotherapy can often be used to assist with stress or anxiety, panic attacks, PTSD, phobias, behavioral issues, and for breaking habits. It has a variety of medical uses as well, which can include pain control, IBS, insomnia, skin conditions, and more.

In *Agnes of God*, Dr. Martha Livingstone decides to perform hypnotherapy on Sister

Agnes to uncover the truth behind her mysterious behavior and the circumstances surrounding her pregnancy and the death of her newborn child. It is likely that Dr. Livingstone suspects that Agnes might be suffering from a dissociative disorder, where she might be dissociating from reality or experiencing a split in her identity due to past trauma. This suspicion stems from Agnes's confusing actions and the discussions she has with Agnes. Dr. Livingstone uses hypnotherapy as a tool to access deeper layers of Agnes's psyche and uncover repressed memories.

Themes

Faith versus Logic

Agnes of God thoroughly dives into the tension and conflict between faith and logic. Mother Miriam Ruth represents faith, with deep convictions and trust in God. Dr. Livingstone represents logic, as a person who works in psychiatry and uses science and logic to explain the world around her. Both aim to examine Agnes through their own lens, and create a picture of what happened.

Innocence

Agnes' innocence is central to the play. Agnes appears to be so pure that she seemingly is unaware of how she ended up in her situation. This is examined as it acts as both a shield and a vulnerability for her character. The characters raise questions about how truly innocent a person can be, and whether that can stand the test of time and the world around them.

Womanhood and Motherhood

This all-female story ponders womanhood and motherhood through its three distinct characters. Each woman has their own perspective on womanhood and motherhood. The play investigates the societal and personal pressures associated with being a woman and a mother, and how these pressures shape and challenge their identities.

Truth

Agnes of God is a quest for the truth, surrounded by mystery and the complexity of these characters' personal experiences. Dr. Livingstone and Mother Miriam grapple with different ideas and understandings of what is true. The play questions how truth is defined and the different ways it can be interpreted.

Discussion Questions

Before the Show

- ★ What are some strong beliefs that you have? How did you develop those beliefs?
- ★ The play is set in a convent. How do you think the setting will influence the characters' actions and perceptions? What does a religious institution bring to a story of conflict or mystery?
- ★ Do you believe that hypnosis can work? Why or why not? Have you ever seen or experienced it work?
- ★ What expectation do you have about Agnes or this story based on the title of the play and any promotional materials you have seen?
- ★ What kind of moral questions do you anticipate the play will raise? Do you think the play will offer clear answers, or will it leave some questions open-ended?

After the Show

- ★ How did the characters' actions and motivations evolve throughout the play?
- ★ What did you think of Agnes when she was first introduced? What do you think of her now?
- ★ How did the characters of Agnes, Dr. Livingstone, and Mother Miriam Ruth evolve throughout the play? Which character did you find the most sympathetic or complex, and why?
- ★ What did you think of Mother Superior and Agnes' relationship?

- ★ What symbols stood out to you during the play? How might the play's setting, certain props, or the language used by the characters carry deeper symbolic meaning in relation to the themes of guilt, innocence, and divine intervention?
- ★ What did you think about the resolution of the conflict between personal beliefs and institutional authority in the play? Was it satisfying or thought-provoking?
- ★ What lingering questions or thoughts do you have about the story or about Agnes?
- ★ What is your main takeaway from this play?

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