Agnes of God, by John Pielmeier, directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, starring Elizabeth Ashley, Mercedes McCambridge, and Maryann Plunkett, at the Schubert Theatre through Sunday, November 6th.

Kevin Kelly, theater critic for the Boston Globe, has written of Agnes of God: "Three actresses make trash worth seeing." Once again Kelly has, with his unbridled scorn, done a disservice to Boston theatre-goers. John Pielmeier's script is far from perfect, reaching a point of profundity nearly impossible to express, but it challenges anyone who attends this show not to be affected by the playwright's vision. It is powerful, almost overwhelming material, and in the hands of Elizabeth Ashley, Mercedes McCambridge, and Maryann Plunkett, Agnes of God is as disturbing and thought-provoking a play as you are likely to see this season.

Agnes is best described as a psychological mystery. A young nun, Agnes, is charged with the murder of the baby she gave birth to in her room at the convent. She becomes caught in the struggle between the court-appointed psychoanalyst who thinks she might have mental problems and the Mother Superior who fervently believes Agnes is a saint. The play unfolds in a series of examinations, flashbacks, and confrontations in which we learn about Agnes' relationship with her mother—and who abused her both mentally and sexually—and her Mother Superior. All of which is set against the backdrop of two paramount questions: Who murdered the infant, and, more importantly, who was the father?

Pielmeier draws his characters with a deft hand. All three women—Agnes, Dr. Martha Livingstone, Mother Miriam Ruth—are marvellously three-dimensional; they all vie for our sympathy. He reveals important information naturally, but in such a way as to heighten the tension to feverish, sometimes unbearable levels.

Yet Pielmeier is more than another hack mystery writer. He weaves thematic material throughout the dialogue as though he were composing a fugue. He elicits out attitudes about motherhood, religion, science, and faith with firm control, but occasionally dialectic argument gets out of hand and the play's action suffers. Most distressing is the discussion of science versus faith that precedes the final climactic hypnotism examination of Agnes. The playwright encounters a serious structural problem here; he needs something to divide two scenes temporally, but in halting the action he risks losing our focus.

Pielmeier's use of comic relief also comes into question. The play's intensity does need relaxing now and then, but sometimes the laughs come cheaply. There are also a number of character coincidences that are obviously contrived, but Pielmeier's use of imagery is astonishing. Agnes' descriptions of her mystical experiences are at once sensuous, erotic, and unbelievably terrifying.

Director Michael Lindsay-Hogg has staged the play almost flawlessly. The scenery is stark—two chairs, an ashtray, and a vast concave wall that dominates the space—and the shifting lighting constantly holds the audience's focus on the characters. Lindsay-Hogg is economical with scenery and is firm with his actresses' movement: All gestures are precise and all motion is well motivated. Agnes' frenetic action in the final scenes explode with such force that it becomes pantomime. Ashley has been playing this role stage through the entire play, serving as narrator, commentator, and scene participant. Ashley has been playing this role since the play opened on Broadway in 1982 and in some places it shows—certain gestures and facial expressions stem from once by rote towards the end of the evening. Yet here's a fine performance, exploring the character's complete emotional range. McCambridge plays Mother Miriam Ruth with fascinating restraint, beginning the play as the antagonist, but gradually opening up and becoming someone we can care for.

Maryann Plunkett is the uncontested standout performer in this show, and her Agnes is the most convincing character to grace the Broadway stage in quite some time. Her voice rings with the innocence of a child who has never been exposed to anything in the outside world, and the terror she is subjected to is horrifying. She never loses control, however, describing her visions with an eerie clarity and a contagious fear. It is Plunkett's godlike endeavor that makes Agnes of God such a heavenly production.

William Bryant