

Riveting, that's the word that best describes "Agnes of God" now showing at Laboratory Theater of Florida. Playwright John Pielmeier was inspired by a headline in a newspaper that read "Nun Kills Baby." The story in question refers to a 1977 trial in which an apprentice nun was tried and acquitted of manslaughter in the death of her infant son. Her pregnancy had been kept a secret and the child's father never revealed.

"Agnes" is well worth watching for the questions it raises and for putting the spotlight on three talented local actors. Director Annette Trossbach has assembled a first rate cast. Dr. Livingstone (Lori Riti) is appointed by the court to determine the stability of a young nun, Agnes (Jennifer Koch). She is accused of the same crime that made headlines in 1977. She denies the very existence of the child claiming police made it up.

Throughout her appointments with Dr. Livingstone, Agnes is fiercely protected by Mother Superior (Joann Haley) who views Agnes as a rare innocent and her connection to God something akin to a miracle. Agnes walks through the halls singing various chants and hymns. She came to the convent at age 17 and was the victim of an abusive mother.

As the play goes on Dr. Livingstone reveals some personal issues that made her distrustful of her faith. Raised Catholic, she is now an atheist. There are also revelations about Mother Superior's past. Haley portrays her as both stern and desperate.

The minimalist set features a metal scaffold with a cross in the middle that is crudely wrapped with pieces of cloth and rope. There is a desk and two chairs. Columns with candles are placed in the aisles and there is a slight hint of incense in the air. The show's action is occasionally interrupted by monologues by Dr. Livingstone and a few flashbacks with Agnes and Mother Superior. Dr. Livingstone becomes obsessed with the case in a very believable manner. She wants to

know, Why was there a baby and why did it die? Does Agnes have a strong relationship with God or is she totally insane?

Koch is fascinating as Agnes, a complicated character. She brings a lot of skill to the role. Her eyes dart back and forth as she tries to make sense of what happened. She says, "It was a mistake. Nuns don't have babies." At first she is shy and timid but in the second act the raw, damaged human being that is Agnes comes pouring out.

Without giving away too much of the ending, Dr. Livingstone is finally able to learn the truth by hypnotizing Agnes and ultimately pulling out some hidden information from Mother Superior. "Agnes of God" is a challenging, thought-provoking drama well worth seeing. It plays through January 24 at Laboratory Theater of Florida, 1634 Woodford Avenue in downtown Fort Myers. For tickets visit www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com or call 218-0481.