

# Blackburn to guest direct 'psycho-theological' mystery

by Jeannine Seitz, reporter

Drama and suspense are the hallmarks of the Otterbein Theatre Department's upcoming production of "Agnes of God," by John Pielmeier.

The play is being guest directed by Ohio State University professor of acting and directing Suzanne Blackburn. Blackburn, a native of San Francisco, was previously associated with Northern Michigan University. She was selected as the guest director after her success with last summer's Otterbein production of "The Fantastics." Junior Joanna Fabian is assisting Blackburn as the show's stage manager.

The "psycho-theological mystery" has an overall serious tone, but also includes entertainment and humor, said Blackburn.

The play features only three characters: Sister Agnes, sophomore Charlotte Dougherty, Dr. Martha Livingstone, junior Jodie Silk, and Mother Miriam Ruth, senior Laura Stitt.

The young nun, Sister Agnes, is accused of giving birth in her convent room and then strangling the infant with its umbilical cord. The psycho-theological theme of the play revolves around Agnes' claim not to remember the conception, birth or death of the infant.

One of the questions posed by the play is: Was Agnes raped or divinely impregnated? Through the play Livingstone and Mother Miriam hotly challenge each other's values.

Livingstone, a psychiatrist sent by the court to evaluate Agnes' mental state, is affected by her bitter feelings toward the Catholic Church. The play takes place in Livingstone's mind as she ponders how she lost her objectivity in Agnes' case.

Mother Miriam Ruth of the convent tries to defend her religious convictions from Livingstones. While the ultimate questions of the infant's divine or mortal existence is never answered, other truths are revealed.

"The play is spiritually centered," said Blackburn, "and only controversial if you have a limited view of faith."

With only three actors, the main challenge of the production is to hold the audience's attention. "It is an actor-focused show," said Blackburn.

Another challenge of "Agnes of God" was the research needed to make the convent order authentic. The cast attended Catholic Church services and spoke with nuns. To prepare for the psychological element of the play, the cast visited the Ohio State University medical school to be instructed in the processes of psychiatric diagnosis, therapy and hypnosis.

Also unique to the play is the staging within the doctor's mind. "The setting is an abstraction of her mind, and the space that reflects her office," said Blackburn.

The play is to be performed in the Campus Center Arena. Michael Blankenship, designer for the production, has designed a set that places the action on top of a concrete block altar.

The three-act play was first produced on Broadway in 1981. Otterbein's production opens the weekend of May 31 at 8:15 p.m. and runs again June 5-8. Tickets will be available at the Cowan Hall box office, 1-4:30 p.m. weekdays. Student tickets are free with Otterbein I.D.



# 'Agnes of God' ends theatre year with power, intensity

by Greg Grant

The last production this school year of the Department of Theatre and Dance ended the year the way it began—powerful, intense and thought-provoking drama at its finest.

"Agnes of God" by John Pielmeier is a challenging work, not only for the performers, but for the audience as well. It demands an incredible attention to detail because otherwise important plot details will be missed. The play is so structured that even a momentary lapse will produce incoherency.

The storyline is as follows: A nun, Sister Agnes, (Charlotte Dougherty) is brought to a psychiatrist, Dr. Martha Livingston (Jodie Silk), to determine if she is fit to stand trial. Sister Agnes has been found unconscious in her room at the convent. A dead baby was found in the wastebasket. Mother Miriam Ruth (Laura Stitt), mother superior of the convent, has a vested interest in the case and is actively involved in the events that follow. Dr. Livingston gets so involved with the case that it becomes more than an examination—it becomes a crusade to find the guilty party.

The play is a psychological drama containing the elements of a murder mystery.

Needless to say, a play of this sort is a heavy burden for a three-member cast to bear. They are outstanding. Silk is outstanding as the probing, questioning Livingston. She allows us to see into her character and find out what makes her tick. She allows Livingston to be fiery, independent and vulnerable at the same time.

Stitt is also outstanding. Her portrait of a worldly-wise mother superior is convincing. We can also see into her character and realize why she is overprotective of the naive Sister Agnes.

Dougherty makes us believe in Sister Agnes, which is no small task. Her childlike naivety is incredibly well done. Her role is demanding emotionally and physically and she is up to the challenge.

It was appropriate that this play was staged in the Arena Theatre. It allows the audience to become intimately involved in the way they have to understand the play. The cast makes good use of the intimacy. Stitt and Silk wage some impressive verbal wars that are intensified by the audience's proximity to the action. Dougherty is also not afraid to shock the close audience by screaming and thrashing around. Perhaps the credit for this goes to guest director Suzanne Blackburn, but at any rate the cast got the audience involved.



Sister Agnes (Charlotte Dougherty) humbles herself before Dr. Livingstone (Jodie Silk).

There were also some disadvantages to being in the Arena Theatre. At some points, some of the action was going on so that I could not see an actress's face as she delivered lines and therefore missed important information. The cast deserves a lot of credit for keeping this unavoidable occurrence to a minimum.

The "scenery" which consisted of a platform and two chairs was simple and appropriate. It was very functional and didn't get in the way of the action, as some scenery in the Arena Theatre does.

I can't end this review without a comparison to "Equus." The fact that both

plays were produced in the same season begs a comparison. One of my professors half-jokingly called the play "Equus with nuns" and he was partially right. It is the same kind of psychological drama. It has the same kind of intensity. It also deals with many of the same themes, particularly religion and its relationship to humankind.

If you want an intense, thought-provoking evening of first-class drama, see "Agnes of God." It will be playing through Saturday. If you don't want to see powerful drama that makes you react, study for your exams.



—Photos by Dan Bravard

Mother Miriam Ruth (Laura Stitt) questions Dr. Livingstone (Jodie Silk).



# Otterbein offers powerful 'Agnes of God' performance

**GUEST DIRECTOR** Suzanne Kiesby-Blackburn and her three-member cast, Dr. Martha Livingstone, a court-appointed psychiatrist, played by Jodie Silk, Mother Superior Miriam Ruth played by Laura Stitt and Agnes, a young nun played by Charlotte Dougherty, have a powerhouse play in *Agnes of God*.

The Otterbein College Department of Theatre and Dance is presenting this theater tour de force June 5-8 at 8:15 p.m. at the Campus Center Arena Theatre. If you are fortunate you may still be able to get a ticket to see this play.

A young nun was found in her room unconscious, blood was also found, as well as a dead, newborn baby. The babe was placed in a small waste basket, one not normally found in this room. The young nun, Agnes, says she was "sick," has no memory of what happened and thinks those around her are a little strange to talk of a baby about which she has no memory.

**DR. LIVINGSTONE'S** job is to find out "the truth" about what happened. Mother Superior's job is to be God's voice in the nunnery, and Agnes sees that her job is to obey Mother Superior and love and serve her God.

Livingstone and Mother Superior are adversaries, both are used to giving orders — not taking them, both are ultimately touched by Agnes, their lives are changed by Agnes.

Many questions are asked and some are answered, but the most important question is never answered in the script, but may be answered in your mind. Or it may be that you will try to force the question from your mind since you can find no answer without faith. Yet, how much faith does the world have today?

The ensemble work of the three actresses was as strong as any I have ever seen. And while we never see the director, we have to be always aware of the director being a key part of that ensemble work.

**IF YOU ARE** intrigued by the following question then you should see *Agnes of God*. If today, in the U.S.A., we had a man, Joe, and a woman, Mary, who had a son, Joshua, and Joshua was declared to be born of a virgin mother, what do you think would happen to that family? How would today's world react?

Call 890-3028 for reservations, you may still be able to get tickets. If you call in the morning you get a recording that tells you about tickets and dates but does not tell you the time the play starts or where the play is staged. The time is 8:15 p.m. the place is the Campus Center Arena Theatre.

If you like to be challenged by theater, if you like theater



## act II

Jean Ann Wolfe-Weaver

that involves you emotionally, if you like theater that makes you think, then do not miss the Otterbein College Theatre production of *Agnes of God*.

**"THE MOVING ARTS** Company is a cooperative of four choreographers — Loren Bucek, David Krohn, Linda Martin and Linda Yoder Krohn — whose primary focus is to nurture the creators of movement art works — whether they call themselves choreographers, mimewrights, composers or directors.

"We seek to expand our audience's notion of dance by incorporating acting, mime, and other movement skills into our repertory and by calling ourselves 'movement artist.'"

The above is the opening "paragraph of purpose," taken directly from the program of the Moving Arts Company for its May 30 program presented at Hastings Middle School last week.

Five "movement" events, or presentations, made up the evening's program. Each of the dances had been conceived by different artists, while three of the dances were choreographed by company members.

**"ANNA'S RIVER"** was choreographed by David Krohn in dedication to Anna Sokolow, dancer and woman. Krohn was also the "male figure" in this piece. The man searching for one woman while trying to understand and interact with Anna as a dancer in "Some Early Impressions;" Anna as a choreographer in "The Fighting Spirit;" and Anna as a lover in "Under the Microscope."

"The River" brought the three Annas into one dance unit to interact with the male figure and interact with each other, each as part of the total woman.

"Ode to Elvis," choreographed by Linda Martin, was danced by Giny Adams. This teenaged woman-child or child-woman is responding to Elvis as a man, as well as responding to the Elvis music. Both the audience and the dancer needed a rest after this piece. It was great fun, but exhausting.

"All the Way Home," the program tells us, was "conceived and directed" by John Giffin. The word "choreography" was not used because this piece certainly had elements of theater, as well as elements of improvisation as well as dance. It was a melding of art forms that never lost my interest.

**PERFORMERS** Loren Bucek, David Krohn and Linda Martin danced separately — and together. They were also all on stage together while working alone. Chairs brought them together, hats separated them, letting them, forcing them, to react as individuals. The hats were thrown on stage from the wings, all kinds hats.

Hats for men, hats for women, straw hats, felt hats, small hats, large hats, hats for children, hats for adults, large-brimmed hats, hats with no brims, and the dancers became actors as they improvised a new character for each hat they tried on.

As a change of pace, they then tried to "clean up" the stage by putting on as many pieces of clothing and hats as possible. An unusual dance form but great fun to watch.

**"... MONKEY on barbed wire ..."** was both choreographed and danced by Linda Yoder Krohn. A woman's world of another time, when the husband was the lord of the house and the wife, when lots of children were the norm, when cleaning the house, washing and ironing clothes and cooking were done over and over manually. It is a strong piece that makes a strong statement about women of that time.

"Vicious Rumors," with choreography by Susan Ven Pelt, was probably the most traditional piece of the evening. David Krohn was "He" (father and husband), Loren Bucek was "She" (mother and wife), Linda Yoder Krohn was "Other Woman;" "The Kid" was Linda Martin and "The Girl," Ginny Adams.

The dance deals with the changes and reactions within a family when the head of the family has an affair. The story was clear, the characters were strong the message was delivered, the solution was missing.

**THOSE OF US** who saw The Moving Arts Company had a creative, changing, yet always interesting and exciting arts experience. A brief question-and-answer period followed the performance and, since the general public in Central Ohio seems to be wary of any dance but traditional ballet, maybe such a question-and-answer period will help audiences be more comfortable with other dance forms.



# 389 Actresses research real world to play parts

By Dennis Fiely  
Dispatch Theater Critic

The words are already there in the script, but sometimes being an actress is like being a historical novelist. There's so much research involved. A novelist may probe the shelves in the library; an actress probes people and life.

To prepare for their roles in *Agnes of God*, which opens at Otterbein College on Friday, three Otterbein actresses interviewed a nun and a psychiatrist and attended a hypnotism at Ohio State University — all in the quest of creating the illusion of truth on stage.

"To be real for an audience, a character has to be real for you," said Otterbein junior Charlotte Dougherty. In *Agnes of God*, Dougherty plays a young nun who bears a child in the convent. The child is subsequently murdered.

TO PERFORM the part, Dougherty must convey the honest feelings behind events, such as child-bearing, that she has never

*Agnes of God* will be staged at 8:15 p.m. Friday and Saturday and at 2:30 p.m. Sunday in Cowan Hall at Otterbein College in Westerville. The play continues at 8:15 p.m. Wednesday through June 8. Tickets, \$4.50 and \$3.50, may be purchased at the theater box office, 890-3000.

personally experienced. "I talked to every mother I could — my boss at work, my director — about what it was like. One woman told me that after she had her first child, she felt like she had been hit by a truck," Dougherty said.

The task for the young Otterbein cast in this emotionally powerful and thematically complex play is to transform second-hand knowledge into genuine emotion and behavior.

Dougherty also had to discover what it's like to be the victim of child abuse and, due to her character's arrested develop-

ment, what it's like to act and think like a child.

She works at Rosa's Deli in Westerville where she has been scrutinizing the behavior of its youngest patrons. "I noticed that children jump from subject to subject; their minds naturally stray," Dougherty said.

IT'S THE kind of observation that Dougherty will incorporate into her character for a more believable portrayal.

The role of the Mother Superior for senior Laura Stitt was particularly challenging because Stitt was raised a Methodist. To learn of Catholic ritual and religious self-sacrifice, she attended a Mass, prayed the rosary and

spent time with a nun who used to live in a cloister.

"She said life in a cloister was very cold because there are no relationships," Stitt said. "People in a cloister don't talk to each other very much. Meeting with her helped a lot. I was impressed with the energy behind her faith."

To play Dr. Martha Livingstone, a psychiatrist with her own hang-ups who interrogates the troubled, young nun and her protective Mother Superior, junior Jodie Silk, of Dublin, visited the home of a psychiatrist.

SHE CAME away with a vivid perception of the psychiatrist's personality, away from the office couch.

Because she has to hypnotize the young nun in the play, Silk also attended a hypnotism demonstration at OSU where she "realized you have to have a real strong, serious and rhythmic voice" to carry out the procedure.

If Otterbein's *Agnes of God* is unconvincing for the audience, it won't be for lack of effort. As these three actresses prove, there's more to acting than merely memorizing the lines.



# Overacting mars 'Agnes'

By Dennis Fiely  
Dispatch Theater Critic

## REVIEW

John Pielmeier's volatile, complex, edgy, mystical, mysterious and, yes, gruesome *Agnes of God* presents a formidable challenge for any trio of actresses, no matter what level of experience. If the Otterbein College cast can't quite scale the emotional mountain, at least it doesn't fall all over itself trying.

The play, which continues tonight through Saturday, is like a courtroom drama. All of it occurs in a psychiatrist's office where Dr. Martha Livingstone (Jodie Silk) and Mother Superior Miriam Ruth (Laura Stitt) wage a wordy war over a young nun, Agnes (Charlotte Dougherty), who gave birth to a baby in the convent. The baby was found dead in the wastebasket with his umbilical cord tied around his neck.

The court asks Dr. Livingstone to probe the young nun's mind in an effort to judge her sanity and perhaps shed light on the curious birth and death. The Mother Superior tries to protect Agnes.

**CONFRONTATION IS** the key word here. At one point, the Mother Superior and Dr. Livingstone go nose-to-nose, toe-to-toe, like a manager and an umpire in a baseball rhabarb.

The entire enterprise is heavy on psychology. By turning on each other, the characters turn upon themselves in appropriately confessional form. A big part of the play depicts the conflict between science, embodied by Dr. Livingstone, and faith, embodied by the Mother Superior.

Agnes, their point of contention, is either an angel or a demon, a murderer or an innocent. Whatever she is, she's clearly crazy.

Sad to say, but not surprising to report, all of this is beyond the grasp of the Otterbein cast, the youth of which is impossible to ignore.

The roles require the characters to draw on traumatic events — rape, birth, child abuse and divorce. The cast simply isn't old enough to have any memories or similar experiences to tap. However, you can't fault their efforts. Given the mature nature of the material, it's a credit to the performers that they don't embarrass themselves. This production is earnest from beginning to end; it never seems silly.

Yet, while *Agnes of God* is assuredly a worthwhile experience for the performers, it's a trying one for the audience.

The depth of feeling just isn't there, and, to compensate, the actresses substitute histrionics. They're in a fit most of the time. They largely show emotion by raising their voices.

Director Suzanne Blackburn doesn't help matters by keeping the show at a fevered pitch when more modulation of tone would have been welcome.

The unrelenting frenzy peaks in Act 2 when Agnes, under hypnosis, throws herself about the stage, lunging and twitching, screaming and kicking like the possessed victim at an exorcism.

Dougherty, usually a delight-

fully natural actress, is particularly guilty of overacting as the psychotic Agnes, but she captures the quixotic nature of the character. At other times, she appears in the state of blissful ignorance, which is where Mother Miriam would prefer she stay.

Stitt, as the worldly Mother Superior, and Silk, as the obsessed psychiatrist, also demonstrate a basic understanding of their characters. The trio is successful at creating sharp distinctions among their personalities, although Stitt and Silk miss much of the inherent humor in their characters' clash of wills.

Some humor here is sorely needed because the entire tone of the production is extremely overwrought.

The busyness of the staging only compounds the problem. *Agnes of God* is being staged in the round and, in an effort to play to all four sides of the audience, the characters are always on the move and their lines are constantly trailing off as they turn from one section of the audience to face another.

The Otterbein College production of *Agnes of God* continues at 8:15 p.m. today through Saturday in the Campus Center Arena Theatre on the Westerville campus. Tickets, \$3.50-\$4.50, are available by calling 890-3028.

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# Arena theater is site for 'Agnes of God'



—Photo by Jeannine Seiz

*Laura Stitt, Jodie Silk and Charlotte Dougherty bring the drama "Agnes of God" to life in the CC arena theater next weekend. Tickets can be obtained at the Cowan Hall box office.*

**by Julie Lynch, reporter**

An insightful guest director, an intimate stage and a complex story plot combine this spring to keep up with the Otterbein theater department's standard of excellence, according to one of the play's stars.

"Agnes of God," the story of a young nun scared by rape, will be performed May 30-June 1 and June 5-8 at 8:15 p.m. in the Campus Center arena theater.

Charlotte Dougherty, a sophomore

from North Canton, Ohio, stars in the play as Agnes, a character she describes as "a 21-year-old with the mind of a child."

Dougherty, who has captured the attention of Otterbein theater-goers in the past with roles in "Heidi" (Winter 1984) and "Equus" (Fall 1984), says the preparation for this particular role has been extensive.

"I've had to watch children a lot," Dougherty said, explaining that she has had to learn to imitate childish tendencies. "It's difficult because I have to forget what I know as an adult and act as a child," she added.

Dougherty also said that since she and the other cast members (Jodie Silk and Laura Stitt) were unfamiliar with life in a convent, they had to talk with a nun about her cloistered life in hopes of portraying the setting accurately.

Another asset to the performance of the play has been the input of guest director Suzanne Blackburn. Dougherty said Blackburn has a "keen insight into the play," and that has made a big difference.

"She's wanted to direct this play for years and has actually researched it for a year," Dougherty said.

The fact that Blackburn is a woman directing a play with an all-female cast has also been significant. Since the play deals with the delicate subject matter of rape,

the cast can discuss details of the play with Blackburn without feeling uncomfortable.

Yet another contributing factor to probable success of "Agnes of God" is the fact that it is being performed in the Campus Center Arena.

Having performed on both the Cowan and Arena stages, Dougherty said she prefers the Arena.

"It's more intimate in the Arena," she said. "It's like the audience is there with you. In Cowan there's so much distance that it's more like [the audience] is look-

ing at you."

Dougherty also said she likes not having to worry about always facing the audience. In the Arena the actor's back is always facing some part of the audience so the direction doesn't have to accommodate one side of the stage.

Tickets for "Agnes of God" can be obtained at the Cowan Hall box office from 1-4:30 p.m. weekdays. Students are free with Otterbein I.D.



## Entertainment

# Otterbein's 'Agnes of God' balanced, effective drama

By NANCY GILSON

C-J Entertainment Editor

In "Agnes of God," three actresses play a psychiatrist, a determined Mother Superior, and a troubled young nun who may have murdered her own child. Not exactly type-casting for college students.

It's a nice surprise, then, that Otterbein College's current production is as credible as it is. The actresses occasionally overact, but for the most part, the trio is balanced and effective and their characters are distinct and moving.

"Agnes of God" is strong stuff. Agnes (Charlotte Dougherty) is an unbalanced young woman who recently had a baby. The child was

### Review

discovered dead in a trash can in her room. Agnes has no memory of the event. Mother Miriam Ruth (Laura Stitt) is determined to protect Agnes while the psychiatrist, Dr. Martha Livingston (Jodie Silk), is equally determined to unravel the puzzle.

John Pielmeier's play is a series of brief, explosive confrontations — Agnes undergoing hypnosis, Dr. Livingston and Mother Miriam arguing over Agnes's guilt or innocence, Dr. Livingston agonizing out loud about the case. The story is further complicated by the characters' religious hang-ups, memories of child abuse

and failed marriages, and some inexplicable events that give "Agnes of God" an air of mysticism.

This psychological mystery doesn't have the conclusive solution

of "Equus." "Agnes of God" opens troubling doors and leaves them ajar for more problems to creep in.

The Otterbein production, directed by Suzanne Blackburn, is mature

and respectful of the prickly issues posed in the play.

Silk, who is on stage the entire play, gives an emotional, tense performance which is in line with her character. Dr. Livingston smokes some 17 cigarettes during the play, an indication of her high-strung personality. Still, Silk and Stitt are so tight, they miss some of the humor caused by the collision of the psychiatrist and the bombastic Mother Superior.

Charlotte Dougherty has a child-like quality, both appealing and dangerous, which works very well for the puzzling character of Agnes.

The production's major flaw is its busyness. The actresses constantly

fiddle with a water pitcher, chairs and velvet theater ropes which represent office doors. All this business creates a cluttered look and detracts from the strong emotional content of the script.

Another difficulty is that this production is staged in the round at Otterbein's Campus Center Arena Theatre. The actresses can't avoid having their backs to part of the audience part of the time which takes some of the impact away from the intense conversations. But since this cast is so constantly on the move, no one is tuned out for long.

*"Agnes of God" will continue through June 8 in the Campus Center Arena Theatre at Otterbein College.*