

An engrossing mystery but not at the expense of art

Innuendo wrapped around a core of truth

Agnes of God
Columbia Pictures
Plaza

by Gilbert Bouchard

After coming out of Norman Jewison's highly enjoyable *Agnes of God* you wonder how much you actually got out of the movie as opposed to what the movie gets out of you — at least if you're of Catholic roots.

A few people I've talked to (all Catholics or lapsed Catholics) agree and wonder if perhaps their reaction to the film might have been different if they had been protestant or Buddhist?

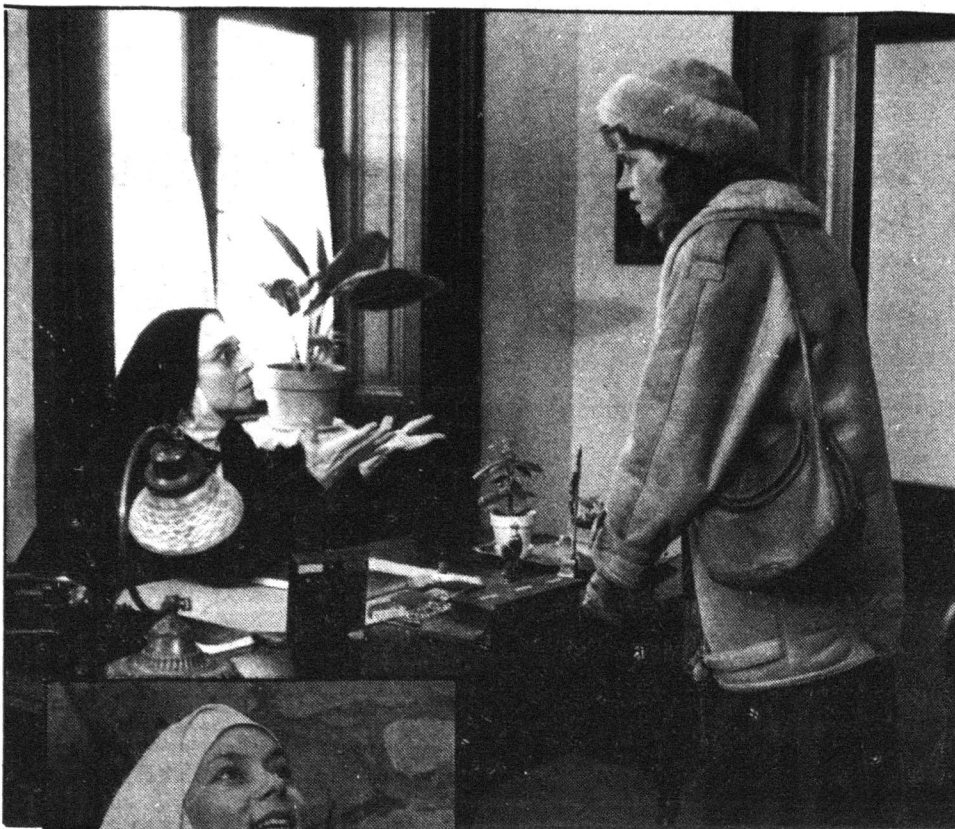
John Pielmeier's script about the mysterious pregnancy of a young nun displays a lot of Catholic hatred, resentment and prejudice, but how consciously or effectively it does so is up for debate.

The plot is deceptively simple. Jane Fonda plays Martha Livingston, a psychiatrist investigating the death of a newborn infant allegedly strangled by her mother, a novice in a rural Quebec convent.

Livingston discovers that the nun, Agnes (played to perfection by Canadian Meg Tilly) is a simple innocent — battered and abused as a child, painfully ignorant of herself and the world around her but has a faith that can't be denied. Agnes believes that she was impregnated by Christ, speaks on a regular basis with 'the lady' (the Virgin Mary one assumes) and spontaneously develops stigmas (wounds on the palms and feet that mimic those of Jesus on the cross).

A pitched battle ensues between Livingston and the cynical Mother Superior, Mother Miriam Ruth (Anne Bancroft), who stubbornly tries to shelter her cloistered order from the bull-like trappings of Livingston and her science.

The movie preys on the irony of a so called 'objective' scientist struggling to come to grips with her hang-ups and reservations toward Catholicism, foiled by the strong rational Mother Superior. Mother Miriam Ruth seems at times embarrassed by her Church's beliefs and is continually defending and explaining the faith that should be above such secular concerns. Bancroft and Fonda deserve commendations for fleshing out their roles, avoiding stereotype, and their attention to detail.



Above: Anne Bancroft and Jane Fonda.
Inset: Meg Tilly

The constant in the film is Agnes. Agnes is firm and secure, either in her faith and the

unfolding of a miracle within her, or in her madness. Tilly plays Agnes with a calculated ambiguity; depending on your perspective she's either saint or madwoman, both are valid and are natural progressions of Tilly's characterizations.

What bothers me about *Agnes* is that while the movie parades forth all the old preconceptions about Catholicism, particularly the mysteries of the cloister, it fails either to debunk or to substantiate these myths.

Agnes of God questions the vows of chastity taken by the nuns and priests, takes potshots at their faith, and makes insinuations about "dirty little secrets" behind the scenes, but doesn't come through with anything more than idle gossip.

It feeds on the underlying prejudice most of us hold about religious orders: convents as bordello's, priest-nun sexual encounters, lesbian/gay activity in convents, and even the stories of secret abortions of nun-priest progeny. The movie panders to this age old hatred, treating it almost as a given.

An example of this is when Livingston, trying to determine the father of Agnes' baby, automatically suspects the priest who

takes the nun's confessions until she meets Father Martineau and discovers an old man in his 80s. Unfortunately his age seems to be the only thing that discourages Livingston from believing that Agnes and he would have fornicated. The audience is left with the impression that if the priest had been any younger perhaps there would have been sexual relationships between the nuns and the priest.

What's a shame is that while the movie flounders in innuendo and prejudice it still has a core of truth and it brings up some questions worth pondering. But *Agnes of God* doesn't make people question their prejudices and unease with the mother church, it just feeds the ignorance.

I got the feeling that Pielmeier is letting the audience fill in too many gaps. He's relying on an emotionally laden subject to bring up points he wants presented, rather than bringing them up himself. Since so many things are left unsaid and have to be extrapolated by the viewer I wonder how valid any of my points are (am I seeing too much into the story?). I think the audience could have gotten a bit more guidance.

Jewison occasionally allows the movie to bog down in rhetoric, and hits us with scene after scene of either Livingston's Freudian drivel, or the Mother Superior's cynical theology.

These criticisms aside, the film is still a valid cinematic achievement. The acting is first rate, Jewison's direction is clean and smooth, and the choice of location and style of the film is above reproach. We get an engrossing mystery that moves quickly and efficiently without sacrificing art.

On a more personal note it's refreshing to see a movie set in Canada without excuses and self-consciousness. Pragmatically Jewison couldn't have chosen a better locale than Quebec for a film about the battle between secular and Catholic forces — since Quebec went from being virtually a Catholic fiefdom to an anti-clerical secular state in less than a decade. The scars of this battle make a perfect backdrop for this movie. One of the movie's opening shots features a pan of Montreal with the huge cross on Mount Royal in the foreground — the perfect visual symbol to embody the church's omnipresence in the lives of all the movie's characters.

It's nice seeing a movie that takes some intellectual risks. Jewison's *Agnes of God* has some rough bits, but overall it's a sturdy bit of craftsmanship.

INTRA
Independent Travel
Retailers Associated

FIESTA'S

MAZATLAN

Limited Space — **READING WEEK**
from \$639.00/person (each of 4)
Depart February 15 for one week via
Pacific Western Charter.
Transfers and accommodation
included. Add 10% for taxes
and service charges.

FIESTA Wayfarer

Book early and avoid disappointment!

For information:

INTRA
Independent Travel
Retailers Associated

**Edmonton Travel
Agency Co. Ltd.**

9006-112 Street
HUB Mall
433-2434

IT STARTED IN MAY
IN A SMALL TOWN
AND EVERY MONTH
AFTER THAT
WHENEVER THE MOON
WAS FULL...
IT CAME BACK.

STEPHEN KING'S
SILVER BULLET
HE MAKES EVIL AN EVENT.

DINO DE LAURENTIIS PRESENTS
STEPHEN KING'S SILVER BULLET · GARY BUSEY · EVERETT MCGILL
COREY HAIM · MUSIC BY JAY CHAT TAWAY · BASED ON THE
NOVELETTE "CYCLE OF THE WEREWOLF" BY STEPHEN KING
SCREENPLAY BY STEPHEN KING · PRODUCED BY MARTHA SCHUMACHER
R DIRECTED BY DANIEL ATTIAS A PARAMOUNT PICTURE

Opening at a Famous Players
Theatre Near You Friday October 11