Theater

'Agnes' a great theater evening

By Arthur Johnson

What prevents a melodrama about a young nun suspected of murdering her newborn child from being a predictable whodunnit?

Playwright John Pielmeier's witty, fast-moving dialogue and the presence of the three offbeat female characters—a chain-smoking court psychiatrist, a Mother Superior whose own children refuse to see her, and Agnes, a childlike young nun who harbors more than one lurid secret in her past.

These are the elements that make "Agnes of God", the current Morris A. Mechanic Theatre presentation, a completely fascinating evening of theatre.

Elizabeth Ashley portrays the atheist psychiatrist who feels compelled to overreach her task of determining Agnes' sanity in order to solve the murder and save the nun.

Standing in her way is the formidable Mother Superior (Mercedes McCambridge) who wants to protect Agnes, and her order; and the accused nun herself, a young woman who has visions of her dead mother and does not recall giving birth.

In her quest for the truth about Agnes, the psychiatrist reveals her own idiosyncracies and passions—a disdain for Catholicism, an ironic lack of control over her addiction to cigarettes despite the fact that she is supposed to know something about human behavior, and an obsession about stripping away Agnes' defenses that seems to go far beyond her duties as court psychiatrist.

Mother Superior reveals her frustrating early lie as an unhappy wife and unsuccessful mother which she has supplanted with the predictable, well-ordered life in a nunnery. The discovery of the murdered infant threatens her newfound security, causing her to rebel against the psychiatrist's probing.

And Agnes, the supposed innocent of the three women, reveals herself to be the most tortured of them all.

What makes "Agnes of God" so theatrically thrilling is the fascinating interplay of the three women's personalities. This deadly serious outing is filled with the ironic humor that can be found in most tragedies.

While "Agnes of God" contains no immortal characters such as Williams' Blanche DuBois or Albee's George and Martha, playwright Pielmeir's adeptness with words and the rapid-fire pacing of Michael Lindsay-Hogg's direction keep "Agnes" moving briskly.

Every word, every moment flows naturally from the preceeding one. A recording of this well-worded play would be satisfying enough, but the addition of the exceptional performances of McCambridge and Plunkett run the words into an even finer dramatic experience.

McCambridge, both stern and satiric, and Plunkett, innocent and ignorant yet shrewd enough to see only what she wants to see provide the acting highlights here.

Ashley's performance, however, always seems stagey. Her mannerisms are a bit too forced. Every walk across the stage punctuated with an "I'm-just-out-of-acting school" quality that seems to repeatedly shout, "Hey, I'm really acting!" McCambridge and Plunkett know that the best performances are those that seem effortless and real.

Still, "Agnes of God" is a great evening of theatre and is not to be missed.

"Agnes" plays through Jan. 28.

"Agnes of God," the acclaimed Broadway mystery psycho-drama set in a convent stars Elizabeth Ashley, Mercedes McCambridge and Maryann Plunkett at the Mechanic through Jan. 28.

'The Living Room' barely alive

By Arthur Johnson

The living room. In the Browne household the location of this room is subject to change at a moment's notice.

It is the custom of this troubled British home to close any room of their sprawling home in which a family member dies. With time this peculiar practice naturally begins to make the Browne abode smaller as the grim reaper creeps up on and overtakes family members.

When the 20 year old daughter of a recently deceased family member, Rose Pemberton (Susan Clayton), enters this eccentric household with the married middle-aged executor of her mother's estate (Eugene Bulluck) to whom she has recently surrendered her virginity, you have the makings of an unusual and not completely satisfying drama, "The Living Room".

This current Arena Players, Inc. production is a very talky effort with several potentially interesting characters including the two adulterers and the Browne family: a doltering Teresa (Vacountess Payne); the neurotic, life-fearing Helen (June Thorne) who mandates the closing of the rooms; and the crippled priest who no longer practices his vocation (Ben Prestbury).

Unfortunately, "The Living Room" offers them little of interest to do besides play out a rather bland tale of a post-teenager taking her first sexual encounter much too seriously, her older lover who may or may not really be in love with her, a priest who sits in his wheelchair lamenting his uselessness to God as if legs were a requirement for being a man of God, and two sisters, one domineering and one docile.

The only real metamorhisis in the play occurs in the final moments after the typical wife-meets-mistress scene and d dread senseless death.

For the most part, the Arena actors perform admirably. Thorne is a standout and Payne provides welcome, if not always in relief as the childlike sister. But, "The Living Room" simply does not gel as an absorbing drama with an involving focus.

The plodding dialogue about religion, adultery, illegitimate children, guilt, fear and death and fear of life just is not stuff of convincing drama here.

While the Arena Players, Inc. is to be commended for including this type of drama as a "stretching" exercise for its actors and to create a varied season of theatre offerings, it never hurts to choose a strong work as the centerpiece for a strong production.

"The Living Room" plays weekends through Jan. 29.

Father Browne, Benjamin Prestbury, accuses his sister Helen, June Thorne, of interfering in the affairs of their troubled niece in this scene from "The Living Room" by Graham Greene playing weekends at the Arena Playhouse, 801 McCulloh St. through Jan. 29.

Baltimore Area

Center Stage- 700 N. Calvert Street, 332-0033. "The Sleep of Reason".

Mechanic Theatre- Hopkins Plaza, 625-1400. "Agnes of GOD" with Mercedes McCambridge thru Jan. 28

Vagabond Theatre- 806 S. Broadway. 563-9135. "The Goodbye People" thru Jan 29

Washington Area

Arena Stage- 6th and Maine Sts. S.W., 202-488-3300. **Old Vat Room** Banjo Dancing Thurs. and Fri. at 8 p.m., Sat. at 7 and 10 p.m., Sun. at 7:30 p.m.)

Columbia Station Cabaret Theatre- 1836 Columbia Road, N.W., 202-387-7894

Folger Theatre- 201 E. Capitol St., S.E., 202-546-4000. "The School for Scandal" Jan. 17-Mar. 11

Kennedy Center- 2700 F. St., N.W. Instant Charge 800-424-8504

Eisenhower Theatre- 2700 F. St., N.W. "The Hasty Heart"

Opera House- 2700 F. St., N.W. "Woman of the Year" thru Feb.11

Concert Hall- 2700 F. St., N.W. Barbara Cook, Larry Adler Jan. 27 7 p.m.

King Jester Theatre- 8049 13th St., Silver Spring, 946-2077. "Ain't Misbehavin' " (extended thru Jan. 29

Round House Theatre- 12210 Bushey Drive. Silver Spring, 468-4234. "Antigone Jan. 12-Feb. 12.

Source- 1809 14th St., N.W., 202-462-1073

Warehouse Rep. 1835 14th St., N.W. "Krieg" thru Jan. 21.

Resource- 1716 14th St., N.W.

Studio Theatre- 1401 Church St. N.W., 202-265-7412. "Really Rosie" Jan. 12-Feb. 12.

Top Hot Videos

Sales and rentals

"Blue Thunder", RCA-Columbia Pictures Home Video, 10026

"Jane Fonda's Workout, Karl Video Corp., 042

"Fleshdance", Paramount Home Video, 1454.

"Making of Michael Jackson's 'Thriller'.", Vestron 1000.

"National Lampoon's Vacation", Warner Home Video,11315 .

"Pink Floyd - The Wall", MGM-UA Home Video MV-400268.

"Raiders of the Lost Ark", Paramount Home Video 137 6.

"Risky Business", Warner Home Video, 11323.

"Superman III", Warner Home Video, 11314.

"Twilight Zone-The Movie", Warner, 11314.

"The Dark Crystal", Thorn-EMI 1966.

New Releases

"Flight of Dragons", James Earl Jones and John Ritter, Children's Video Library, Vestron.

"Redd Foxx: Video in a Plain Brown Wrapper", LED Vestron Video

"Smokey and the Bandit, Part 3" Jackie Gleason, Paul Williams and Jerry Reed, MCA Home Video.

"Soap Opera Bloopers", VIP Video

American Music Awards
A Michael Jackson Show

By Jeff Wilson

Los Angeles (UPI)— Superstar Michael Jackson's yearlong dominance on the airwaves spun into an American Music Awards sweep, a public "seal of approval" his chief rival said was long overdue.

Jackson, 25, was nominated 10 times, twice in the same category, and won seven awards, including Best Pop-Rock and Soul Albums for "Thriller". His only defeat was to Lionel Richie's Calypso-styled "All Night Long".

"I'm surprised", Richie said after beating Jackson's "Billie Jean" for Best Soul Single. "But it was wonderful evening for Michael.

"For Michael, this is long overdue. This puts the final thumbprint — the seal of approval — to a great talent".

The spotlight on Monday night's nationally televised awards show, witnessed by 6,000 people inside the Shrine Auditorium, focused on Jackson, who sat in the front row with his date, Brooke Shields, on his right and television's "Webster", little Emmanuel Lewis, on his left.

The shy and reclusive singer, who rarely makes public appearances, wore an old-fashioned, red and gold sequined commodore's uniform, plus a black glove on his right hand. Throughout the evening, he wore sunglasses.

"Billie Jean," one of the songs from "Thriller," was named Best Pop-Rock Single and "Beat It" from the same LP won for best Soul and Pop-Rock Video. Jackson also selected as Best Male Vocalist in both categories.

"I'm very thankful," Jackson said after accepting the first award. "I don't want to make a long speech. Thank you very much."

Jackson, whose singing career spans nearly two decades, took a bit longer in accepting later awards, taking time to thank the American public that voted for him, disc jockeys who played the album, producer Quincy Jones, the girls screaming in the balcony, his brothers and sisters and mother and father "for teaching me everything I know."

"There's nothing more I can say," he said after picking up the final award, "I love you very much, goodbye."

Michael Jackson holds up his fingers in victory sign as he holds up Emmanuel Lewis, star of "Webster" as Jackson won a total of seven awards with his album "Thriller" and stole the show at the Shrine Auditorium.

Alabama won three Country Awards, for Best Duo or Group, Best Album for "The Closer You Get" and Best Video for "Dixieland Delight".

But it lost out for Best Country Single to Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton with "Islands in the Stream". Barbara Mandrell was named Favorite Country Female Vocalist and Willie Nelson Favorite Male Vocalist.

The other Soul Winners were Gladys Knight & The Pips as Best Duo or Group and Aretha Franklin was Favorite Female Vocalist.

The other Pop-Rock Awards went to Daryl Hall & John Oates as Best Duo or Group and Pat Benatar as Favorite Female Vocalist. "I enjoy winning so much," Miss Benatar said, "Anybody who says they don't enjoy this is a liar".

The Awards, whose winners are determined by a poll of 30,000 record buyers, are a barometer for next months coveted Grammys, chosen by artists' peers in the music industry. Jackson has a record 12 Grammy nominations.

The show was highlighted by a tribute to Jackson, who also received a special Award of Merit honoring his career achievements. Diana Ross, his close friend and mentor since their days together at Motown, presented the award.

The tribute included a live medley of three Jackson hits — "Ben", "Never Can Say Goodbye" and "I'll Be There" — by Barry Manilow, who sang at Jackson's request, and taped appearances by Paul McCartney, Liza Minnelli, Jane Fonda and Yul Brynner.

Artists and records swept away in the Jackson onslaught included Richie, David Bowie, Billy Joel, Rick James and Prince in the vocalist categories; the albums "Flashdance", "Lionel Richie", "Synchronicity" by the Police, "Pyromania" by Def Leppard, "1999" by Prince and "Visions" by Gladys Knight & The Pips; and the videos "Tell Her About It" by Billy Joel and "She Works Hard For the Money" by Donna Summer.

Lionel Richie, winner for hit "All Night Long" is pictured with superstar Michael Jackson on stage as Richie picked up his award. "It was a wonderful night for Michael," said Richie.

Gladys Knight and the Pips sing their thanks backstage after they were named as Best Soul Duo or group at the American Music Awards.

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