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Agnus Dei: Who Takes Away The Sins Of The World?

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Agnus Dei: Who Takes Away The Sins Of The World?

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Theatre (Performance)

by

Meghan Rose Shea

B.S. Northwestern State University, 2005

May, 2016

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“But you can try, can’t you, to be good?” - Doctor

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The Playwright and The Story

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” – 2 Timothy 3:16 ESV

John Peilmeier is an elusive man. I found little information outside of his own, self-titled website and almost nothing of his parents or childhood. Born in Altoona, PA and raised Catholic, Peilmeier attended Catholic University and became successful as a working actor. For graduate school, he studied playwriting at Pennsylvania State and was recognized at the Eugene O’Neill National Playwriting conference for his work on *Agnes of God*, which won the 1979 Great American Play contest.

The play opened on Broadway in March of 1982 at The Music Box Theatre and played for 599 performances. He wrote many other plays, but *Agnes* is the only one that was critically acclaimed. When *Agnes* found success, he stopped acting and focused completely on writing. His last acting appearance was in Faerie Tale Theatre’s production of *Thumbalina* with Carrie Fisher. (I have always held a special place in my heart for Faerie Tale Theatre; it was a formative part of my childhood). Peilmeier is drawn to themes of destruction, resurrection, discipline, loss, and dogma. He writes of faerie tales, islands, and idealism, though not all of his work has landed. Like many writers, he falls into the trap of lofty ideals and poor execution.

Peilmeier went on to write the screenplay for *Agnes of God* and found success writing several other films like *Flowers for Algernon*, *The Memory Keeper’s Daughter*, and the 2007 version of *Sybil*, a character that closely mirrors Agnes. While Peilmeier became a prolific writer, none of his plays met with the acclaim of *Agnes*. *The Boys of Winter* opened on Broadway for only eight days, *Sleight of Hand* played for seven, and his last play to find success, *Voices in the Dark*, managed almost two months.

John now lives in Garrison, New York with his wife, though he always felt at home in Scotland and has always been drawn to islands. He loved Robert Lewis Stevenson, known for writing *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jeckle and Mr. Hyde*. Like *Sybil*, *Agnes* sometimes reads as a cloistered version of Dr. Jeckle, keeping their horrible secrets from a prying world.

Agnes of God's backstory in Peilmeier's words:

I had been writing for several years, not taking it seriously and supporting myself by my acting work, when I got an acting job at the 1977 Eugene O'Neill Playwrights' Conference. I was so swept away by the work done there that I returned to New York City determined to go back to the O'Neill as a playwright. I wrote a play which made the semi-finals but not the final cut for the summer of '78, and during that summer I did most of the initial work on Agnes. For a good while I had been looking for an idea upon which to hang a play about questions of faith – looking, essentially, for a plot clothesline. About a year earlier I had seen a headline in the Post or the News shouting “Nun Kills Baby!” I didn't read the actual story, but something like nine months later I woke up in the middle of the night with an “Aha!” moment. The title was obvious – a bad liturgical pun – and the cast was kept to a minimum because I felt small, simple plays worked best at the O'Neill. I wanted to challenge myself to write full, rich women's roles, and so the psychiatrist, who at first thought was a man, became a woman. I submitted the play to the O'Neill, as well as to Jon Jory at Actors Theatre of Louisville, where I had worked a lot as an actor.

On May 1, 1979, I got a call from my wife while I was visiting my sister in Florida

– I had received a telegram informing me that my play had been accepted for the 1979 O’Neill Conference. At that moment I knew my life had changed. The play was workshopped at the O’Neill (Dianne Weist played the title role) and subsequently received an amateur production in Kingston, Jamaica, a production I went to see a week after my father passed away in October. Jon Jory, in the meantime, accepted the play for the 1980 Humana Festival, where it premiered professionally. As a result of that production, the play received something like six regional productions the following year, although no New York producers saw it in Louisville.

The second of these regional productions, at Center Stage in Baltimore, was attended by many producers, and I was put in the enviable position of having to choose between six offers for a New York production. I chose correctly, and Ken Waissman produced the play, opening it at the Music Box Theatre on March 31, 1982. It received rather mixed reviews (I have never been a darling of the critics, to put it mildly) but word-of-mouth spread, and once Amanda Plummer won a Tony for her performance, its future was assured.

Peilmeier’s *Agnes of God* is uniquely relevant and relatively popular due in-part to the relatable dilemmas and opportunities afforded the actresses playing Mother Superior and Agnes. Even after 30 years, the tug-o-war between science and religion remains intractable.

The play ended with seemingly open questions, yet talking to audience members after the performance, nearly all seemed to assign their own definitive meanings. Unlike Shanley’s third act of *Doubt* where the audience is left uncertain: “What does she doubt, who is to blame,” the *Agnes* audience seemed to leave the theatre unencumbered. Peilmeier did not leave us with a mystery or even an existential question, but stoked the fires of beliefs instilled long ago. Many

asked: “How did she get pregnant,” as though, even after the words were spilled that she killed the child, the audience wanted to believe she was still partly innocent and the conception was immaculate. I think the main difference between Shanley’s *Doubt* and Peilmeier’s *Agnes of God* is the presence of miracles. While *Doubt* truly raised questions, challenging the audience to answer *Agnes* raised the questions and inadvertently answered them with the miracle of the stigmata.

Peilmeier cites the inspiration for his story as a news article, an origin story in many ways even more scandalous. Like Agnes, Maureen Murphy was also a nun and purportedly unable to remember her pregnancy or birth. She was 36 years old when she asphyxiated her baby, compared to Agnes’ 19. She was also a schoolteacher and was considered a highly intelligent person. Peilmeier’s Agnes is child-like, abused, and uneducated – certainly a more compelling protagonist. 1982 audiences would perhaps not soften to the idea of a 36-year-old educator asking them to believe she was pregnant with an angel’s child. Also, while Agnes asphyxiated her baby via umbilical cord, Maureen shoved underwear down the boy’s throat before placing him in the wastebasket, a key element that found her not guilty by reason of insanity (The Bryan Times – March 5 1977).

Peilmeier was not the only author to draw inspiration from this story of a nun’s infanticide. Catherine Breslin, a reporter covering the trial, wrote a novel based on the events surrounding the case of Maureen Murphy. In Breslin’s version of events, Maureen suffered from multiple personality disorder, a half-truth likely aimed at the heartstrings of the reader. She also insisted that Maureen had lost too much blood after the pregnancy and never intended to kill the baby. In an interview Breslin gave *New York* magazine, she alluded to knowing the father of the child: “He’s never been publically identified, and I hope he has gotten good and damn lost.” She

goes on to say, "I hope the book will force the church to confront the terrible torments that nuns suffer about their sexual identities," (New York magazine p.9). Breslin was harshly criticized by the church for investigating the matter. Her novel was titled *Unholy Child*.

The Women of Martha

“The saints had lovers” - Doctor

Amanda Plummer played Agnes on Broadway and won both the Drama Desk Award and the Tony Award for Best Supporting Actor for the role in 1982. Geraldine Page, Mother Miriam Ruth, was also nominated for the Tony that year. As someone who has invested so much time into the doctor, I am stung on behalf of Elizabeth Ashley who was not nominated for any awards. Alas, the voice of reason does not often get the pleasure of shining. Mother Miriam’s role is complex but clear in its purpose; her parameters and arc are easy to follow. The same goes for Agnes, her role beautifully written and structured. With good structure, it is easier for the actor to find their footing and excel. Martha’s character and place within the play is so complex, the audience does not know where to put her structurally. What is her role other than the arbiter of chaos?

While playing Martha, there were times when I felt I was in a strength competition. Straps on each arm being pulled in two directions at once, I crouched down to the floor, lowering my center of gravity to resist the pull, but there were far more than two directions to be pulled in. The actress grasps for answers without definite truths set by the writer or director. Perhaps this is why Elizabeth did not get the praise she deserved. There are too many hoops to jump through and the character is not as fleshed out as it could be. The format of film better handled the character of Martha. We could see where she lived, what her life was like, and it was able to paint a broader picture for the actress and audience.

While snubbed as Dr. Livingstone, Elizabeth Ashley won the Tony and the Theatre World Award for her role in *Take Her, She’s Mine* in 1962. In 1964 she was nominated for a Tony in the classic, *Barefoot in the Park*, and in 1975 she was nominated for a Tony and a

Drama Desk award for the unforgettable role of Maggie the Cat in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. She had studied acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse, proud home of the Meisner Technique. The University of New Orleans' own Department Chair of Film and Theatre, David Hoover had also directed Ashley.

According to the New York Times, Elizabeth Ashley was originally cast as Martha but was offered the movie, *Svengali*, with Peter O'Toole and left the production. Lee Remick replaced her for a trial run in Boston but just before the play opened on Broadway, Remick decided it was not for her. The New York Times insists the decision was mutual though filmreference.com suggests that "creative differences" forced the change. Ashley returned, but the ordeal cost the production, and the opening date was pushed back a week (a luxury I wish our production had been granted).

The Harvard Crimson was hard on Peilmeier's writing of Martha, expounding many of my own issues with the piece:

Despite the incomplete sketching of Dr. Livingstone's character, she has the honor of delivering the play's opening speech--which, laden with dreadfully kitschy symbolism, has the effect of striking a desperately false note. Such notes recur, though not at all frequently, and most are sounded by Dr. Livingstone. Her chain-smoking, which she explains as an obsession taken on when her mother died to replace her former obsession with that daunting figure, is unattractive, intrusive and psychologically simple-minded.

This validated feelings I had at the start of the process. I did not initially find it a defect of the writing, just that it was raw and my challenge was to overcome the simplicity of the

language and obviousness of the first monologue. Later, it felt so transparently manipulative, I didn't know how to breathe life into it.

The Harvard Crimson goes on to say:

Lee Remick, despite her experience and usual excellence, represents the weak link in the cast. Perhaps the role of Dr. Livingstone provides insufficient depth and variation for a good characterization. In any case, Remick's "scientific" composure seems more a lack of acting than a lack of warmth. Remick's performance improves as Dr. Livingstone's personal involvement with the case increases, but her mannerisms remain stylized, false and somehow jarringly over-bright.

The New York Times disagrees and praises the actors for working through the script's faults:

WHEN Elizabeth Ashley marches forward to give the opening speech in John Pielmeier's "Agnes of God," you instantly feel that you're in good hands. Miss Ashley wears a professional woman's no-nonsense suit, and there's no-nonsense authority in everything she does. Her eyes are ablaze; her voice snakes through the Music Box as insistently as the smoke of her cigarette; her monologue lays out Mr. Pielmeier's premise with brisk, eloquent efficiency.

One other notable actress to play Martha was Tony award winning Susan Strasberg, daughter of great acting coach, Lee Strasberg and actress Paula Strasberg. Susan was in the National Broadway tour, and while I could not find any articles on her performance, I am proud to have walked in her shoes, even a little.

Diving into Martha

“Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand.”

-Ephesians 6:14 ESV

I was raised half-Catholic. My mother, a bible-thumping Southern Baptist, and my father, a staunch Irish Catholic, could not agree on my relationship to God. By way of compromise, I was baptized in infancy by a Methodist minister uncle. Years later, I made the decision to get baptized in a Baptist church and was delivered to Catechism shortly thereafter. From then on, my parents were at war for my soul. They swapped Sundays – on the first and third Sundays of the month I was Catholic and on the second and fourth I was Baptist. By the age of eight, while other kids at school wanted to discuss My Little Ponies, I just wanted to know whether or not that little cracker was the *actual* body of Christ. Ultimately, *more* was not merrier in my mind, and I had been driven definitively agnostic. From there, I found more truth and fellowship in the theatre than in any statue or steeple.

My faiths, both gained and lost at the peril of familial harmony, helped me understand Martha and her complex relation to faith. It is difficult for me to separate the character from myself, a state *The Practical Handbook for the Actor* refers to as “The Myth of the Character.” (Bruder p.74) When onstage, an actor cannot be someone else. They can add superficial characteristics like a limp, an accent, or a cigarette; but at the core, the individual does not change. Coming to terms with Martha’s realities within myself was an essential part of my creation. Fortunately, we shared many likenesses.

Martha fought for truth, playing the voice of reason. Her role and arc within the play were not as extreme as the other two characters, a flaw that left a lot of grey area for the actress

to fill. So I used what I knew best: my own life and experiences. When working on a character, an actor has to use what they already are. In many ways, this means exploring aspects about oneself that they have not felt comfortable delving into before. The theatre is a collaborative craft. The individuals we work with are as much a part of the experience as the text.

What we think of as “character” is nothing more than the combination of the script, our instincts, and ourselves. I am a huge believer in simplicity and trusting the script. Honestly, I did not recognize the weaknesses of *Agnes* until I began the reflection period. We can be trained to analyze a script, we can be trained to better utilize the body and voice, but where many actors fail is in the training of the instincts.

In my career as an actor and teacher I have extensively studied Meisner, Viola Spolin, and Linklater. Each approach is based off the same idea of getting out of the head and into the body. Again and again these teachers make a point of reminding the actor to “stop thinking and start doing.” Meisner says, “If you’re really doing it, then you don’t have time to watch yourself doing it, you only have the time and energy to do it,” (Meisner p. 24). The goal should be to work and train our bodies and our minds to the point that by the time we walk out on stage we are exactors of our craft. Of course, it feels better to perform with confidence in our abilities but really, how else are we to better serve the other players, the story, and the audience? Mastering our instincts puts the audience at ease, allowing them to relax and enjoy the full experience of the theatre. As Spolin so eloquently put it, “Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information, and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with reality, and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves

function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression," (Spolin p. 4).

Kirsten Linklater adds that, "The mind is reluctant to embrace deep change and will play devious games to maintain the status quo," (Linklater 59). One of the biggest struggles of this piece was maintaining artistic integrity. By that I mean going to war with my own lingering status quo. So many times when I faced struggles in this process I thought to myself, "I just have to live until it's over," – negating all the work I had put into this project up until that point and then all the work I poured in prior to that. All of it, down the toilet. So many of my journal entries ended in: "well, I lived," as if this project had the power to kill me. I fought the status quo daily while working on *Agnes*, many times resulting in tears and self-doubt.

Basically, it all comes down to trusting the self and training actors to follow their instincts no matter what. Allowing ourselves to step out of social expectations and into the reality of being human. It is Meisner's belief that "talent comes from instinct," and I completely agree. Before I end my quoting spree, I'd like to add one more quote that influenced my experience: "It is highly possible that what is called 'talented behavior' is simply a greater individual capacity for experiencing. From this point of view, it is in the increasing of the individual capacity for experiencing that the untold potentiality of a personality can be evoked," (Spolin p. 3).

'The individual capacity for experiencing' – I love that. How many times in our lives have we allowed ourselves to fully experience anything? I'd like to be clear that I'm not citing quotes I've copied off the Internet for the interest of this paper. These are things I believe and use as the basis of my own acting and personal teaching philosophy. I truly believe that if an individual wants to become a better actor they must go through the fires of training that

challenge the instincts. The basic premise of Spolin work is to stop acting and start playing. Meisner similarly instructs us to stop acting and focus on the “reality of doing.”

Agnes was an incredibly atypical experience for me. I began the process with an open heart and mind. I did not plan to use any approach or method so completely but when I began to feel so challenged within the project that my foundation began to shake, I pulled out all the tools I could, gladly employing an arsenal to overcome my demons. These are the principals I constantly reminded myself of: To trust my instincts, to do my homework, to “not do anything until something happened to make me do it” (Meisner p. 34), and to breathe.

With the goal of trusting my instincts, I joyfully look back on my time working on improvisation. There is a great freedom found in improvisation, the giddiness of zero consequences and being a kid again. I am not singularly referring to the kind of improv found in sports comedy or “Whose Line is it Anyway,” but also the improv explored by working within the parameters given under any circumstance. The only thing more boring than watching a scene that is without “in the moment” acting is being in one. This is the uninspired “deadly” theatre Peter Brook speaks of in his book, *The Empty Space*. It is this improv that flexes the muscles of organic inspiration and trains the instinct. Truly honest moments in life are hard to come by and like the theatre evangelist I am, I believe this is why the theatre is relevant today. The writing of Chekhov or Shakespeare is brought into the now by the contemporary souls presenting it. We don’t have to add or expand anything to make it relevant. It is the actors that make a 2016 production of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, or Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* current.

Capturing an honest moment on stage or in life is as sweet as not spilling a beer when the carrier has fallen (because, priorities), or catching your keys with one hand in the air after

they fall off a desk. It is in these moments where we feel alive, adept, and ready to conquer the world.

I have worked with actors before who refuse to work outside of organic acting. Actors who have told directors where they could shove their directing, and I find this outside of the spirit of what Spolin and Meisner intended. This is a collaborative craft and we have directors for a reason. Even if we do not trust our directors it is our job to make the given direction and blocking work. We all have bosses to with and parameters to work within. In fact, it is in these confines that we do greater work.

Throughout the process of *Agnes of God* I relied heavily on my training, partly because I was challenged to define my process and partly because I found *Agnes* to be an atypical theatre experience that resulted in emotions running amuck. My goals shifted from discovering moments within the script with my partner to “avoiding emotional outbursts.” Challenging myself to find order out of the chaos. The training helped here, Spolin physically instructing me to “get out of the head and into my body” and Meisner quietly reminding me that I can only work off what my partner is giving me and within that there is a world of possibilities.

Throughout the process of *Agnes* I employed a Linklater warm up prior to every rehearsal and performance. There were times when it lasted only five minutes and others when I needed closer to 30. I enjoyed getting to the theatre hours before most and the graduate assistant’s office supplied a natural space for this where I spread my yoga mat and enjoyed the quiet. I knew the warm up well enough to modify it to my needs. For instance, there is an exercise where one shakes the body on an “ah” sound. It’s very simple but invigorating nonetheless. If I felt like my sinuses needed extra attention I would pay attention to that and spend more time there. I find simplicity is key for me when I commit to warming up. I won’t do it if it gets too complicated.

Because the role of Martha was so physically and emotionally demanding, I had to take time and pay my body and mind respect. When warming up I always check in with my mind and assess where I am, how focused I am, etc. I then check in with my body. My lower back tends to be a menace at times so it consistently needs stretching out and a extra love. The last thing I check in on is my breath and I spend the most time there. In the event of extreme stress, I do not breathe as deeply, my inhalations and exhalations shorten and my mind spins out of control. I am less aware of my surroundings or what my body is doing. Deep breathing engages the core and the center of my being. As an actor, the body is the only tool I have and if it gets out of whack, everything else will follow. I found the role of Martha to be incredibly physically demanding. She is a doctor and maintains excellent posture. There were times in the rehearsal period at the end of four hours on my feet that my body begged to give up Martha's posture and presence.

Although the bulk of my training is specifically Meisner and Spolin, I would not classify myself as either of those "types" of actors. I am the sum of my training but I also studied musical theatre for four years, where I learned tap, jazz, ballet, Alexander, Laban, Shakespeare, viewpoints, as well as classical chamber music with a strong foundation in Linklater. In my graduate experience I have explored Stella Adler, more viewpoints, Suzuki and more Shakespeare. Different tools are needed to work on different types of projects and with different personalities; thankfully my toolbox is large. I truly believe that this training is what held my hand through the lonely process of finding Martha. Technique is there for when inspiration fails us. Many of those who have gone before us have poured their lives into defining what acting is and how to go about it, but it is a craft like any other. There are tools we can use or discard, and then there are artists who don't use tools we consider to be standard. There is the man who makes unarguably beautiful paintings only using his feet, because it is the only thing he has. I

am as grateful for my training as I am for my hands. I do not believe there will ever be a day when I am done seeking out new ways to approach my craft. My approach is the armor I wear when I go into battle; the more challenging the situation, the more I put on.

Martha and the Nuns

Prayer to Saint Martha

Novena Prayer to St. Martha

*O glorious Saint Martha,
I have recourse to your protection and aid
And as proof of my affection and faith I promise faithfully to complete this novena.
Comfort me in my difficulties
And intercede for my family
With your intimate friend, our savior,
That we may always hold God in our hearts
And be provided for in our necessities.
I beg your supplications,
Especially in behalf of the favor and I ask of you in this novena.
(Mention your request)
I ask you, Saint Martha,
By your intercession to help me
In overcoming all my difficulties
And teach me to become great
In the Kingdom of Heaven
By becoming as humble as you
In this world.
Amen*

Dr. Martha Livingstone is detached and obsessive. Wary and audacious, flippant and professional, Martha is all over the map. Peilmeier was certainly thoughtful in naming her. She is referenced in the Bible in the books Luke and John. Mary of Bethany and Lazarus, the guy Jesus raised from the dead, were her siblings. To clarify, there are a few Mary's in the New Testament and Mary of Bethany, in many traditions, is considered to be Mary Magdalene, but in others is thought of as an entirely different Mary. In any case I should clarify that Martha is not Jesus's aunt – an idea I briefly entertained and got excited about. Martha witnessed both Lazarus's and Jesus's resurrection. Martha was thought to be a friend of Jesus and was venerated as a saint. She is the patron saint of housewives and domestic workers. The Martha of

the Bible was someone you'd go to if you wanted action to be taken; she was a doer, defender, and mother of all who entered her home.

I loved reading about biblical Martha; once venerated, her character was clear and concise. She was faithful to Jesus to the end and died of natural causes. Martha Livingstone, my character, was all over the place and to define her would be to put her in a box, only to take her out in the next scene. An idea that makes the actor in me squeal with exaltation and the storyteller in me shake my head and demand more clarity and specifics. I found her character to be foggier and less connected (than Martha of the Bible). Perhaps that's why the other one became a saint.

From the top of the play, we see Dr. Martha Livingstone calm, cool, collected. Sharing a personal story with the audience, she explains that once upon a time she believed in happy endings and while she still held on to the slightest glimmer of hope, life has proven otherwise. She swiftly moves into action recounting her story of Agnes. As the play moves on, we find out that she distrusts nuns, has taken up chain smoking, and once entertained the love of a wildly romantic Frenchman, Maurice. The relationship ended because she got pregnant and "didn't exactly see myself as well... as my mother." This is Martha's all too vulnerable passing confession of an abortion. It is my belief that Maurice was her first and only love. I see Martha as much too sensitive and careful a soul to throw caution to the wind anytime a man showed interest. She is far from careless. She refers to her own mother as an obsession and in a monologue confesses to arguing with her over religion and the existence of God. We also learn about Martha's sister who "decided she had a vocation to the convent" and ultimately died by the hand of her Mother Superior's negligence. This loss weighs heavily on Martha and is ultimately

what drives her to get to the bottom of Agnes's case. I like to think of Martha's journey as one of redemption. She could not help her sister but was determined to help this girl.

Martha has no secrets in the play. It is not a far stretch of the imagination that Martha, like many in her field, sought out psychiatry to sort out her own familial woes. The following are things we know about Martha's childhood: she watched the movie *Camille* several times and hoped for an alternate ending; her mother allowed her sister to go to a convent at the age of 15; her sister died at that convent; her mother, a Catholic, got sick and died but not before Martha aborted a pregnancy she experienced with Maurice, her fanciful French ex-lover. Here is where we fall short of information on Martha: Martha never leaves the stage; outside of Martha's accounts of herself, the other characters do not talk about her; her conversations with Agnes are less back and forth and more inquisitorial, while Mother Superior's conversations with Martha are focused more on the existential – science vs. religion, and Agnes' situation. By the end of the first act Martha has been completely drawn into the case and is determined to seek acquittal for Agnes. The order and coolness the audience sees in her has melted away and she is on the verge of madness.

One of the challenges of playing Martha is in the exploration of why she chooses to stay on the case. In the first monologue she says, "Her case was assigned to me, Dr. Martha Livingstone, as court psychiatrist, to determine whether she was legally sane." Due to her past with nuns, the loss of a best friend and a sister to nuns, I felt Martha's conflict of interest to be at odds with the case and wondered why she did not recuse herself. I justified her actions by using the same reasons to reflect that Martha is the exact person for this case. My questions remained though. What did it mean to be considered fit for trial? To be sane? I contacted a local psychiatrist, whom I trusted. Dr. Michael Walsh says:

In LA, competency to stand trial is done by two psychiatrists or by a psychiatrist and a psychologist. They basically assess two key components – does the individual understand the charge against him/her (or the proceedings against him/her) and can the individual assist his/her legal team in his/her defense. This assessment is usually done by reviewing old records, interviewing the defendant, and gathering collateral information. Each examiner is basically assessing whether the defendant is acutely psychotic or is severely depressed/manic. Psychosis and severe mood symptoms can impact one's ability to assist counsel. By looking at several sources of information about the defendant – each examiner is better able to see his/her level of functioning and illness. The examiners also look for evidence of malingering.

In LA, the two examining doctors are called a 'Sanity Commission' and will present their findings to a judge who makes the final determination regarding fitness to stand trial.

In regards to specific symptoms suggesting a psychotic or mood disorder, you can google psychotic symptoms – depression symptoms – manic symptoms. Sanity has many definitions – legal, personal, psychological, ... I am not sure if I am very sane ;).

I found it fascinating that ultimately the matter of Agnes' sanity was completely in the hands of Martha. Her lone opinion stood between Agnes and her fate. By the top of the second act, Martha – the defender of domestic woes – is in full force. Her disposition reached mania and we see her collecting herself in preparation for Agnes's hypnosis. She is in full-fledged mother-doctor mode collecting all the information circling the circumstances of the pregnancy she can. She is determined to get to the bottom of the mystery and the only thing that can stop her at this point is Agnes herself. After the first session with Agnes, her suspicions about Mother's involvement are all but confirmed. Martha has allowed herself to be so taken by Agnes and her story that she believes that Mother has killed the child. By the end of Act II scene ii, Martha has unraveled. It is at this time that Mother tells Martha that a miracle has occurred: "Oh, and as for that miracle you wanted, it has happened. It's a very small one but you'll notice it soon enough." Martha is reeling from her most recent battle with Mother. She launches into her monologue that speaks of a dream she had had of a baby and when she woke up her menstrual cycle, that had stopped years ago, had returned. The hope that Martha experiences at

the mere *idea* of becoming a mother is crippling to her, softening her hardened heart. In the following and last scene she greets Agnes as she would her own child. With the final hypnotism at hand, she is more determined than ever to save her sweet soul. It is then that Agnes breaks and confesses to an angel entering her room and laying on top of her; and when she had the baby, soaked in blood, she strangled it hoping to save it from the pain of the world. In Martha's final moments of the play, she admits to believing in miracles again and hoping that Agnes is a part of her. But she also asks the audience, "What kind of God would allow such a wonder as her to face the pain of our well-ordered existence?" So we are left with the question: Is Martha saved? We know she is menstruating again and that she has stopped smoking, so there has to be some hope for a future for her. Then again, she poured her soul into this girl with hopes of saving her and lost her, just like her best friend in the first grade, and her sister, and her mother.

Martha is fueled by her desire for a miracle in a world that has proven to her time and again there are no miracles. In her first monologue, she declares her need for happy endings and by the end of the play, she is granted something greater – a miracle, surrounded by the reality of disturbing circumstances – but hope for the future nonetheless.

Mother Miriam Ruth

But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you. (Ruth 1:16-17, ESV)

I titled Act I scene viii “Earthquakes and Visitors,” a defining moment of Mother Superior and Martha’s conflict within the play. Martha is asking Mother what she can remember about the possible night of conception and Mother is confused by what she means.

Martha: You don’t remember anything unusual happening at the convent around that time?

Mother: Earthquakes?

Martha: Visitors.

This nugget of dialogue captures where the two stand in their ideology. Mother searches for explanation in a God (natural) event while Martha looks at the event as wholly man made.

Miriam Ruth embraced civilian life, but the inevitable failures involved with being human broke her soul and eventually she was reborn as a nun. Life was not kind to Miriam. She had an unhappy marriage and children who did not appreciate her; perhaps, she did not appreciate them. The church offered her formality, order, and purpose. Her job was clearly defined as Mother Superior and the world became more black and white.

Martha’s relationship with Mother Superior is tenuous from the start. It doesn’t help that Martha has a colorful past with nuns. But Mother is immediately protective of Agnes, sparking Martha’s suspicion of the whole situation. Mother takes on many roles within the play. For Martha she vacillates from mother, to sister, to confidant, to friend, to enemy. At times, as in

Act I scene x, she plays all roles in one scene. In our production, Mother was fierce and biting; grasping on to Agnes like a mother bear, and Martha has entered the den.

Mother wanted to stay in the dream of miracles. In a way, she and Martha wanted the same thing but in different ways – like any good protagonist-antagonist relationship. If Martha had been able to talk to Agnes without having to deal with Mother, there would have been no story. The story is the Mother-Martha duel dynamic punctuated and lightened by the appearances of Agnes. They both want the best for Agnes but have wildly different ideas about what “best” means. For Mother, it is for Agnes to spend the rest of her years in the safety and confines of the convent. For Martha, it’s a bit more difficult. There are times when I felt Martha wanted Agnes to go home with her so she could educate her and spoil her like the child she never had, and other times Martha just wanted her to be free in whatever way that meant.

These women matched wits in many ways and dueled through every scene they had together. The scenes between them played like a rollercoaster of emotions. As the play progressed, Martha opened up to her more, almost treating her as a confessor at times. She confessed to Mother about her friend that died in grade school, her addiction to smoking, and her hatred of nuns. Mother is the antagonist of the play but is also the mama bear and moral compass of each character.

Mother had her secrets, thoughtfully released throughout the play. The audience learns in her first scene that she was a smoker, a sign that she had given in to desire at some assumingly weak point in her life. In Act I scene x we learn she had a family. One of the heavier secrets Mother kept from Martha was that she is Agnes’s aunt. Her sister was Agnes’s abuser. She is ashamed of her sister’s actions and fears what it might mean for her. When I first read the play, I wondered why she kept this information from Martha. Was she ashamed? Did she ultimately

feel responsible? While these questions are not really answered in the play, we do know when this secret was exposed Martha had more reason than ever to be suspicious of her involvement.

Martha goes through hell in this play but I believe, her lowest point is when Mother says:

Mother: “We need people like you to destroy all those lies that ignorant folk like myself pretend to believe.

Martha: Mother...

Mother: But I’ll never forgive you for what you’ve taken away. (*silence*) You should have died. Not your sister. You.

Here, Mother and Martha part ways. Mother does not slightly allude to anything in this line; she slowly and purposefully indicts Martha for destroying her purpose for living. There were moments in the play that one might have felt these two could have been friends, could have made amends after the case was settled. Mother could have been Martha’s spiritual confidant and maternal figure, and Martha could have played surrogate daughter; but in this moment, with Martha pleading, all hope for their continued relationship was lost.

Miriam Ruth was Mother’s birth name. I imagine Peilmeier had fun with this one as he combined two of the strongest women in the Bible. Miriam was Moses’s older sister known for leading the women’s exodus out of Egypt. She is the one who saved Moses’s life from Herrod, her father, when Moses’s mother sent him down the river in a basket. It was Miriam who took pity on him, went against her own father, and raised him as her own. Ruth has her own book in the Bible. She is known for her steadfast love and kindness to her step-mother, Naomi. Ruth rehabilitated Naomi, when she was broken, alone, and financially desperate in a culture that was far from her own. The vows that Ruth made to Naomi are the vows used in many Christian weddings today.

Both Miriam and Ruth's stories are in line with Mother's character in *Agnes of God*. They are strong females, desperately fighting for their own truth, committed to their sisters in Christ in life and death.

Agnes

“Not devine, just a child, without benefit of a man” - Mother

Agnes’s presence is felt palpably throughout play, her angelic voice coloring scenes with effortless grace. Floating in and out of scenes, Agnes’s character is static throughout the piece. That is not to say she is without depth but in the eeriest of ways, the title character – around whom the story circles – does not change, or grow, or learn anything. But this is why we love her. Agnes is unchanged by the outside world in a way the audience wishes to be. Her childlike curiosity, playfulness, and freedom cry are qualities we wish we were all free to express. She is quick to laughter and anger, striking a chord with the audience and proving she is “special.” When she refuses to remember her pregnancy, the conception, or the birth, the audience is left scratching their heads. Whether her actions and words are viewed as innocent or manipulation, she is not the character on the journey.

“But she’s not an enigma. Everything that Agnes has done is explainable by modern psychiatry. She’s a hysteric. She was molested as a child. She had no father, an alcoholic mother, she was locked in a house until she was seventeen and in a convent until she was twenty-one. One two three, right down the line.” – Doctor

I remember at the very first read-through, every time I spoke to Agnes I softened my voice. I did not plan this, it was just my natural reaction to her. Agnes, as written, has a disarming quality about her. Martha’s relationship with Agnes was the backbone of the play. If Mother Superior was Martha’s foil and antagonist, saving Agnes is what drove Martha to the end. Agnes was both Martha’s hope for the future and (her destruction). For Martha, Agnes was the sister she had lost, the best friend she had lost, and the daughter she never had.

I have two favorite moments of the show. The first is when Agnes appears in Act I scene vii. The dialogue flows from Martha's monologue where she's speaking about being entranced by Agnes. There is a beat and she calls out for Marie. Immediately Agnes answers. I enjoyed that moment as an actor of flawless transition from one moment to another. Every single rehearsal and performance, I turned around and saw her for the first time. It was always a fresh discovery. This moment was a beautiful melding of what I, Meghan the performer, was experiencing and what I felt Martha experienced every time she would get lost in her thoughts and obsessions, and then get snapped back into reality by Agnes. The two became one.

My other favorite moment in the show is when those two things aligned again – Meghan the actress and Martha the character. Agnes's entrance at the top of Act II scene iv was moving for me every night. It is the moment after Martha has made the revelation that there *is* hope for her future and she is so grateful for Agnes's part in her journey. Now she is determined to settle the case once and for all. By this moment in the scene, Martha has had her final standoff with Mother who had Martha removed from the case. This was the longest period of time where Agnes was kept from Martha since they met. I imagined this separation as hurtful to Martha, emotionally and physically, just as a mother would hurt if she had been separated from her child. As an actor, I was thoroughly exhausted by this time in the play. My feet hurt, and my lower back throbbed. Adrenaline had always proven to mask physical pain, but by the end of Act II, it had worn off. I believe Martha would have been in a similar place at this point. The loss of sleep over her obsession with healing Agnes drove her weary but she pushed on. The moment when Agnes enters and is excited to see her, as a child would her real mother, tore my heart every night. Agnes' eyes, full of happy tears and expectations – Martha knew the end was near.

*Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.
Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.*

Lamb of God, you who take away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

Etched into my brain forever, I remember this liturgical chant from my childhood of half Catholicism. The breaking of the Eucharist always follows the chant as the priest says, “Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb.”

Mother and Martha were the only two called to the supper of Agnes. Blessed are these characters that sacrificed a child. They both did, in their own way. Mother tried to protect her by keeping secret the fact that she was her aunt and she knew Agnes was pregnant, and when the baby was born it was she who left her alone with it. Martha did not leave the scene without doing her own damage. For some, trauma is best left alone and not revisited. Agnes was not equipped to deal with the pain of her past but Martha, a doctor who could see she was inept to heal, forced her to face it anyway. Agnes does not come to terms with her madness in the end, she is driven further into it, and that is Martha’s great sin.

St. Agnes was known as the patron saint of young girls, rape survivors, and the Children of Mary. She died a virgin martyr and is symbolized by the lamb.

Journal

“The hypnosis took weeks to achieve, not minutes, an hour a day, spaced in between a kleptomaniac and an exhibitionist. Between lunch and dinner. Between Phil Donahue and Dan Rather. Between sleepless nights. Endless weekends. But my memories, oh they come too easily. Sometimes they won’t even let me finish a sentence. They come galloping out, mid-thought. I know if only I could finish the thought they would...” -Doctor

I found out I would be playing the role of Dr. Martha Livingstone in late July of 2015. The Production was set to open November 4th in the UNO Lab Theatre. Upon learning I would play Martha, I felt exhilarated to have a thorough challenge, a true thesis project, a part that would require my whole being. That moment passed swiftly and absolute fear and terror rushed through me for the same reasons. Martha doesn’t leave the stage. Between most scenes she directly addresses the audience, a task I assessed would be wildly difficult for many reasons. First of all, it demands a trust in the audience, a weakness of mine. Also, the Lab Theatre, a space small enough for the audience to be aware: aware if I went up, aware if I broke character, aware if I wasn’t a natural born smoker, basically... anything that happened to me would be seen by the audience and I’ve already cleared up how much I trusted them, right? In larger theatres there is room, a space between the actor and the audience, separating them from beads of sweat and make-up tricks that make the eyes appear larger. This is not the case in the Lab. Every breath, hesitation, and exhale would be a shared experience between the audience and myself.

The story was wildly interesting to me. I love psychology and religious dogma, particularly Catholicism in all of its ritualism and darkness. I was drawn to the fact that it was based on a true story. I briefly noted that Peilmeier did not have any other plays still being produced, but I felt *Agnes* was his Magnum Opus.

I was thrilled to work with director, Beau Bratcher. Impressed by some of his recent work, I could not wait to get to work with him myself. I had been told by friends that he was a demanding director that accomplished beautiful work. I couldn't wait to get started.

My goal for the piece was to work on my relationship with the audience both as Meghan the actor as well as Martha the character.

The Cast

Dr. Martha Livingstone.....Meghan Shea
Mother Miriam Ruth.....Vinita Matthews
Agnes.....Natalie Collins

The Team

Director.....Beau Bratcher
Assistant Director.....Jenny Billot
Stage Manager.....Samantha Eroche
Assistant Stage Manager.....Julia Ann Harris
Set Design.....Kevin Griffith
Lighting Design.....Mitchell Courville
Costume Design.....Anthony French

***** Note *****

I took handwritten notes in a notebook during rehearsal and typed them up every night after rehearsal adding reflections and thoughts (almost completely stream of consciousness). I stayed true to my thoughts and feelings as experienced. The thoughts are in no way “right” or even “wrong” – the words written are merely an honest depiction of what I was going through in

the given moment. I'd like to note that this was a singularly unique experience, not typical of my normal rehearsal process. Because of this difference, I learned a great deal. I was fully out of my comfort zone. In the following pages the reader will see the wrath of my self-doubt and ego as well as the battle I faced.

First read-through:

Read-throughs are a time to hear the different voices in the roles and to allow the design concepts to sink into the brain. On this night we listened to the director's vision for the piece. I wasn't sure how it would come to fruition, but that was not my job. It sounded beautiful: drapes of fabric hanging from the ceiling, silhouettes, a bare stage, the idea that everything was happening in the director's mind.

*** Two days after the read-through, the director quit. I was looking forward to working with him, so this was a disappointing blow to myself and everyone involved. I respect the director and had spent the last two days wrapped in hope and excitement to get started. I have a personal anti-quitting rule and because of this, my initial reactions were raw. The theatre is such a time sensitive and personal craft – quitting disturbs the flow and destroys the trust. The role of director as commander and chief, leader, and protector had been compromised. My rational side was positive he had strong, justified reasons, but my whole self is not rational. We had all come together and readied our hearts and minds for the project, the play was greater than us all, and our leader had bailed before we started. Eventually, he decided to return to the show and set the start date for rehearsals a week behind our original start. This resulted in broken trust and a week less of rehearsal time for the already daunting task at hand, *Agnes of God*.

Rehearsal One, Sunday October 4, 2015:

Though morale had been crushed, I hopped back on the horse for day one. The idea of this being my thesis had begun to weigh on me in the days approaching, and I was concerned that I would treat this production differently and thus squash or step on things that had helped me succeed in the past. Alas, like Schrodinger's cat; the mere thought of observing my craft, a thing so precious to me, would change it. Perhaps this was for the better, or perhaps I would get stuck in my head and produce shoddy work that was unconnected and far from truthful. Nonetheless I was aware of pressures involved with this not only being a play I was committing to but also the all-defining *thesis*.

An asset I pride myself in is the ability to walk in to new productions wide-eyed, like a first grader on the way to school, simultaneously believing “I’m a big girl now!” and “everything is new and terrifying.” This is a quality I love about my work and is still present after participating in theatre for nearly 20 years.

As we began, I felt immediately behind and simultaneously exhilarated. Once the director got going I felt like I was watching a Nascar race. He seemed open and organic, but I was quickly astounded that for every other line of dialogue I had some sort of blocking or piece of business. This would certainly not be a boring *Agnes*. The pressure I felt perhaps stemmed from his tendency to physically spin around the actor on stage while giving them direction. I was not actually doing all of the blocking. I was just standing there attempting to note what he was saying. We would fly through pages and then I’d get to do it once. The first order of business after this rehearsal was to reprint my script in a much larger font. For the first time in my career as an actor, there was not enough room on the page for me to notate all of my direction.

I quickly became overwhelmed and when we ran through it all, I asked him to walk through some of the blocking/business with me, which he kindly obliged to do. Then he said,

“Take your time.” I took a breath and began. The first time through the first two scenes I stumbled on some words, nervously. I hadn’t quite found my footing in the rehearsal. He seemed to want a “performance” of sort in order to sell him or prove to him I could execute the blocking given. That’s how I felt – I’m sure he just wanted to see if his ideas properly fleshed out. It was demanding for a first rehearsal. I am used to directors easing in cautiously and carefully. Walking away, I thought I had an idea of what he wanted the scene to look like, but I felt I was far from achieving it. Usually, in rehearsals I am able to easily spit out what I’ve just learned, like in dance rehearsals when I was younger. A dancer could begin a dance, giving me a count every now and then, and I was adeptly able to regurgitate it back without hesitation but as the dance progressed in difficulty and rhythm, I would find myself overwhelmed. We worked at such a speed today I felt a hair behind the whole time. In many ways, I loved it. I hope I continue to love it. I can see myself and my temperament eventually feeling defeated by this method – less defeated by external pressure than by internal. In order to maintain motivation, I know I need to feel like I have succeeded in small ways as I continue to progress. As a character that stays on stage the whole play, there are no breaks. Best keep reminding myself to breathe. Tomorrow morning I’ll start my second day of meditations. I hope they can help me keep my head above water.

I cannot go much further without bringing up or explaining a past challenge with the actress playing the Mother. In the three years I have known her, I have found her to be a difficult person to understand. In all honesty, I was nervous to begin this journey with her, but I also felt there was potential for great chemistry between us.

A specific behavior of hers that I have felt distracting is the need to repeat each line several times with different line readings until she gets them “right,” sometimes seven or eight

times. This is a unique approach I had never seen before. She is fearless to say the line out loud, stopping rehearsal to get the line right and asking the director if she's doing it right. I had been taught "line readings" are not acting; however, this method seems to give her confidence and is a great example of the idea that rules are there to be broken. On the other hand, I find that any time we have to stop, for any reason, I am taken out of the story. It is difficult to do a scene, finding the flow and pacing when the ball gets lost on the other side of the ping-pong table.

Director's Notes:

- The play takes place in the doctor's (Martha) mind. Both Agnes and The Mother Superior will be on stage behind gauzy fabric haunting me the entire show.
- There will be a 2nd Agnes like character who will be used as "Marie" when I'm on stage or about to be on stage with Agnes.
- Kind of like "back to the future"... I keep getting pulled back into my mind by the other characters. Observe a beat of discombobulation between.
- The doctor would have recused herself from the case after first meeting for two reasons. First, the conflict of interest involving Marie. Second, the conflict of interest involving my own infertility.
- A question: "Why do I stay?"
- Marie is the inciting incident for us all.
- The order of Nuns is the "Sisters of Joseph" they are not called nuns but they are nuns for all intents and purposes. Not sure why. I guess I'll look into that. It is an offshoot of the order from the true story. Same but different.
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sisters_of_St._Joseph

- The woman portrayed in the play by Agnes. The “real” woman from the real story was a 37 years old, teacher, and extremely smart and capable. The impregnation happened at a teacher’s conference. She was acquitted. Found not guilty by reason of insanity.
- This happened in 1976. The trial took place in 1977.
- Her name was Maureen Murphy.
- In the actual case, there was concern over whether the judge could be objective because he was Jewish.
- The actual convent was Our Lady of Lourdes.
- In the true story the sanity was questioned partly by how they found the baby. She shoved her underwear down the baby’s throat.
- I must find the balance between being thrown off my guard and being a knowledgeable psychiatrist.
- Find moments when thrown off and where I can hop back on my horse.
- It must be clear to me that I never wanted this case for personal reasons.
- What is the lynching mob? She is fighting for objectivity
- I must fight my past to find some objectivity here.
- The laugh at “she died of appendicitis” must come from a place of anger. I’m still angry and hurting from Marie’s death. Venom behind that line.
- How old was I when Marie went away?
- What was my relationship to Marie?
- What was my relationship to my mother after Marie passed?
- How long was Marie at convent before she died?

- I keep putting a question mark behind spotless floors... my god what a metaphor for their minds. Why?
- When I say, “Just hearing her voice”... what would I say if she didn’t interrupt me?
- What’s my goal with the first encounter?
- Beau: on my suggestion of distance and coldness at the top: If I don’t get too close I can maintain objectivity. But Agnes brings me in and I’m hooked when she mentions Marie.
- She baits me by bringing up the baby.
- Personal belief: everything happens for a reason.
- Marie goes to people and offers them comfort. Marie sends Agnes to me ... to get to me.
- How long has Martha not been menstruating?
- How she deals with the loss of menstruation is a clue as to how long it takes her to process things. And is part of the objectivity fight.
- Agnes brings up me having children. When she does that snaps coldness back in to me.

Personal Notes: Overwhelmed. Fascinated and challenged by the onslaught of questions raised by the director. Working to get off-book for scenes ahead. Hoping to be as open and receptive to my scene partners as I can be. Hoping for clarity in my work.

Rehearsal 2, Monday October 5, 2015

Rehearsal Cancelled.

Rehearsal 3, Tuesday October 6, 2015

My goal was to suss out the blocking. The job of learning blocking is taking what the director gives and bringing life to it. This will be my goal for the next two nights.

Rehearsal ran from the full four hours and was emotionally exhausting. Mother, didn't show up till about 9:00 p.m. The lateness was frustrating and by frustrating I really mean intolerable. Instead of blocking the scenes on the schedule, we wound up reviewing scenes from the night before and working them quickly and intensely. Martha is demanding, and I need emotional prep to work certain scenes. I think of myself as a flexible actor, but I prefer to work by a schedule. I like to know what is coming next, what'll be worked next, if not for any other reason than to be prepared. By 9:00 p.m. my energy was down. Martha is constantly driving the action forward and moving from standing to kneeling to moving furniture. Also, as a doctor, I imagine she moves with great ease and has excellent posture. Holding it all together for the duration of rehearsal was a job in and of itself.

When Mother Superior finally arrived, we hastily blocked in rapid fire two of the three scenes planned for that night. We didn't accomplish all we intended, but at least we got a good chunk blocked.

My challenge at the moment is absorbing all the director throws our way. The top of the show was re-blocked tonight. I like the new direction. Before I was entering from the audience door, an idea that left me slightly anxious due to thoughts like, "What if someone is running late?" "Will I be able to sneak by them?" I am now entering from down stage right, a direction change that puts me in a safer place pre-show.

I am wrapping my head around these scenes and the movement between them. The director and I discussed the idea that Martha had already lived the scenes and that in his vision of the play, I was stuck in this place in my mind and re-living the memories over and over. That

kind of blew my mind for the night. How do you play that? Knowing how the scene will end? Do I change them every time, just a little, like the way memory works? Does it evolve and change with each remembrance?

Our Agnes is a very giving scene partner. She's reliable and present, and it is lovely to get lost in her eyes. I can't wait to get the book out of my hands and a cigarette in them. The cigarettes should be fun. I love any activity that gives me something to get lost in.

Director's notes:

- What does Martha mean when she says her mother is an obsession?

Rehearsal 4, Wednesday October 8, 2015

Act I scene v is a bit of a monster. My goal is the same tonight: to be open and receptive to direction and my other actors in order to fully absorb the blocking. I still felt behind. I have always relied on my body to remember blocking for me, and it has seldom been a challenge in the past. So far, this particular project has been challenging because the blocking has been evolving as we go which is a fun exploration in and of itself. The difficulty comes with the specificity of the blocking.

When initially tasked with setting goals for every rehearsal, I thought it would be more related to moment-to-moment business. For example: I'd like to explore what will happen if I choose action A over action B. Or, I'd like to give Martha a crazy walk tonight to see if it gives me insight into her character. In reality, I still feel like I am dog paddling in the deep end. Attempting to keep up with the director's vision and on top of the demands of the show. I'll do it, I'll make it work; the challenging part of that is that I don't know the why's and the how's. (I

will not say motivation). A big part of my feeling behind is a lack of reasoning in my head – why I should move right then dart left. I understand the traps of the show – it is three people on stage for two hours – watching actors sit and debate would hardly be entertaining. In the coming nights, I would like to explore how I can infuse my given direction with more organic ease.

Tonight we had our first full-on laughter break in rehearsal. At a week in, it was long overdue. After a hectic day I had placed a baby bell cheese in my bra for the trip from the third floor to the first where the lab theatre is located. My hands were full and I did not want to lose it. Well, I forgot about that baby bell cheese. Starving and in the middle of rehearsal hours later, I found it and ate it; all of which the Stage Manager, Sam, caught. We shared a hearty laugh and my soul was fed.

Laughter is essential to my growth process. I need to know I have the freedom to laugh in a rehearsal. I cannot explore the depths of emotion demanded in this show without being able to share joy with those around me. Laughter brings us together and assists in making us a unit. I was grateful for my minor cheese debacle. It allowed us all to breathe, pick up, and move on. Our director is intense, and once he gets rolling he does not slow down for anyone or anything. Come to think of it, we were going without breaks. I should mention it to our stage manager. I identify with this quality in a director and appreciate it. Without a firm stage manager, I would forget to give rehearsal breaks as well.

I had a clarifying moment with Mother. She told me to sit on a line (again), as though I was missing a cue. She had given me direction a few times before but I brushed it off. This time I took the time to explain to her where I would be thinking about sitting down and where I'd actually sit down – which was my actual direction: to think about it on a line then do it on another. Her character is already seated, and I did not understand how my movement on one line

or another affected her but I guess it is not for me to understand. She insisted I sit on a specific line. I hate to think of myself as a theatre rule zealot, but giving other actors notes goes against the idea that we're listening to each other in the moment and that if I change the slightest thing in performance it might throw her. I can handle myself, but this is another layer of challenge. Needing freedom on stage, I have a director who is invested in the specificity of blocking and a scene partner who gets lost if I do not sit on a specific line. This sort of rigidity is scary to me on stage, less because of the other actor's need for it and more because I am not sure I can live up to it, heaping more pressure on top of an already stressful situation.

There was some confusion of the blood in (Act I) scene v. Is it the single stigmata (just in one hand) later achieved in both hands in Act II scene iv? The discussion ensued over whether it was a warning OR her period and just another clue for the audience as to how sheltered Agnes is. The director wanted it to be her period, because it played less on the miracles of the play and more into Agnes's abuse as a child, not being allowed to attend school and fed lies in her formative years. Though, Mother has a line referring to the "hole in her hand." In the end the director decided that it was the single stigmata, because the script pointed to that and he did not desire to alter the script.

Rehearsal 5, Thursday October 9, 2015

We finished blocking Act I sans Mother Superior tonight. It is challenging to block without another character present. The stage manager wound up standing in for her and was a wonderful and receptive scene partner. We covered the rest of Act I and got out early. My goal was the same as it has been for the rest of the week: to be open to the blocking and explore how to organically implement it into my performance.

Rehearsal 6, Sunday October 12, 2015

My intention for this rehearsal was to let go of my desire to get this blocking perfect. We're in rehearsal, a time built in for failure and triumph, and I fear I have started to fall into the approval/disapproval trap. Spolin says, "In a culture where approval/disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position, and often the substitute for love, our personal freedoms are dissipated. Abandoned to the whims of others, we must wander daily through the wish to be loved and the fear of rejection before we can be productive. Categorized "good" or "bad" from birth (a "good" baby does not cry too much) we become so enmeshed with the tenuous threads of approval disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed. We see with other's eyes and smell with others' noses. Having thus to look to others to tell us where we are, who we are, and what is happening results in a serious (almost total) loss of personal experiencing. We lose the ability to be organically involved in a problem, and in a disconnected way, we function with only parts of our total selves." (Spolin p.7). This idea has been weighing on me and I felt removed from Martha and her journey.

I want to walk in tomorrow for the stumble-through feeling less stumble prone, a manifestation of my nervousness, and in order to do that I've got to let go of attaining the director's approval. While the director hands out questions to think on from time to time, there wasn't much personal nurturing. Admittedly, this is a grey area – it is not the director's role to nurture a mature actor. I am ashamed to say that I needed it in this show but I did. Ultimately that need only fed the trap of approval/disapproval. In my understanding, if I'm not receiving notes about my performance then I'm doing it right. Though, I cannot be on stage for four hours a night and not be screwing something up at least some of the time. The less personal feedback I

get on this sort of project, the more I'll get into my head which is far from a desirable place to be.

Perhaps he thinks I'll figure it out on my own.

Perhaps this is his way of being kind and giving me breathing room.

So far, I've been focusing on the likenesses between Martha and myself. But today, as we received blocking I started to feel her melodrama. I began questioning why she does the things she does. Though she is a smart, capable, calculated character, her actions feel forced and impulsive. For instance, when she flat out tells Mother Superior she has become personally involved in the case – why would she do this? I wish the mother had found out some other way than my telling. My telling cheapens the cost for me, and I am currently frustrated with this.

The monologues. Where I am now? LOST. Completely. Screw the line learning... I'm angry that I have to tell so much about myself in between, with only three characters and minimal set. It's too vulnerable; uncomfortably bare for a woman who is supposedly hardened by the punches life has thrown her. We have not worked the monologues. Rehearsals are for scene work and running through the monologues; we have yet to work them and they need the love.

Rehearsal 7, Monday October 13th, 2015

My goal for this evening was to find clarity in moments through the stumble-through and to remember to breathe. This was our first real run-through with all of the blocking. I was interested to see how far we got without stopping.

I arrived on time tonight; I was running my lines and lost track in the next room. Rehearsal was in the dance studio, and as I walked in there was a thickness about the room. The

first thing I see is Sam, our stage manager, filling Mother Superior in on blocking she missed last week. She was just finishing up. I cannot imagine learning that much in such a short period of time.

Next I see Jenny, our AD and a friend of mine. Our rehearsal process had been very serious up to this point, so I was thrilled to have someone to make eyes with across the room. Her presence was fresh and welcomed. She has a quick wit and a talent for making me laugh. We had worked together successfully before, and I was happy to have her friendly face and wise input in the room.

Rehearsal begins and we get oriented in our new space. Our playing space is taped out, and I was given an ashtray and chairs. My first monologue went all right and then mere breaths into the next scene we're stopped because blocking was incorrect. At the top of the scene, I was supposed to cross as a retreat from Mother Superior, but she didn't cross to me so I could not retreat. This repeated for the next three hours. Every single moment of blocking was re-given. This was not just frustrating or challenging, it was demoralizing. I had just spent a week on this, felt overwhelmed by it, rehearsed it in my off time, and now I'm standing here... lower back pounding... relearning new blocking because my scene partner was out for the majority of blocking. Not only was I re-learning it but it was evolving as things do when blocking is done without a key player. I think this was the result faulty planning, if the production team knew Mother would be out why would we cover so much without her? Also, our encouraging cheerleader of a stage manager is new to the job. She had been coached well, but we would stop and start because she had me rising on one word and my script illustrated different blocking so we'd have to stop and discuss this as a group – as in which word, exactly, to rise on. I believe in blocking and stage pictures but at this point in the process we needed to get through it, to feel the

show in our bones. The blocking I had worked so hard for (rise on this word and place your hand on her hand on this word and take a beat and think about this in the next moment) had been thrown out and we were back to square one. On top of that, there were several moments when the stage manager had recorded a different word for me to stand on, so I would be stopped because I stood up a word early or late, etc. This was tough, as we had started rehearsal later than planned, and I had spent the first week learning blocking without a scene partner and now we were at it again.

My eyes welled up because of all the misunderstanding and frustration. I see our AD across the room hold up a finger – on that finger she has drawn a little smiling face. Then she holds up another and this one has a little face with its tongue sticking out. Cheered up immediately, I was able to pull myself together to finish the night strong.

We were scheduled to get through a lot more than we did, but I lived.

Rehearsal 8, Tuesday October 13th.

Back in the Lab Theatre – thank God – personal goals were set aside. I wanted to do everything in my power to assist in a smooth working of the show. I felt like I just needed to submit to the words and actions and be there for my partners. Back to the basics: What does Martha want? Our goal was to iron out some kinks in (I:x) where Mother had not gotten the blocking and to finish Act II, a task we accomplished. It was a little hairy, but we made it through. The vibe was much more positive than the night before, and while I still feel like we are behind on certain things at least the energy in the room was better.

Another night of starts and stops, this time focusing on Act II blocking. Flow is imperative to my learning process. I need to feel the pacing of a scene, but it is challenging if

I'm being stopped every two seconds. My approach for this night had changed from wanting to make personal progress to focusing on the progress of the ensemble.

I observed being in a scene with Mother as less a game of ping-pong and more a game of pinball. I pull back the trigger (my line) and send it off to her. There were times when the ball would come back to me, and there were times when my ball would just disappear into the abyss. Only to be started again... another quarter another game. One day I'll find my flow.

Rehearsal 9, Wednesday October 14, 2015. – My only conflict.

Rehearsal was cancelled.

Rehearsal 10, Thursday October 15- Off book for Act I date.

Grateful for today's day off for fall break. I have no goals for rehearsal other than getting through Act I without sinking the ship. I am in ten of the ten scenes of Act I. Four of the ten are my monologues. I worked lines forever. I woke up early and just stared at my script for ten hours before heading to rehearsal. I walked in at 6:15 with great trepidation. The director patted me on the shoulders and eventually we were off. We were unable to go in order (adios flow) because Mother was out until 8:00 p.m. Agnes and I ran lines for a while. When Mother finally got there, we started from the top and it was a struggle for us all. We got through all ten scenes. Upon reflection, I felt there were monologues I struggled with more than others, but for the most part I did well. I also struggled some during my scenes that are just rapid-fire questions for Agnes. Her one-word repetitive responses do little by way of cues for me so fighting through those moments was to be expected. Usually, by the time I get to an off book date we have run scenes several times, but that was not the case here and that was a major challenge for us all.

Rehearsal 11, Sunday October 19, 2015

We met early to run lines – just the stage manager, Agnes and I. Mother was late and was still not off book. I understand this show is a heavy line load for the three actors involved. I do not deny this task is difficult. I understand many actors work differently. I understand that we all have different line learning capabilities. Personally, I struggle with lines until I understand the true intentions of the character, and I still had moments I struggled with tonight, but I could make it through the scene. There is a huge difference between struggling with lines and still being able to make it through the scene and struggling with lines and just stopping. With such a key character not off book, I was fearful for the whole production. I want to be clear that I don't give a flying flip about whether or not an actor knows their lines perfectly, as long as I'm given just enough to get by on my own lines. I'm actually ok with almost anything that happens on stage as long as it does not halt production. As soon as I am stopped for any reason, my blood pressure starts to rise. So far in these rehearsals I felt like I was riding in the car with my grandmother as she alternated between flooring the accelerator and riding the brakes, pulsing the brakes, resulting in nausea for all in the car. I admit this is a blaring fault of mine, but I have never encountered it in the excess that I did during this singular process. There was not enough Xanax or meditation in the world to cure this frustration. Looking around the room I was bewildered. Though Mother was not off book, the halting of rehearsal was not exactly her fault, and because I could not figure out who was at fault, like a true oldest child I carried that burden myself.

At times I struggle with lines and cues, but really when I just breathe they are there for me because I know them. The stop start thing has to stop; it is an impediment to the process.

Our director's frustration is palpable, I'm sure he would like to be working on other things at this point as well. I am feeling low at this moment in the game. My exhausted and vexed version of Martha is probably boring too. I don't know what to do, how to change my goals in order to make rehearsal a more productive and enjoyable experience. I am at a loss. I hope something comes to me by tomorrow.

Personal Note: I apparently cannot say the word Marlboro. This was my direction for the night: marl... marl....marl... boro....borrow...burrough....

Rehearsal 12, Monday October 20, 2015

Climbing out of the despair pit of last night, we had our best rehearsal yet. Outside of rehearsal I think about Martha a lot; inside rehearsal I've gone into survival mode, which in and of itself is a barrier between me and creating art. This rehearsal was a game changer. For the first time, 15 days from an audience, I felt like we were really working scenes. Not just start/stopping with blocking and lines. Granted, we had the scripts in our hands for Act II, but at least we were moving forward. The director was more interactive with us tonight, helping a great deal. After the rehearsal we talked about Agnes and whether or not she thought she was carrying a miracle baby. Martha and I agree there is no way it was a miracle child. If Agnes, in all her innocence and glory, had been immaculately "touched," she would have cherished that baby forever. She wouldn't have let anyone touch that baby and certainly would not call it a "mistake" much less kill it. It truly would have been a miracle. BUT she kills the baby. Agnes would not kill a miracle.

Physically, I am struggling with the stools. I have to scoot up to get on them, and it is not working. I can't just sit, and they're light so they scoot when I sit in them. It's distracting, and

once I get the cigarette in my hand, I will not be able to just reach down and adjust the stool without looking a bit foolish. To be explored further...

Director's Notes:

- Change in 1st scene. Set both stools at the top of scene 1 not second stool in scene 2 like originally done.
- “The Questions” in I:iv – Have the idea to have her ask the questions and drive more to the point of Father Marshall.
- Hysteria – she’s a victim of God. She’s just another victim of God – which helps mother see how faithless I am.
- My monologues are me talking to my therapist.
- I am gradually losing my mind as the piece moves.
- Memory- imperfections/reference affair.
- React to Mother’s cross in II:iv.
- I am stuck between stoicism and vulnerable Martha.
- The ending, when mother says “*I’ll never forgive you*” is mirroring my monologue about how my own mother never forgave me for leaving the church.

Personal Note: The setting of the stools is a challenge. I accepted it heartily at the beginning of the process and felt it was a great idea for my character to set up for the next scene, but I have started to disagree, feeling the moving of the stools to be superfluous and cumbersome during sensitive moments and moments when I am conveying important information.

Rehearsal 13 Wednesday October 21, 2015

There was a great deal of dread felt by all involved with the first line-through of Act II. My goal was to push forward, letting go of fuck-ups and moving with ease to the next bit. The line through was not satisfactory, but I think the meditations have helped. I was able to breathe through and forgive myself as I moved forward. In all honesty, I stayed home to rehearse lines in order to prepare for tonight's rehearsal. What I have learned about myself is that I need someone to run lines with. Looking at the lines on the page does nothing for me. I cannot assume I have learned my lines until I can say them out loud, without hesitation, and with the book far away from me. Having another person on book monitoring my accuracy and giving me cues is imperative.

The scenes of particular difficulty are the hypnotisms and any scene where I'm just drilling questions. They're repetitive and spiraling. After the line-through, we did a speed through of Act II and got all the way through. It was amazing. We were able to keep our books so I think that helped, but moving through it "speedily" was really at the pace at which I'd like to accomplish for the show, if not quicker. It felt exhilarating. We moved a few steps forward tonight. Act II is a rough one for me though. It is all hypnotisms and monologues. Ugh. Tonight was demanding, but in the speed through I started to feel that flow in my body and that felt good.

Rehearsal 14, Thursday October 22, 2015

Tonight the calendar suggested we were to run through the entire show. The director was running a bit late, so we ran lines with the stage manager. The hypnotism scenes are still rough. I once had a director tell me that concentration was a weakness of mine. I am easily pulled in different directions. An enormous amount of my work as an actor has focused on concentration and is being put to the test in these scenes.

I fought this demon tonight – my focus that is. When the director arrived he re-blocked the first scene for me. I like it better. It's more active, though I am concerned about entering from the audience. The theatre is small, we have minimal staff, and I have nowhere to hide prior to entering. I fear this will stretch the focus I just referenced.

Right now I'm still struggling with the placement of the seats. It has evolved a few times, and I've learned that when I'm given a piece of direction I pick a phrase that sticks with me and hang on to it. I think many people learn this way, and when that phrase is changed all hell breaks loose. I've also acknowledged that, like most human beings, I do not like being uncomfortable and this experience is uncomfortable for me. I am unsure if I can deliver this performance. I am doubting myself and my place in the theatre.

We got through a good deal of the show in two and a half hours. Up to Act II scene iv – not bad technically. Again, we picked up our scripts for Act II. What boiled up in last night's rehearsal is that we're officially two weeks out from tech, and our stage manager is sitting off stage gesturing and straight up telling us our blocking and lines, sometimes before we've even lost them. Let me clarify, she is an angel and has just learned her job as SM. I believe that role is an incredibly challenging and nuanced one. One day, because of this, she will be an incredible stage manager. There is no acting theory on how to deal with a difficult rehearsal process. I honor and respect the blocking given, but sometimes it might not happen on a specific word. On top of that, I don't think it is doing anyone any good to be spoon-fed the things we're supposed to know. If we don't know them then we should struggle. When I taught middle school, I was known as the first teacher to ever get fourth graders to perform without someone whispering their lines off stage. In my mind, this didn't speak well of the teacher that came before me but I accomplished this because the first time they missed a line in rehearsal I let them find their way

through or around the problem. No one learns anything if they are constantly spoon-fed information. Here I was, working on my graduate thesis, and we have a stage manager whispering our business to us off stage. I have an enormous amount of material to cover and my fucking up in rehearsal right now is inevitable. I need to be allowed to do that; I need to fight through the moment and rally.

Speaking of my fucking up in rehearsal – I have never struggled as much as I am now. For one, it is difficult material; for two, it's a lot of material. Usually before a show I like to get in at least one flawless performance by that I only mean smooth and connected. I am used to being able to achieve that – a performance that I can feel proud of. But then again, I haven't tackled something of this magnitude in a while. I'm allowing myself the fuck ups, practicing self-forgiveness and reminding myself to be kind and breathe, but it is not making rehearsal more enjoyable. We learn from failure, right? This place of scraping the bottom is uncomfortable. It is affecting my mood and how I handle my personal relationships. Tonight I can't wait until this is over. I hope I turn up on the other side of this poisonous negativity.

There is also a feeling of “I'm not allowed to be off,” coming from the demands of the script, my desire to please my director, my desire to be a good example for my students, and the demands of being on stage with an actor I have not been able to trust. The urge to help is there, but I don't know how. There isn't any room for me in this play to have an off night, to play more, to fail.

After talking with a friend, our AD, she suggested I might better navigate the hypnotism scenes if I think of it as touring a house. I'm not teleporting there. I'm walking up to the front door, opening it, then heading down the hallway. This analogy helped me clarify the hypnotisms

for myself, and what once seemed random made sense when I thought of it more as a tour from where I am now than teleportation to a completely different place.

Rehearsal 15, Sunday October 24, 2015

I arrived at our two o'clock rehearsal at noon. Sam met me to run lines. We ran my trouble spots and then started at the top of the show. I had an epiphany this weekend when a friend told me my thesis isn't about doing "my best work ever" but more about an analysis of "what I'm learning through the process." The idea of it being a learning process and not a culmination of everything I have learned took a load off my shoulders. Onward and upward.

I felt the weight of the role on my shoulders today and was in a bit of a panic waiting for my "lights up" from the SM. She said it, and then we realized we were missing Mother Superior. I was still given a 'GO,' I finished my monologue, and Mother was nowhere to be seen. If an actor is supposed to feel free and open in a controlled work-space, then I was not getting any of those things. The play cannot stop after my first monologue because someone is not ready to enter. I am resentful that I have to be ready for my own cues, sensitive to what will be light and sound cues as well as my fellow actor's cues. The fact that people are missing entrances only feeds my bitterness. If this is not a culmination or even a representation of the work I have put into my craft over the years, I am indeed learning something. The lesson I have learned on this night is that I get bitter when I feel the weight of a show on my shoulders, which in turn, affects my performance, the ensemble, and disturbs my peace in the process. I'd like to note that I am aware that theoretically I am in control of my attitude and that while in rehearsal I go out of my way to hide the emotions going on inside because it would be poisonous to display them. That said - just having them is poisonous too.

We ran through the first act, received notes, then ran through the act again. It was good to go through it all, though I long for more specific attention to individual scenes. I would like to work one scene at a time, but our time for that has passed. My monologues are something I worry about, as they have not been worked individually either. My goal for the day was to solidify my blocking through those monologues. By monologue blocking, I mean the placement of the chairs. I've found it challenging to place a chair or stool exactly where it needs to be; in the Lab space an inch off or a slightly different angle changes the blocking. Then, in true *Agnes* form, as soon as I succeeded the director mentioned changing the first scene again!

Director's Notes:

- Cut the handshake in Act I Scene ii. Slight blocking change... I hold my ground till Mother walks toward me.
- Act I:iv adjust chair placement for Agnes's sign of the cross
- In the first flashback look at chair as if Mother is there.
- Make sure a cigarette fumes in the first flashback to indicate real time.
- "My recommendation" – hit "my"
- "I didn't exactly see myself" as a mommy... make this moment cuddlier. Like maybe I could be a mother. Take a beat before "Maurice Did."
- Director asks "Maurice saw you as a mother?"
- Director asks when she says earthquakes and I say visitor what does that mean? My understanding is that earthquake is a god event and visitor is a man event.
- Specifically mark where the 1st two options are in Act I scene ix.
- Don't let Agnes get away. Go to her on 'I wish you were dead' and don't let go.

- Director changed the cement truck monologue from the fat to scrawny option offered in the script. In order to make it clear I'm not shameful for my fat. That I've moved on; perhaps that's why I'm fat.
- Why would St. Thomas More smoke Parliaments?
- Why would St. Peter be the Original Marlboro man?
- Changed pronunciation of Marlboro
- Why would apostles smoke hand rolled?
- Why would Mary Magdalene smoke Virginia Slims?
- Go to the smaller chair for "you ask I'll answer"
- Punch "my" on "that's My Duty as a doctor"
- Hug on "thank you"
- Mind my posture
- Pregnancy monologue – go up stage Left for "and then once"
- Be in Marie's corner for "Marie, Marie," then sit when Agnes sits
- Hear the mother when she says, "I'm not a Virgin." Listen to her there.

Rehearsal 16, Monday October 25, 2015

The dance studio is difficult to work in. We open next week. The director said we, Mother and I, were being "shown up by an undergrad." I found this to be an expression of loss of control. Leading up to this I did not feel in sync with the director and his desires. I do not feel that after he quit we healed enough to tackle this monster of a show. At this moment I disconnected in the process. We had been under the boulder of Spolin's approval/disapproval syndrome but the second I felt unappreciated I let it go. Contrasting feelings of freedom and

anger began to stir within me. I was angry at the director for not fighting for the show sooner and for being disrespectful and yet I was free – this comment serving as the straw that broke this camel’s back. I no longer needed approval from anyone to move forward and do my best.

The run of Act II was bumpy. How could it have been better? It could have been better had we not run it with scripts the last two times. It could have been better had everyone paid due diligence to their cues. This show is musical in nature, and the blocking should be executed like a ballet – entrances and exits are significant with only three actors at play. Each entrance signifies the passing of time and evolution of character.

The line notes were so specific I find them hard to swallow. I am a proponent of following the script to a “T,” but we have spent three of the four rehearsal weeks with a seemingly singular focus on blocking. On this night I fell apart and excused myself from the room. The director’s words were biting and I felt alone in this venture. On any given night there are four of us in a room rehearsing, and none of us seem to be on the same page.

I continue to struggle finding Martha every night. It is possible that her obsession has become my own; I have this singular focus by day and night that I must “make *Agnes* better.” Then I get in rehearsal, and I am constantly corrected via brutal line corrections and small blocking things. I was stopped in the middle of a scene to correct petty problems that could be fixed later. Frustrating isn’t the word. I said two words instead of a contraction or a contraction instead of two words, but it is a lot of pages of my own words – just me. I feel beat down. I am trying to rise to the occasion, but I keep slipping.

My goals? What fucking goals? I want to make it through scenes alive. I want to not fall down the rabbit hole that is the pause Mother takes before she gets to her cue. I want to not suffer anxiety-induced diarrhea. I am my own worst nightmare of a scene partner. MY biggest

problem is myself. I lost my mind. When I took the break for myself, the director offered encouraging words. I got back up there and finished strong for the night.

Director Notes:

- Cut handshake at top of Act I.
- Do not face her when lighting cigarette
- Liv adjust chair placement.
- In first flashback look at chair as if Mother is there.
- Director wants cigarette fuming in flashback.
- My recommendation. Hit “my.”
- Line: “I did not exactly see myself as a mommy” make cuddlier. Like maybe I could be a mother. Observe BEAT before “Maurice did.”
- Maurice saw me as a mother.
- Director Question: Why does she say “earthquakes” my answer was: Earthquakes are a god event not a man event.
- Emphasize: Earthquake/visitors difference.
- Do not let Agnes get away. Go to her on “I hate you” and do not let go.
- Cement truck monologue. Line: “I was fat” was changed to “I was skinny.” Because I am large, he didn’t want Martha to feel ashamed for being fat.
- Mother touches me and I say – “That’s also why I hate nuns.” Observe BEAT then “Why is her singing so important to you?”
- Go to Agnes’s chair for “You ask, I’ll answer.”
- Punch “My” on that’s “My duty as a Doctor.”
- Hug Agnes on “Thank you.”

- Posture: keep back straight/Catholic schoolgirl.
- Pregnancy Monologue: Go to “momma’s” corner. When I say Marie died, go to Marie’s corner. Take “Marie... Marie” up and out.
- Hear Mother on “I’m not a Virgin.” That needs to stop Martha.

Rehearsal 17, Tuesday October 26, 2015

We ran the hypnotisms. The focus was to give Agnes instruction on being hypnotized. My goal for the night was to find moments I enjoyed about the rehearsal. I desperately needed something grounding and motivational to hold on to in this project. My monologue in Act II scene iv is my favorite to perform, and I’m holding on to the sweetness of nailing that tonight.

Just making it through is a damn miracle, and we did. The show is officially under two hours. Finally – that feels better. Weight is melting off my body due to stress. I've been meditating with headspace but it's hard. A week out, I can't slow my head down for much. I’m warming up and meditating before rehearsal, but when I arrive I get flustered and start to make mistakes. I find the pressure I am under back breaking and I believe if I could trust my scene partners it would not be so challenging. If we fall into a hole, it's my job to carry us out. At times tonight I said Mother’s lines for her. At one point, I don't think she was feeling well, and she just sat in the chair avoiding all given blocking. I did my best to execute my blocking around her.

I know she is under similar pressure as me, and I am deeply empathetic. The stress is debilitating; it makes me ill too. I have never experienced this with a show before. Rehearsal has always been my favorite part of the day, but not with this show.

The director mentioned our ensemble last night. I have been a part of incredible

ensemble work before, experiences I think fondly on. For this show though, I felt we were more of a dysfunctional family. All appropriate roles filled: lost child, hero, and scapegoat. At this point we were certainly a family; I could honestly say that but less Partridge and more Jerry Springer.

Director's Notes:

- Cross away for "I'm always careful sister" so I don't rush into monologue.
- Stool can always go at edge of curtain. Bring main chair down in front of ashtray a bit.
- Turn into her when she makes the sign of the cross.
- Stay upstage for Marie Marie – connect with Camille.
- Look at page 43. Push tempo
- P. 42 top. Light final cigarette of scene.
- (In general, always have a cigarette in Act I)
- P. 57 two different Agnes's – first is to cut bullshit, second is to calm her down
- When she's laying in my lap move her veil so she can be seen so I can see her.
- Don't slap knees.
- The remembrance of my best friend is coming too easily.
- Under hypnosis - don't yell the 'who's'
- Take a breath before 'was it for me' moment in last monologue. Review new line.
- Loosen grip on cigarette.

Rehearsal 18, Wednesday October 28, 2015

We made progress tonight. By that, I mean there was flow in the show. It felt good. My goal was to slow down. There is a moment in every rehearsal process when the speed of things

changes for me. Much like when Neo learns to dodge bullets in the *Matrix*, my actions and lines fully actualize as play things I can call on at will. It's as though I start from day one running at full speed wanting to be at the finish line already. In this slowing down, my awareness is heightened, I am present, and I feel ready to take on the world. I have been working from a fearful place, then panicking because of the fear – a never ending cycle. Nothing creative or good can come from fear. So before tonight's rehearsal, I spent some time with myself, and before that I spent some time with friends just shooting the shit and swearing to them that I shall rise from the ashes that is *Agnes* and fully actualize as a phoenix. I made a point to seek out my stage manager and have a sweet moment with her as well as to seek out Agnes and connect with her. We made plans to do some sun salutations before the show to do something together, to warm up, to connect to each other and ourselves – something I wish I would have implemented earlier in the process.

I contacted Mother many times today via text to ask when we could run lines. She was unable to make it.

Act I was a bit rough, particularly Act I scene x. The rehearsal process as a whole went from blocking to relearning blocking to runs. In theory, I understand why. Running the show gets the rhythm of the show in the bones of the actor. But our runs were littered with stopping for what I thought to be arbitrary reasons: missed lines, missed blocking, missed cues. The nights were onerous. Also we had not run trouble spots. Not working trouble spots will affect the show and my confidence in it. During both of the hypnotisms there is hysterical cross talk that we have not once gotten right in rehearsal. Those two moments specifically need to be worked.

Director's Notes:

- I don't believe it's stigmata, that should be reflected in the how long did it last/come back lines.
- Mar-boro
- Kleptomaniac/exhibitionist informed by French "kiss me" music. Maurice... remember him. He was playful.
- Listen to her sing at the top of the show.
- Change the line "don't waste those tears on me" to "spare me the emotions, mother."
- The touch before "let's finish this" is an apology.
- What is my ignorance to knowledge story?
- What does Mother teach me?
- What does Agnes teach me?
- In last monologue legitimately ask the audience. Wait for answer before stepping down or step down for answer.

Rehearsal 19, Thursday October 29, 2015

I am filled with butterflies headed into tonight's rehearsal. It is the first night we are not allowed to call line. Tough. Historically I do my best to never call line, thinking it a shameful thing to do so late in the process, but with this load and lack of smooth runs it is inevitable. My goal for rehearsal is to observe each awkward moment as an anthropologist and repeat to myself "isn't this interesting," because really at the end of the day, it's my life and it *is* interesting. I am in this show with a woman I've had a difficult past with, playing a role I am fascinated by and that I truly identify with, studying this thing I love with people I admire, and I get to actively participate in this fantasy world that is theatre and write about it, which *is* interesting. I get to

explore the meaning of being truly alone on stage – something slightly terrifying and definitely curious. My goal for the evening was to show gratitude for my fear and to ask it kindly to leave. It isn't necessary. I'll probably live. My goal is to find gradual changes in relationships to the other characters on stage. In Act I scene ii I am re-meeting Mother for the first time. But by the end of Act I, we're practically buddies sharing intimate information with each other. And by Act II, I'm accusing her of murder. As for Agnes, I gradually love her more and more. I push her because I'm her doctor and I want her to be well but I believe the more I love her the longer I fall by the end of Act II when she (Agnes) admits to killing the baby.

Director's Notes:

- Let Mother get closer before I dodge her handshake. Show my own neurosis in that moment.
- When someone touches you feel the touch. Honor first touches.
- Line change: "But I learned to go 14 hours with only one match" – changed so I could use a lighter for the show! Yippee! Much better. Those matches were tedious.
- When Mothers says "hole in the palm of her hand" – have a visceral reaction.
- The Virgin birth was a Lie line. "To Teach" her on that line.
- Fade out of my flashback when Agnes comes on for who was in room with you.
- Live in "She's a god damned liar." The singing calms me down and I'm remorseful.
- Breakdown self then build her up.
- After Agnes starts humming I start my "Mother, Mother" lines.
- Don't be quick to end the play – connect to her
- Blocking change at top of show – I do the first monologue off-stage down stage Left and move onto the stage for when "the baby was found..." moving furniture then.

- Give Agnes no attention in final moments.
- Watch Mother walk away. Keep watching her.
- Blocking change for last monologue: On the word NIGHT turn to Mother. On the word ROOM turn to Agnes on the word HIM walk to her out of curiosity on the word HE after 7th night touch her.
- Think about confession vs. therapist. Make that decision.
- “Why? Why?” At end. Really ask the audience. Was it to the simple end? Realize it might be me. Then for “What Kind of God – put it back on the audience.” It can’t be me. God Damn it give me an answer! This doesn’t make sense. So last moment is more like “I dunno.”
- I have to come up with answers for myself so I verbally pontificate.
- Think about Martha at the beginning of the play. She has given up and actively doesn’t believe in God. Those things lessen as the play goes on.

Personal Notes:

- I asked for spike tape for the chairs. When I’m in the middle of the monologues it’ll help. It was never explicitly clear on where they go and sightlines in this space are too tricky.
- This isn’t a play about answers. It is a play about questions.
- Listen. Challenge yourself to listen.
- Saying there is “no God” is an answer. It’s hard to live in the space in between. Most of us are trying to figure that out I guess. It’s the harder place to be – in the honest place. But what does that mean for me?

Saturday. No rehearsal.

Met with Mother to run lines. She was 35 minutes late.

Personal Notes: For every monologue a wall needs to come down. I want to name those walls and what am I vulnerable to now?

Monologue 1: Blatantly stating that I'm not a believer – I have walls for silly things like that, perhaps locked away in my own mind; not forgotten vaults of Hollywood, but forgotten vaults of my own mind. I wish I could believe but that's silly.

Monologue 2: Why I don't believe. My sister died at the hands of a nun. I have trauma there. But saying this aloud has to change me. Which is why, I believe, I make my proclamations of beliefs here. It's defensive.

Monologue 3: I have a glimmer of hope. I am beginning to question my stance on faith. I confess to an abortion. I think Martha is beginning to feel raw here, open.

Monologue 4: I am open to Agnes and her magic. I won't say it, and have not admitted it to myself, but I want to believe that she's a saint here. I blame Mother for that, but I believe that's totally projection.

Monologue 5: Top of Act II: I am completely entwined with Agnes. I meet with her an hour a day every day, and everything revolves around that meeting. I am convinced of the struggle with

my definitions and proclamations about the world, but she has given me hope and with that hope my mind is flooded with memories I've locked away in the vaults of my heart and mind.

Monologue 6: I am forgiven – the references to white and association of purity here. I am forgiven and I've been given another chance: to have babies, to fall in love, to believe in miracles.

Monologue 7: I've been saved. I'm not sure by whom. By Mother? By Agnes? I question the audience for sure. If I believe, everything has a purpose now. If I believe in an afterlife, there is more; I don't turn to ash when it's all over. There's a big discovery in this scene: "Could it have all been for me?" I guess I liken this to the Christian Christ's dying for my sins. Did Agnes die for mine? To save me?

Rehearsal 20, Sunday November 1, 2015 Tech

I arrived at 12:50 to meet with the director at 1:00 to work my monologues, but he was unable to show up. I waited for everyone else to arrive and we started a line through at 2:00. This was a good, productive line-through. The stage manager did have to feed Mother her lines, but overall it was productive. We didn't get all the way through Act II, but it was smooth enough. I requested that we skip to the end of Act II, because there is a rough spot where the three of us are talking and everyone needed some clarity with this moment. Working through this trouble spot was a huge relief for us all. We were able to pay attention and slowly work through consistent problems constructively.

Then we did a cue-to-cue involving a lot of standing around and waiting. Afterward we ran Act II and worked blood for Act II. We finished a hair before 11:00. A long day, but we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Personal Notes:

- Both Agnes and Martha struggle with belief. She with the baby, and Martha with religion/god.
- I brought my own shoes. The given ones are not flattering and too big.
- I need to explore more doctor traits. Martha the person is clearer to me than Martha the doctor.
- My goal for tonight and this week is to set my ego aside and allow the production to take wings of its own.
- Playing with the idea that the actor playing Mother is the Lamb of God in my title.
- How deeply do you need it? The miracle? At the end there are no miracles.
- The separation of theatre – theology – therapy.
- Creating and communing with others drives me. That was a big struggle with this piece.

I did not always feel we were in this boat together. It was an unsettling feeling. I need that communion. If I didn't, I'd be a painter or some other form of solitary art form. This is a medium of people. I like people; I like sharing beautiful, well written moments with people, and finding my way out of uncomfortable ones with those people. This show doesn't have that. No community was ever formed, and by the time I got out of my head and realized there wasn't a community, it was too late. The poison of complaint and

gossip and scape-goating had done its work. I've never worked a day in my life. This experience has been work.

- In the line-through there was a race almost to get our lines in before the stage manager fed them to us. Waiting for Mother to get her line out; it isn't time for that. That should have happened already. I have new cues as she's learning those lines. It's hard not to step on her lines as we wait for them to come, and I'm being given the note to let her finish.
- The smoke irritates my throat and my eyes. Eye drops and thieves oil down my throat.

Director's Notes:

- Bring Necklace and black tank. "gaudy jewelry" requested.
- Take a beat before "How do you do?"
- Line: you ask, I'll answer.
- Do I wish atheists had those words? Not believable.
- Open up in scene with Agnes after pregnancy monologue. (I: iv.)
- More sure footed at top of show. I played with my feet "like a child."
- Look at Agnes during I: vii push purposefully.
- "They were two of a set of triplets" should be a "gotcha" moment.
- "Let me help you" touch Agnes.
- Exasperated "Yes" then exhale before "I had freckles" "and guess what"... all one thought.
- We're running Act II twice tomorrow.

Stonewalled. Mustering up the courage to go to rehearsal and get done what needs to get done. I arrived early to meet with the director, he didn't show, and then we had a long tech day. In the run, some of the above mistakes were for the first time. I hadn't made them before. In my right foot, the arch is fallen and after hours of being on my feet in heels I was in agony. I stretched it out in a scene, seeking relief, and it was brought up that I looked "childish and not engaged" in the scene. I didn't really find that note helpful. I embrace the fact that I fail on stage regularly but a constructive note could have been phrased along the lines of "I see you tried something, it didn't work, how about trying X tomorrow" or "You stretched your foot out on stage, do not do that, it does not read well" in lieu of telling an actor they looked "childish and not engaged" when that actor has been working their ass off all day. The director had the most notes for Act I scene vii. Interestingly enough, I had recently gained footing and confidence in that scene and tried something new. The director disliked what I tried, and has every right to that. I was trying to play with where I was in my relationship with Agnes at this point. It is still early on in our sessions, but we have gotten to a point where I could comfortably push her for more information, so I played with doing that in a planned and tactical way as opposed to a mothering way. It was an idea and I guess it didn't read right in the audience. The note hurt, and that stung for a bit.

Moving on.

Rehearsal 21, Monday November 2, 2015

Run through of Act II. Twice.

Personal Notes:

- I loathe that we aren't doing a full run. This is when I need to feel the run in my body. Now – this is that time. I should have talked to the director about this but this late in the

game I did not trust myself to be thinking clearly, I could be wrong. I wasn't sure what it looked like on the outside. I knew that from my perspective we had added many elements in the last few days but still had not mastered (or gotten through a run without stopping) a single simple run.

- What is my ignorance to knowledge story? I am still figuring that out I guess. What does Mother teach me? I believe she teaches me to reckon with my past. What does Agnes teach me? Agnes teaches me to hope for the future. What do I know at the end that I do not in the beginning? Miracles do exist.
- Exasperated “ Yes”
- Really wish “Atheists had a set of words that meant as much...”.
- Push purposefully in (I:vii)
- Don't start in with Mother until she hums in Act II.
- Watch Mother walk away.
- Teach her on “Virgin birth was a lie”
- Beze moi – hear it during klepto-Ex monologue.
- Song of the night: Pretenders' cover of Creep and Billy Joel's Goodnight My Angel.

Director's Notes:

First run

- Physically she is about presentation.
- What makes Agnes more special – worthy of miracles than myself? Why not me? That is part of the obsession at the end of Act I into Act II.
- But my memories – cross on “they come too easily.”
- Connect to Mother on “the mind.”

- Have the realization at the end of the monologue “this is it.”
- Make sure to touch Mother
- Martha and Agnes connect before I cross down – connect to her one more time give her back to Mother Superior. Buck her up before I turn her up to find Mother. Turn my back to her.
- “But you didn’t get it did you?” Interrogation city. Blocking change.
- Cue to enter at Beze Moi – changed. First it was last line then I’m out for whole song.

Personal Notes:

- Me: What kind of trouble? Push along. Get amped up.
- My goal for the night is to move with purpose. Why am I moving? How am I moving? The reality of doing.
- What if I had lost someone? What if there was a miracle – If miracles were real? Could that person come back? What then? Is Agnes more special? Why does she get to experience miracles and not me?
- “What you are choosing to believe is a lie.” Was too harsh.
- Struggle for control. The director is fighting for control in the eleventh hour. I understand that, but I also feel a little marionette-ed.
- For the first “go” everyone around me was jumping lines. I was scrambling. I need cues.

Director’s Notes:

Second Run

- Don’t step out of light at top of Act II. Follow the lights as they come up.
- My first cross: would you like to tell me when you’re here? Up the roller coaster.
- The plastic of my hair pin is not period.

- At first moment when I hold Mother back. Gesture to her to sit down.
- Nothing “Oh come on mother” – don’t cross around. Wait till her line.
- P. 91 so you believe let her finish the thought. Treat ellipsis like a question.
- Use my upstage hand for “I’m not prosecuting you.”
- Thought: forms of service in the theatre the director serves the actor and the author the actors serve each other and the script the stage manager serves. We all serve... this is a community art.
- Move into light for final moment and keep that flowing.

Personal Note:

- Me: The director fixes externals to the point that he breaks to your internals. This is why Agnes works so well with him. She’s a dancer.
- It was a late late night with sound cues. I was kept after rehearsal to listen to them and write them down. Mamet’s perfect baseball game plays in my head. We’re at the bottom of the ninth and it doesn’t look good. But how will this end? I’ll live... probably. If my heart doesn’t give out... or stomach cancer doesn’t set in... then there’s the diabetes. I wanted to lose weight for the role. I have lost about 25 pounds. Mostly from stress and the last ten in the past few days...eating is a past time now... so is sleeping. Looking forward to rest this weekend. BUT first, I’m up to bat, one out to go.

Rehearsal 22, Tuesday November 3, 2015

"A little bit excited well, excited and scared" - Stephen Sondheim

What kind of masochist am I that this rehearsal process has been so challenging and I’m excited to share it! Relieved to be getting a whole run in. I haven’t gotten my backstage pattern

in yet. That is something I like to use tech week for that hasn't happened at all this week. I like to get there early. I create a playlist that inspires me, puts me in the right place for the show. I listen to that like it's gold as though it is magic. I have to get certain songs in before I can go on. Not to mention I love taking care of the Linklater warm up. That said, my voice, though I feel I'm working it out every night between the smoking and the yelling and the emotions it's holding up well. I've been putting drops of thieves oil on the back of my throat before bed every night. I really believe that between that and the warm up, my voice is holding up well in the face of significant strain.

Tonight was also special because the head of our department was in attendance, as well as our AD. There was a notion of "under the microscope"... but I know these people, and they want me to succeed, it was comforting.

Before the run we went through Act I of Camille's light cues. Camille is the actor playing all the phantom nuns in silhouette. I was so anxious about the run and the second we were done with her cues I got a "places" - so much for getting back into the proper headspace. This was agitating because her placement in the show should have been handled prior to this moment. This was the last chance we would have to run in the space and my pre show routine had been interrupted yet again. I had to hold on to whatever solace I gleaned ahead of time. So much of Meisner work happens in the moments before you walk on stage. What just happened? Where am I coming from? What am I doing? What do I want? Including whatever emotional extremes I'm playing with that all takes time... prior to entering.

My top entrance wasn't clear. I was previously given direction to saunter on as she sings the Kyrie but there was a stark light on stage and I was pretty sure I should have been in it. I'm not sure if it's the levels or what but I feel, in my monologues that I'm competing with her

beautiful voice. For every monologue there is supposed to be singing behind it. I'm not sure if it's accompanying me or I'm accompanying it. Also, It wasn't completely clear to me how I would be receiving my cue to cross to my entrance, which is also the audience's entrance.

On this night we got a new ashtray. It's a bit tricky because it only has one handle so I have to grab it at a tilt. On top of that, there's a glass of water on it. I have to collect that before I lift. Just something to think about and work out as the week goes on.

Director Notes:

- Start in corner light at blackout.
- When I'm moving furniture at the top connect with audience more.
- On Thursday try taking Mother's handshake then crossing.
- See Camille as mom before "she sent her off".
- Talk about - keep me after for Camille placement - AFTER- I stand center and gesture to her with my arms.
- Martha and Agnes - best act I scene iii.
- Martha and Agnes - talk after about I love you moment – avoid potentiality of this being sexual.
- At "bad babies" - take that mental note more. It's a clue.
- Be more spacey and discombobulated at "Do you know a Mari?"
- Question mother's line "This is manslaughter not murder".
- When do I realize Agnes is innocent?
- Progression - I'm the doctor and the I's and the ME's and MY's ... hit more.
- Over to far in front of mother
- When Mother tells of her kids keep that it was too harsh. I want to tell her something specific

but she doesn't let me get it out.

- You can help her. Emphasis on HER
- Reaching out to MS. This is your second chance.
- When - separate difference between Agnes' father and Charlie field hand.
- Mother tableau added to scene iii of act II.
- There are no saints to day- shock me
- Listen to her singing. Take a beat. then continue
- Top of II:iv was best ever keep it up.
- We are getting this thing in shape
- Find moments of stillness in monologues.

Personal Notes: “That teenage feeling” – there is a tug-o-war inside of me that simultaneously wants more direction and wants to push the director away. Striving to be and get better every day I want more and more feedback. On the other hand, we are so close to the show, there are notes I wished we had covered weeks ago and I long to move on, less encumbered by last minute fixes.

Opening night/preview - Wednesday November 4th, 2015

Director Notes:

- The first time I hear Agnes sing in I:ii. The most beautiful thing in the world. Does she sing often is a line of wonder.
- Touched on moments of brilliance but haven't crossed the finish line. On the “I see” air out of balloon at that moment.

- Shortly after that in obsession talk get lost more. Beat Before I bet you're sorry you asked a joke. To get on track.
- "God Love her" talk w beau/ never happened. Tonight's run of that monologue was the most unclean it has been.
- The Virgin Birth was a lie...as though I'm teaching an honors student.
- Take a beat before "Agnes do you ever think about leaving the convent?"

Personal Notes:

- The idea of killing your babies. New title.
- Significant mood shift in the room... from playful to heavy and exhausting... looking forward to my director letting go. Usually I'm holding on to their leg saying "don't let me go!" Not this time.
- Me: always challenge yourself to look for discoveries.
- Me: Establish a foundation to color the lines structure
- The story of the stools
- Me: always challenge yourself to look for discoveries.

Thursday November 5, 2015 - Opening night

We added the cacophony of sounds just now. I was instructed that it was for the audience, not for me, and to simply exit. This did not make sense at the time but because it was opening night I questioned less than I would have earlier in the process. I would have to feel it in the moment and try to make it work. Unfortunately, he was right, it was for the audience, I could barely hear the cacophony so when it came time to build I just grabbed the ashtray and exited. Opening night, a night I hold dear as a culmination of work, expectation, and

release had been diminished because we were still adding elements. I had entered the zone of keeping my head down and moving forward. A quality I love in all actors, showmanship. Of course we are artists, but at some point in our collaborations we have to nod, smile, find our light, and move on with the show.

I am grateful for the personal journey I have made with Martha, this process has made me a better person and a better actor.

Self Evaluation

“No, Sister, this case is a little more complicated than that.” –Doctor

I am proud of the work I did in this show – more because of the magnitude of the work and less because of the quality. I would liken it to running a marathon; I ran the whole time without stopping, I experienced the runner’s high once, I hit some walls, but I finished the race with quasi grace. The dark moments made the light more enjoyable. In the end, I did not beat any of my personal bests; the miracle was in the crossing of the line. The experience is certainly going down in the books, somewhere under great life-learning events, between my first love and that time I accidentally caught my favorite sweater on fire...while wearing it.

Historically, my success can be gauged by how much I beat myself up at the end of the night. I take my work personally and have been told I take it too seriously. Most nights I’d rather hide after shows than greet the audience, expressing often my love for rehearsals and desire to stay within them forever. I do love performing, putting all of my energy into the story, and serving the audience. The nightly aftermath of *Agnes* was more along the lines of forgiveness. Because the show was so mammoth for me – by that I mean the entering the stage and not leaving till the act break and running the gamut of actions and emotions between – there was no time for me to dwell on small actor mistakes. When a line was skipped or a beat missed, I had so many lines and beats ahead of me I could only focus on the task at hand. Over and over in my head I could hear my Meisner teacher, Larry Silverberg, say, “What is happening right now?” – reminding me to never stop taking in my environment. Then, because Meisner actors get a bad rap for staying in the moment too long, I would think of my friend Mike Harkins’s words: “think faster.”

This experience was a particular challenge for many reasons. When it was time to perform, I was relieved. Partly because that meant the end was nigh, but also because the theatre is an actor's medium. Performances meant the show was mine, and I could feel creatively free within the confines handed to me by the director. I have never worked well under a microscope, and this rehearsal process was tedious and offensive at times. Getting past that allowed me to perform, possibly better than I ever had. Also, the show grew with every performance. Because we were roughly two weeks behind on schedule, incredible growth occurred over the span of performances.

As far as my goals for the project were concerned, it was hit or miss. One of my stated challenges going into the piece was the direct address to the audience. The director gave me the option of addressing my own therapist or using it as a confessional. He also said the struggle was in my mind which would have translated to me talking to myself during those monologues. Unfortunately, none of those things specifically materialized. If I would try it one specific way it would not work. Instead, relying on my instincts, I flowed between those concepts; resulting in what I consider to be artistic failure. Stanislavsky said it best, "Generality is the enemy of all art," (Bruder p.15). Because I could not make that specific decision, I believe the show suffered. The script was unclear. I did not believe that Martha would be that forthcoming with her therapist, nor do I think she told the strange joke about a mob hanging a man to a confessor. The closest idea to what seemed most truthful to me was the reliving of the events in her mind. This then begged the question, did I need to have a given circumstance outside of what the play already provided? What is the role of the audience in any play? The audience is the reason we are here, without an audience what would the theatre be? Our whole purpose is to plan for them, perform for them, serve them, and to tell them a story. Is this

simplicity not enough? I always ask myself “who” I’m talking to in any given scene. Is it too simple for the answer to be the audience, the specific individuals who came to see that specific performance? Is that not specificity enough?

I found the confessional idea to be physically confining. Usually a person is seated and speaking to a character they cannot quite see at their side. This was an action I could only truly commit to in the first and last monologues and even then, only for parts of them. This still left the question of who I was talking to in the meat of the play.

I believe a strength of mine is feeling connected to the work. The words become a part of me. The process takes longer than some techniques but when I know the words they are as much a part of me as my own voice because they hold great personal meaning. The same goes for my scene partners. Even for past class projects it has been more important for me to spend quality time with my partner, getting to know them, feeling appreciated by them, learning how to trust them, than it has been to learn the scene. The learning of the scene is the simple part; the learning of a person is much more difficult. The scene is just on the page. It is the people and our experiences with them that lifts it off and brings it to life. This project was far from the norm in the sense that early on in the rehearsal process I spent little to no time outside of rehearsal with my partners. I wish I could go back and change this. Our schedules did not mesh and it seemed impossible. As opening night drew closer and the situation became direr, fear drove us to find that time, and it was well used. By the time we opened I felt at one with the ladies in the show, more so with Vinnie than with Natalie. Natalie was very much like her character, distant and ethereal. I think I purposely kept her at a distance, because it helped me drive to know her more in the scene. I was always aware of our distance off stage. In the play she was not human; she was a far off creature who took on symbols of Martha’s personal failures in life, her strained

relationship with and eventual loss of her own mother, the loss of her sister, the loss of her best friend, a stand in for all the nuns who had ever wronged her, a child. For Martha, all those symbols fueled her to push on through the action of the play.

I never felt like I had mastered or controlled this piece. For instance, the smoking: I do not think that was ever as artfully executed as it could have been. I was not uncomfortable in the doing of the thing, and I was painfully aware of how much it bothered others. There were nights when I could say fuck it, and there were nights when people coughed and mumbled. I could see the smoke flowing into the eyes of my partner. Feeling that they are my responsibility, I would hold the cigarette higher, which some people responded to as false. Sometimes when playing a role, I get to a point in rehearsal when the material is so a part of my physical and emotional self it turns to putty in my hands; a point at which I can begin to play. Like steel in a forge, that which was immovable becomes movable, and I feel free within the parameters of the work. I am then fully able to serve my partner, the audience, and myself.

I never achieved that cohesive sense of understanding with this project. The culprit might have been the skewed trust amongst the ensemble and director. I acknowledge the fact that I never talked to the director about my concerns regarding the lack of full run-throughs, rehearsal flow, and the feeling of being a marionette. I never had a good reason to not go to him. Looking back, I remember thinking that certain things were just not my job; for instance the stopping and starting in rehearsal was outside of my control. To an extent it was also outside of his control. He couldn't help that an actress struggled with her lines and blocking. The past few years I have focused on connecting with my scene partners so much I have negated the director. The director and I had a good personal relationship but it had yet to extend to the workspace; a failing I will work on in the future. I was not as forthcoming about my needs as I should have been. Looking

back, I remember feeling like he was overwhelmed with certain aspects of the project and I wanted to be the least of his worries. Better communication with the director would have improved this project and will be a personal goal for the future.

Due to the chaos of the experience, going on stage every night became more of a practice of Grotowski's holy theatre centered in as much ritual and spirituality I could muster prior to walking on stage because once I entered the arena the product was out of my hands. The rituals included warming up, spraying my make up space and the dressing room with heart chakra opening essential oils, cleaning the space with a smudge stick, listening to my *Agnes* playlist, making sure a certain song played before I walked on. The walking on was a challenge in itself. I gave up everything, handing myself over to the work I had done, and ultimately the moment. I discovered a different kind of freedom working on this project. It was the freedom from circumstances surrounding the project. Thankfully, the angst could be used on stage. I guess what I'm saying is that Martha and I made a similar journey. The difference from the freedom I'm used to feeling on stage and the freedom I learned to experience in *Agnes* is control. Control is comfortable, but I am proud of learning to work without it, and instead work from a place of freedom and belief in miracles. Perhaps that is why, for the first time in my acting career, I left each performance with my head held high. There was no reason for this show to not crash and burn for every single performance and when it did not, I knew that St. Genesis, the patron saint of actors, performers, and clowns was smiling down on me.

“Or perhaps the song was simply a remembered lullaby sung many years before. And the father was hope, and love and desire and a belief in miracles.” -Doctor

Agnes responses
American College Theatre Festival Respondent's critique:
Pia Wyatt and Michael Boudewyns
"This is what they saw today."

Friday November 6, 2016

- They noticed a lack of sound designer in the program.
- They admired the set and equated it to my broken dreams/ tears falling.
- A bare bulb was pointed out in the house – unsexy.
- The show starts when someone comes to see the show; there was no information to be found on the website.
- They thought the poster was evocative and beautiful.
- The set looked like a snow angel
- Banners hanging in a church – a visual that also came to mind for them.
- They wished my costume was more business like. Harder lines
- They noted my costume was unflattering “unprofessional”
- My costume communicated “MOM”.
- Several things happening at once on stage.
- The singing and the speaking were in competition.
- The moving of the furniture was controversial; he liked it but also felt it became a play about moving furniture.
- Losing vital information (I was busy therefore my information was not credible) He lost the beginning sentences and compared the first moments to a magic trick. Losing the idea of “Look here! Not here!” The theatre is magic.
- Why not an electronic cigarette? “The storytelling of smoking”

- He thought I was uncomfortable because it was unhealthy. He went on about the unhealthiness and made it known he did not appreciate the choice to smoke.
- The smoking was hard for the audience.
- Agnes' nose ring. Why is that part of the show?
- Anything on stage is part of the play.
- Lovely connection with Agnes and Doctor.
- They loved the size difference between Agnes and Doctor.
- They noticed Agnes and Doctor's connection but wanted us to open up more; include audience.
- Michael, having seen me perform before felt that I had more of a sense of theatricality in the past than in the performance tonight.
- I was not in my light, "find the hotspot" they said – *[I want to add that I know how to find my light but because two productions were being set in the same theatre we had not experienced a proper tech and were still getting light cues and sound cues down.]*
- They wanted more specific light changes. Specifically for the flashbacks They noted it was not choreographed enough.
- The transitions were great.
- Michael noted he could see the magician pulling the strings.
- Michael wished the stage had been white for the blood. Magically delicious.
- Going into Act 2 No music, they wanted music.
- The ending music didn't match the top music.
- They didn't understand the echos throughout or at the act. *[The note to add this happened on what was supposed to be our opening night but was turned into a preview.]*

It was a big moment. The last moment of act 1 and I was told to allow it to affect me but that it was not for me; for the audience. I don't think I ever made this work correctly. I did not know how to not hear it since I heard the other echoes. It was a challenge. It came at the last minute and I feel I failed at incorporating it.]

- They noted that the memorization was off. Humans stumbling was a part of their experience.
- Hypnotism not set up. Not specific enough. Build tension. Now this will happen NOW this will happen... etc.
- Kick up the tempo at the end of act 1
- On the blocking – both people were sitting and talking or taking turns sitting, not storytelling.
- Use the cigarette to make a point.
- Somebody else deal with the table at the end of the 1st act, they felt it was a poor use of me.
- The table is then off stage right and can be seen by audience, it needed to be struck.
- The moving of chairs was not storytelling.
- They felt we rushed the hypnotism.
- I need to open up to the audience. *[on this night I had not placed a chair correctly which had me facing my partner more and less the audience]*
- Pia needed us to be in Action more.
- Not enough tension or obstacle for them.
- They disagreed with the touch at the top of the show. They did not feel it was earned.

- They said they did not see fighting but cooperating between Mother and I. *[this made notable improvement by the end of the run]*
- They thought I executed great direct address and good emotionalization.
- They noted that the end was too choreographed with the crossing to Agnes during her last monologue.
- They said, “Please don’t change anything”
- They did not need the transition from Stage Right to Stage Left for me.
- The stepping down during my final moment did not buy anything.
- He felt we were still in character for the curtain call. He wanted us to be us. *[this was not a decision we made, I think we were all in shock at the end every show]*
- He was not clear when intermission began.
- For the bows he wanted a group bow first then individual. 4 equally important parts.

I caught the respondents after for further comments:

- They thought I was strong and together – no nonsense.
- Moving the set bothered one respondent but not the other.
- They thought I was stalwart and that works at the end.
- They hated the smoking. Hated.
- They didn’t feel my costume was complimentary to my profession or my body.
- They loved Martha’s relationship to Agnes.
- They appreciated the size difference between Martha and Agnes.
- They appreciated my mothering and smothering of Agnes.
- They felt I was a good listener.

- They felt I drove the play well.
- They felt the play was at a 7 and we needed to strive for the 10.

Personal Notes:

Overall I felt the ACTF people disliked their experience. While they didn't seem to be struggling to find things they enjoyed I felt that they dove in with what they did not like and held on to those things. The smoking and my costume were two things they repeatedly commented on as things that did not help the production.

This was hard to take. They were not supposed to come on our opening night, our producer saw to it that they would not take that away from us as a moment of celebration. That said, our actual opening night, two nights before, was called a preview by the director so we stayed after for notes and it was not much of a celebration. I did not feel like I had the pleasure of an opening night with this show and that was disappointing after so much work. Do not fear, I made up for this loss on closing night.

Post Mortem

- The vulnerability throughout- on the verge of tears. “on the cusp of tripping over the whole time”
- Escaped Morality, escaped the answer – between faith and non faith without judgement.
- Graduality of relationship, not forced.
- Appreciated comic relief. Good moments of statements of meaning.
- Tediously gradual
- Designer question: Kevin: Shaping of space? Cumbersome. How was that?

- Natalie enjoyed the smaller space. Felt it was more meaningful.
- The “confined vulnerable” read well. Simple. Elegant.
- Placing the action was difficult. “Where was this happening?”
- Appreciation of the symbolism of my seat of power
- The play took place in my mind space.
- Designer: Mitchell: asked if it was too shadowy? Maintained the construct. Tighter? His goal was to flow in and out until we broke it at the end.
- The shadow symbol nun. What was she? Not an actual person but the placeholder of one.
- My question to audience: What was the last moment of the first act for you? It was agreed that it wasn’t clear. Mixed feedback.
- Agnes is the female Christian version of *Equus*.
- Designer: Kevin: (on the blood) too literal, it could have been more visceral in our minds.
- Designer: Kevin: The stage set drew attention and was not necessary.
- Agnes of God – obviously written by a man. Not contemporary anymore.
- What spurred the decision to do this piece?

The Big Easy Entertainment Awards

In the spring of 2016 *Agnes of God* was honored with a nomination for Best University Production.

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Appendix I
Rehearsal Photographs

All photographs were taken by our stage manager, Samantha Eroche.















Appendix II

Scene Goals and Obstacles

Act I Scene i:

Objective: To dive in, to remember.

Obstacle: The facts get in the way.

Act I Scene ii:

Objective: To get acquainted with the case and subject.

Obstacle: Mother avoids my questions.

Act I Scene iii:

Objective: To share about my sister and clarify my stance on objectivity and God.

Obstacle: Marie, my sister, and the anger I hold on to is my obstacle to objectivity.

Act I Scene iv:

Objective: To examine my subject.

Obstacle: Agnes evades my questions and hallucinates.

Act I Scene v:

Objective: To learn why Agnes is the way she is.

Obstacle: Mother continues to avoid my questions in order to protect Agnes.

Act I Scene vi:

Objective: To reminisce about my own mother and to reveal my own secret.

Obstacle: The fight for objectivity.

Act I Scene vii:

Objective: To get Agnes to confess that she knows where babies come from.

Obstacle: Agnes refuses to acknowledge the pregnancy.

Act I Scene viii:

Objective: To obtain the facts from Mother and convince her that I'm on her side.

Obstacle: Mother threatens to remove her from my care then concedes to help me find information.

Act I Scene ix:

Objective: To prove I am a meticulous Doctor and will stop at nothing to get to the bottom of this case.

Act I Scene x:

Objective: To get Agnes' permission to hypnotize her and convince Mother I mean no harm.

Obstacle: Mother attempts to refuse the hypnotism but agrees when I implicate her in the child's death.

Act II Scene i:

Objective: To confess my obsession with the case.

Obstacle: The memories will not allow me to finish my sentence.

Act II Scene ii:

Objective: To comfort, then hypnotize Agnes. (Exploring the night the baby came)

Obstacle: Mother interferes with the hypnotism.

Act II Scene iii:

Objective: To expose my dream that broke open my desire to have children and exclaim that there is hope for my own future.

Obstacle: The doctor vs. human struggle. I still have to maintain professionalism.

Act II Scene iv:

Objective: To demand information from Mother and conclude the case with one more hypnotism. (Exploring the night of conception)

Obstacle: Finding out the truth that Agnes had killed the child.

Act II Scene v:

Objective: To wonder, plead, and question the audience. Why did this happen?

Obstacle: The question remains without answer. The case is settled but the heart is not.

Appendix III

The Agnes of God Playlist

- *Where is My Mind?* by Maxence Cyrin
- *Where is My Mind?* By Trampled by Turtled
- *Sedated* by Hozier
- *To Be Alone* by Hozier
- *Someone New* by Hozier
- *Foreigner's God* by Hozier
- *Like Real People Do* by Hozier
- *Someday You'll be Loved* by Deathcab for Cutie
- *Murder in the City* by The Avett Brothers
- *All My Mistakes* by The Avett Brothers
- *When I Drink* by The Avett Brothers
- *Accidental Babies* by Damien Rice
- *Agnus Dei* by Rufus Wainwright
- *And So It Goes* by Billy Joel
- *The Animals Were Gone* by Damien Rice
- *Awake my Soul* by Mumford and Sons
- *The Blower's Daughter* by Damien Rice
- *Cigarette* by Ben Folds Five
- *Cold Water* by Damien Rice

- *Creep* by Pretenders
- *Delicate* by Damien Rice
- *Don't Forget Me* by Neko Case
- *Elephant* by Damien Rice
- *Everything Will Be Alright* by The Killers
- *Ghosts* by The Head and The Heart
- *Hallelujah* by Jeff Buckley
- *Halo* by Ane Brun & Linnea Olsson
- *Heal* by Tom Odell
- *Keep Breathing* by Ingrid Michaelson
- *Little Sister* by Rufus Wainwright
- *Lonely* by Yael Naim & David Donatien
- *Lullaby (Goodnight my Angel)* by Billy Joel
- *Miss You* by Alabama Shakes
- *Still Hurting* by The Last Five Years Original Cast
- *Nobody Needs to Know* by The Last Five Years Original Cast
- *Parting Gift* by Fiona Apple

Appendix IV

Who's Who in the Production

Director: Beau Bratcher

Assistant Director: Jenny Billot

Scenic Design: Kevin Griffith

Lighting Design: Diane Baas and Mitchel Courville

Costume Design: Tony French

Stage Manager: Samantha Eroche

Assistant Stage Manager: Julia Anne Harris

Dr. Martha Livingstone: Meghan Rose Shea

Agnes: Natalie Marie Collins

Mother Miriam Ruth: Venita Matthews

Ensemble: Camille Collins

Vita

Meghan Rose Shea was born and raised in Covington Louisiana. She has been involved in various forms of performance art for as long as she can remember. In 2005 she completed her Bachelors of Science degree in Musical Theatre Performance from Northwestern State University. Post undergrad she moved to New York where she interned with Davenport Theatrical Productions. Eventually, submitting to wanderlust, Meghan moved to the Samut Prakan province of Thailand where she taught English and organized performances for the students. In 2007 she started working for St. Tammany Parish School Board where she joyfully taught for the Talented Theatre program. In 2016 Meghan fulfilled her dream of obtaining her M.F.A. in Theatre Performance from the University of New Orleans. She has been kissed by a wild sea lion, had an elephant go rogue on her, and once swam with several sharks. She has loves teaching, acting, directing, and is an avid snorkeler. She currently lives in Slidell, Louisiana with her love, Casey Taylor, and their two pets, Ziggy Stardust the dog and Oyster Po Boy the cat.