



**Smithsonian Institution**

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

## **Playbill for Your Arms Too Short to Box With God**

Extracted on Apr-19-2024 06:41:52

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"I trust audiences. They are the only standard by which I judge. And you know what? They are always right. You give me 2000 drunk Shriners, and if they don't get quiet and listen and watch when I get up in front of them, it's *my* fault. They bought the ticket. They volunteered to come. It's my job to entertain them."

*Agnes of God*, in which she plays a psychiatrist who is state of the art modern humankind as perceived by science...except for her reserve of humanity ("They haven't worked that out yet," she asides), pits her awesome acting talents against two equal acting heavyweights: Geraldine Page and Amanda Plummer. Ashley calls them "the two most brilliant actresses I've ever worked with," which made her assignment all the more difficult since her psychiatrist character is the least showy of the three stage roles.

"This has been difficult," Ashley says of the play which deals with a young convent nun whose murdered newborn baby is discovered by her Sisters. "The entire play is a tapestry of human nature, a tapestry," Ashley continues, "about the terrible dangers of dogma and arrogance. It's a play about life and death, God and sex," she says off-handedly. Deep. Very deep. And complicated.

Elizabeth Ashley replaced Lee Remick in the role of the narrator/psychiatrist just prior to the play's opening in New York. "I had been offered the play twice before but wasn't available," she recalls. "And then I got a call. It was a little like being a musician with a band somewhere on tour and getting a call saying, 'Hey, someone's died, can you come play with us,' and your finding out that the band you've agreed to play with is The Rolling Stones."

Ashley had 10 days to learn the role: "One week in Boston where the play was trying out, and one week in New York

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when we opened in previews." It was down to the wire but on opening night Ashley was ready. And with her customary élan, she managed a handsome ensemble effort with Page and Plummer.

Elizabeth Ashley is as up-front about her personal life and her beliefs, as she is about her professional life. Four years ago the autobiography she wrote with Ross Firestone was published. Called *Actress: Postcards from the Road*, the book was an enthralling, sometimes shocking look at life in the big arena. In it she wrote about her marriage to George Peppard, her affair with writer Tom McGuane, and her life upon the 'wicked stage.' "That book was my knee-jerk reaction to all the show business books," says Ashley. "I never thought it would sell, but it did." She says the book is about "my emotional and artistic adolescence. It's my childhood. I think since I wrote it I've grown old, if not up."

Honesty, it seems, is one of Elizabeth Ashley's natural resources.

"With me, what you see is what you get," she brags, lighting yet another cigarette, and allowing the smoke to billow over her head.

"The only thing I cannot be accused of is *image*."

No one can call me a fake. They can't lay that petty contempt on me. No, no. Take it or leave it. That's what it is."

[[advertisement]]

[[image: black and white photograph of a divided television screen showing a football player catching the ball. The left side is annotated: "Freeze frame on Toshiba's four-head Beta system." The right side is annotated: "Freeze frame on ordinary VCR systems.\*"]]

[[bold]] Toshiba stops the play without interference. [[/bold]]

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[[image: black and white photograph of a Toshiba Beta-video player and remote]]

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\*Actual TV picture.

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