

Nuns, silly and serious, hit Broadway

Retta Blaney | May. 16, 2011



Patina Miller, center, and the ensemble from "Sister Act" at the Broadway Theatre in New York

Sr. Jamison Connelly is a counselor in a Catholic drug rehabilitation center. Her garb is standard middle-aged nun fare -- black skirt and vest, royal-blue shirt, a crucifix pin, a simple wedding band. She depends on prayer to get her through her challenging work. And she swears -- profusely.

Nearby, at the Queen of Angels convent, the sisters have no discernible work. Attired in full black and white habits, with only their faces showing, they giggle and sing their way through the day -- "Praise the Lord, it's good to be a nun." The world's your oyster when you're locked inside a cloister. It's easy to imagine they've never heard a curse word, much less uttered one.

Such are the portrayals of women religious in two shows that opened within 24 hours of each other on Broadway in April, "High" and "Sister Act." "High" closed on Apr. 24, just five days after opening, due to negative reviews, but will probably go out to regional theaters soon.



"High," a drama by Matthew Lombardo, is born from his life experience. "Sister Act"

is a musical version of the 1992 Whoopi Goldberg movie about nuns harboring a second-rate lounge singer who has witnessed a murder. Both shows are likely to attract audiences -- "High" because it stars an A-list Hollywood and theater actress, Kathleen Turner, and "Sister Act" because it's a musical and the film was a hit that spawned a follow-up film. Goldberg is a producer of the Broadway version.

While audiences may latch onto these current nun stories, the real vowed women are likely to feel much more of

a kinship at the Booth Theatre with Sister Jamison, a former drug addict who was homeless for several years at the height of her addiction, than they are to the comic characters up the street at the Broadway Theatre.

As silly as the nuns can be in "Sister Act," at least they're women. In his off-Broadway show "The Divine Sister," female impersonator Charles Busch offers a spoof of the far-fetched nun portrayals from 1960s movies such as "The Singing Nun" and "The Trouble With Angels."

The realistic quality Lombardo brings to Sister Jamison is natural considering the Catholic playwright based her in part on a high school teacher. But what makes her even more believable is what else he drew upon -- his faith and how that enabled him to recover from a seven-year addiction to crystal meth.

"Sister Jamison is a nun, but I think she doesn't buy into a lot of Catholicism," Lombardo said during an interview in the conference room of his show's publicist. "She has her special relationship with God. She gets him and he gets her. She covers herself in being a nun."

Her descent into addiction and homelessness was caused largely by guilt she carried from her teenage years, believing she was responsible for her younger sister's death after the boy she brought home one night murdered the girl while Jamison was passed out downstairs.

After three and a half years on the street, Jamison got sober, returned to her childhood faith and became a nun "to find forgiveness and seek redemption." She explains that doing all of that was enough. Giving up profanity as well would be "too much for one lifetime."

"I curse -- a lot," she says. "It's one of my character defects."

She's also quick with a sarcastic response. Complaining one morning about starting work so early, her superior, Fr. Michael Delpapp (Stephen Kunken), asks if she hadn't had to get up early in the convent.

"No, and we didn't make bread and cheese for the townspeople," she quips.

Lombardo says nuns were his biggest fan base in pre-Broadway productions in Hartford, Conn., Cincinnati and St. Louis, responding to Sister Jamison's unconventionality.

"She's a very human, tangible character. They respond to her faith, in some way, and to her flaws."

The nuns in "Sister Act" lean more toward caricature, in keeping with the genre of musical comedy and the model set by the movie, although one of their creators, playwright Douglas Carter Beane, based them in part on the sisters he encountered growing up in Philadelphia in the 1970s (the same city and decade in which the show is set). A Protestant with "a long line of Methodist ministers in my family," Beane got to know and admire nuns when he was a student choir member competing with Catholic schools.

"They were always full of life, fun and enthusiasm, and they were great listeners," said Beane during a telephone interview from his Manhattan home. "I have no horror stories. They were loving, nurturing people. I didn't have that [Protestant] prejudice. It was very much the opposite."

For this reason, even though his job is to shoot for comedy rather than realism, he has worked to invest his sisters with as much truth and integrity as possible and make the religious references real enough that "a Catholic person seeing the show would have a good time."

"I want to treat them as human beings. That allows me to write people as best I can without pushing a viewpoint. I want it to be a Christian review of life within the confines of a Broadway theater, to not sound preachy and to be uplifting."

Since this is his "first Catholic piece," he spent a great deal of time on the Web site Fish on Friday, which attempts to explain Catholicism to non-Catholics, "went to St. Patrick's a lot and did a lot more kneeling" -- including lighting candles to St. Jude when the going got tough -- and read interviews with nuns online. He also sent his script to a nun who was the sister of a theater friend and she returned it with comments in the margins. When he had immediate questions he took them to two Catholic cast members, Fred Applegate (Monsignor O'Hara) whose wife is a liturgist, and Audrie Neenan (Sr. Mary Lazarus) who had earlier in life considered becoming a nun.

Beane wasn't the only one searching for credibility. Victoria Clark (Mother Superior) corresponded with Mother Dolores Hart, a former actress who is now prioress of the Benedictine Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Conn. Beane had hoped to invite Hart and all the sister consultants to opening night, but because it fell during Holy Week he was planning a night for them at a later time.

As for the authenticity of the habits, when the costume designer asked him what order the sisters were, he said he didn't care as long as they weren't too restricted for their dance numbers.

"It's an imaginary order," he said. They continue to wear full habits as "the last order still holding out."

Lombardo didn't consult any nuns about his script, drawing Sister Jamison as a composite of three people: a teacher at South Catholic High School in Hartford, Conn., Sr. Maureen Reardon; his no-nonsense rehabilitation sponsor; and his mother, a compassionate woman "who says the rosary everyday like a good Catholic woman should. She taught me my religion."

The influences are obvious. Sister Jamison is never so real as when she prays. Ordered by Father Michael to take on the case of a 19-year-old addict she feels inadequate to treat, she beseeches the Trinitarian God for help in formal prayer, but she also talks to God as a companion.

"You have got to meet me halfway or it's not going to work," she cries out, echoing the words the playwright uttered himself at his darkest hour. Until he was 36 he had been strongly anti-drugs, but then he fell in love with the wrong guy.

"He was addicted to crystal meth and I was addicted to him," he says about the start of the seven-year downward spiral during which he lost his home and his career, and his family wouldn't talk to him unless he agreed to go into therapy.

That day finally came in 2007 when he woke up in a seedy Times Square hotel in a room where the windows were covered with tinfoil, blankets and sheets, an addict's attempt to keep out all brightness. Lombardo stumbled into the bathroom, turned on the harsh light and looked into the mirror. The wasted man staring back jolted him, as he realized for the first time what he had become, a drug addict.

At that moment, the duct tape holding up a sheet peeled off and the tinfoil fell. A spot of afternoon sun bounced off the mirror, filling the room with light and color. He doesn't know whether it was coincidence, divine intervention or a drug-induced hallucination, but it was the epiphany he needed. He got down on his knees and told God he would get himself into a taxi and to a hospital if God would see him through recovery.

"You have to believe in a power greater than yourself," he says. "It was faith that gave me the strength to get sober and to write the play."

It wasn't only his personal life that changed. Before "High," he wrote what he describes as "fluffy light comedies." His harrowing journey changed that.

"I thought, "Maybe this came into my life for a reason." What I knew was being an addict and Catholicism. Maybe there was something in that challenge of life that I could turn into my art."

Using his experience, he broadened his play to appeal to a larger audience than just Catholics and former addicts.

"I tried to make it more about faith than religion. It's set in a Catholic rehabilitation center but it's about a much bigger discussion."

Like Sister Jamison, he relies on faith to carry him through.

"I go to many recovery meetings. That's where my faith is restored, being in a room full of people who share belief in a higher power restores me and my faith and my sobriety."

He learned that faith is the only way he can continue.

"Addiction is indeed a disease. The American Medical Association says there is no cure but there is treatment and the best is a 12-step program based on the belief in a power greater than yourself. Isn't it beautiful that the American Medical Association says if you find faith you will get sober? It's the only disease treated with faith."

And he thinks it's great that two plays about the importance of faith opened back-to-back on the Great White Way this season. "It's where we are in our history today. People want to have faith. They're looking for something greater than themselves."

Beane agreed.

"Materialism is kind of running its course," he said. "People are asking, "Why are we here? Is there anything more to life??"

[Retta Blaney is the author of *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors*.]

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