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The sad, suffering return of 'Godspell'

Retta Blaney | Dec. 9, 2011

The company performs "Light of the World" from the Broadway revival of "Godspell" at Circle in the Square Theater. (Photos by Jeremy Daniel)

?Godspell? is showing its age, at least as represented by director Daniel Goldstein?s production at New York?s Circle in the Square Theatre. This first Broadway revival of the beloved 1971 ?rock musical? might be compared to a middle-aged person trying to recapture youth. In people the result is sad to see, but here it?s just boring.

What seemed fresh and light 40 years ago -- 20-something actors cavorting around in colorful ragtag costumes singing and acting out Jesus? parables, with him leading and joining in the fun -- now seems like a church pageant aimed at getting the youth group more interested in religion. Nothing in this revival is of Broadway quality except the songs, which were adapted by composer/lyricist Stephen Schwartz from the Episcopal hymnal and the Gospel of Matthew.

Even the songs suffer here because of choreographer Christopher Gattelli?s formulaic dance moves, which in the case of the show?s breakout hit, ?Day by Day,? look more like a cardio class warm-up. I also thought of the gym during ?We Beseech Thee,? which had cast members bouncing on mini trampolines. The performance was about as involving as watching someone else exercising. The one musical exception was ?All Good Gifts,? nicely sung by Telly Leung and the company and presented simply.

The fitness center motif continued with Goldstein?s bizarre staging of the Last Supper with Jesus and the disciples gathered around a hot tub. For the life of me I don?t understand the significance of that. Maybe if they had all hopped in it might have made a point, if a bit of a kinky one, of communion and fellowship. As it was, they sat there passing around some pita bread and a chalice while the water bubbled and steamed in front of them.

Another major problem I had with the show was its failure to use inclusive language. I understand that the songs are already set to King James, but the spoken scripture needed someone with a New Revised Standard Version. Attempts were made throughout to update the jokes, such as having the judge in the Good Samaritan parable hurry on by with the excuse of having to get to court for a Lindsay Lohan appearance ?again,? but then all the scriptural references featured the ?God and men,? ?every man who humbles himself? and ?nurses a grudge against his brother? viewpoint.

I had this same complaint when I reviewed the 30th anniversary off-Broadway revival in 2000 for *NCR*. I mentioned this to Schwartz during a telephone interview then and he told me inclusive language ?fails as art? and that he has always felt men represented everyone. I told him I had never felt included in the word men. Why would I? I?m not a man. I suggested substitutes like neighbor or brothers and sisters and he said he liked the idea of using neighbor and would speak to the director, Shawn Rozsa. I didn?t revisit that production so I don?t know if the changes were made, but here we are in 2011 for the trumpeted first Broadway revival, and the language is as exclusive as ever.

It?s a shame this production is so limp, because ?Godspell? has meant a great deal to many people. It ran for five years off-Broadway before transferring to the Great White Way in 1976, where it ran for another year. It has been produced throughout the world and its song ?Long Live God? was used in Catholic liturgies until at least the late 1980s. ?Day by Day,? based on a 13th-century Catholic prayer, spent 14 weeks on the Billboard Hot 100 chart. ?Godspell? even had the distinction of breaking the color barrier in South Africa when, in 1974 at Schwartz?s insistence, it was performed with an integrated cast before an integrated audience.

The audience when I attended this revival was largely middle-aged, probably boomers with great memories of the show. I had seen the original production off-Broadway when I was in high school and admit I wasn?t thrilled at the thought of seeing it again, but figured I?d get into it once I was there. I like the songs and still listen occasionally to the original cast album, but the staging here is so bland that the songs would have been better served in concert form.

The revival?s marketers must be hoping to draw in young people rather than rely on nostalgic boomers because ads proclaim it as being by the author of ?Wicked,? Schwartz?s 2003 musical still playing to large audiences at the theater next door to ?Godspell.? I wonder, though, if today?s generation can be drawn in to this story about the teachings of Jesus after having cut their musical theater teeth on the current comedy blockbuster ?The Book of Mormon,? which features a song about female genital

mutilation, and on a hit from several years ago, ?Spring Awakening,? in which the young characters were either talking about sex, having sex or masturbating.

Godspell was conceived and originally directed by John-Michael Tebelak, who died in 1985 of a heart attack at the age of 35. He left his royalties to my church, the Episcopal Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, where he was an artist in residence. Lisa Schubert, vice president for cathedral events, marketing and communications, said that over the past decade the cathedral has received royalties of between approximately $50,000 and $75,000 a year, which are applied to the general support of the cathedral?s arts activities. Long live ?Godspell?!

[Retta Blaney is the author of *Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life Through the Eyes of Actors* (Sheed & Ward, 2003), which includes interviews with Kristin Chenoweth, Edward Herrmann, Liam Neeson, Phylicia Rashad and Vanessa Williams.]

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?Godspell? on Broadway
www.godspell.com

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