

A Biblical Rock 'n' Roll

By Drew Wemple



THROUGH SOUND, its rhythmic piano rolls, operatic harmonies and vibrant guitar licks melded into one. In story, it's a twist on classic biblical parables, with simple messages that can apply to even modern-day life.

Godspell is a production that takes gospel and gives it a rock 'n' roll twist. It gives a jovial take on the Bible's prophetic accounts and sets them to rapid and lively musical tempos. It's a story that's been told in many different ways and through the eyes of many theatrical visionaries, but now, a few North Country theater companies are peeling back all its layers to show what this play truly has to offer for everyone. Adirondack Regional Theatre (ART), Chazy Music Theatre (CMT) and the Essex Theatre Company (ETC) have come together to collaborate on this project and give it a local twist.

The play itself begins with recanting the long-told parables, through musical numbers with swirling genres and eye-catching dance routines. The story of Lazarus, the widow and the judge and the good Samaritan are stories taught in church halls, schools and even bedtime stories for some but now come to life on stage. The musical bounces from parable to parable with each one possessing its own daily-life applicable message before shifting to the pensively emotional crucifixion: the passion of the Christ. But while this storyline may reflect heavily religious overtones, it's truly a theatrical masterpiece and done in a way that doesn't feel like sitting through a bible school class.

"It's an interesting little view into some of the big themes about what Jesus of Nazareth was trying to say, through the eyes of these storytellers, done in such a way that is visually interesting," says Director Dana Berry. "I think it'll be really appealing to a lot of families and a lot of people across every different denomination. I don't think it's necessarily overly religious. I think it's really welcoming. It embraces diversity, pride and inclusivity."

Along with portraying that message through the storyline itself, *Godspell* features an eclectic range of musical styles, rhythms and instruments that amplify its theme. Writers Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelak crafted choruses and harmonies in this production that have been celebrated in theater. Songs, such as *Save the People* and *Day by Day*, are just a few of the play's most notable musical numbers; yet

with each unique lyric and melody, these songs resonate the idea of acceptance and kindness.

"Everyone's a little bit different when it comes to spirituality, but I think it's just sending that overall message of just being a good person. With the music, it might have some of those religious undertones in it lyrically, but if you were to just kind of remove the lyrics from the Psalms, you'd think you're listening to maybe a rock song or a jazz song or a gospel kind of sound," says Shannon Passno-Waite, the music director.

One of the twists these several North Country theatrical companies have put on this production is election to do its 2011 revival version. In this Broadway-rebooted version of *Godspell*, the music and choreography were given a modern jolt, with aspects re-orchestrated, yet still stays true to the story and its essence.

"It's got that rock edge to it with crazy harmonies and a lot of clashing chords that when you're listening to it, it sounds really awesome," says Passno-Waite. "But when you're trying to learn it, it's deceptively hard. But it's such a cool challenge. I feel like I'm being challenged musically again, which is really neat. It keeps me on my toes."

Another one of the fascinating aspects to this particular interpretation of *Godspell* is that it was the product of an intuitive collaboration between the three local theatrical groups.

ART and CMT creatively combined their artistic forces, trading visions and ideas, as good neighbors do. "We're super stoked that we can do this together and that we can bring the talents from Chazy Music Theatre and Adirondack Regional Theatre together because of the nature of community in the show, we were thinking it would be really representative of us coming together," says Berry passionately. "As a theater community, there's not many of us, and we try to share and be as open with each other as we can. So, it's great to be able to work together."

The ETC also has entered into this symbiotic partnership by playing host to this production for one of its two-weekend run. This show was originally set to just be performed at the Strand Center for the Arts in Plattsburgh; however, Essex has opened its Masonic

Lodge doors to make this musical even more accessible and inclusive for the community.

"I just think it's really cool that we get to share this show in two different places. I think that also shows how adaptive our actors are and how willing they are to be able to do that," says Passno-Waite, excitedly. "One weekend of a show generally is pretty draining as is, because you're putting so much into it. The adrenaline and everything kicking in feels awesome, but at the end of it, it is pretty tiring. But it's really cool that we get to kind of have this experience twice, in a different spot."

While these companies are sharing spaces, costumes, props and ideas, what might be the biggest piece to this theatrical relationship is the merging and coming together of this local talent.

"We have some fun instruments, silly sets, props and different things that we're using, but really, it's a lot of the actors doing a lot of the labor. I love it's that style of acting; it's totally different from what we normally see," says Berry, thoughtfully. "This definitely is going to be a stretch of the imagination and will really put people into maybe a different mindset that I hope makes them think more creatively."

Godspell by design, aims to leave the audience to ponder about the messages it portrays. They're simple bits of truth within each beginning parable, and as it crescendos towards the crucifixion, it reflects on all the morals and themes that were displayed before. It's a curious mix of music, theatre and biblical tales that can leave the audience either humming its famous harmonies or in deep contemplation.

"Kindness, love and positivity are the main themes that I'm hoping that people take away," says Berry with a smile. "If having fun listening to the music or watching the actors is all that they get out of it, that's great."

Adirondack Regional Theatre, Chazy Music Theatre and Essex Theatre Company will present "Godspell" on Aug. 4, 5 and 6 at 7 p.m. and Aug. 7 at 2 p.m. at the Strand Center for the Arts in Plattsburgh and Aug. 11, 12 and 13 at 7 p.m. and Aug. 14 at 2 p.m. at the Masonic Lodge in Essex. For more information or to purchase tickets, email info@adktheatre.com or visit adktheatre.com.