

HUDSON, NEW YORK and beyond



In 1971, when the musical featuring a genre-hopping pop score by a young Stephen Schwartz, and a very loose New Testament story about Jesus' life and teachings conceived by the late John-Michael Tebelak opened in New York, it had a decidedly hippie vibe. Tebelak created the show in the late sixties for his Carnegie Mellon master's thesis. By the time it hit Broadway, three years after HAIR, the concept of Jesus-as-flower child in clown makeup was edgy to most, offensive to some.

GODSPELL is a popular choice for high schools, colleges, and community theaters because it allows the cast of 10 to shine individually, offering each cast member at least one lead vocal part. By the time I saw a professional production in New York in 1981, it was a part of my cultural fabric. I owned the movie soundtrack and had been a part of a high school production.

Pan forward to August 11, in Pittsfield, MA. I came out of a progressive protestant background, so I was prepared for the rock-gospel-laced production. Sitting next to my 22-year-old daughter, I wondered if she would connect with the production's updated garage-rock charm. And would conservative Christians or Non-Christians be offended by the material? Mostly, I wondered--is it possible to outgrow Godspell?

Director Alan Filderman's 10-person troupe assembled onstage, separating themselves equally apart on chairs, and platforms, all part of Randall Parsons' 70s retro design. The audience was small and spread out with significant gaps of fifteen feet in-between groupings of chairs. There was a lot of press, which wasn't surprising; we were making history together. Berkshire Theatre Group's revival of GOSPELL, the first and only live musical approved for performance by Actors' Equity since March, began with a prelude. Under Massachusetts standards for safety, outdoor performance venues are allowed to admit only 100 people, including cast and crew, so the theater can sell only 75 tickets a night, which is why they cost \$100 each. Ordinarily, the theater stages its larger shows in a 780-seat theatre.

Reminiscent of a church revival meeting, the ten actors offered personal testimonies about the pandemic's impact on their lives and careers. Twenty-eight-year-old Brandon Lee had to go back to work at a gas station. Najah Hetsberger, a college student, said she went from the best month of my life to Zoom University. Tim Jones (Judas) had just moved to New York when the city shut down. He returned home to the Berkshires and took a job delivering masks and protective equipment, worrying he might infect his parents with COVID. Kimberly Immanuel voiced her anger over the anti-Asian prejudice she encountered. Other cast members lamented over their uncertain futures.

As Jesus, Nicholas Edwards' delivered magic, with a welcome dose of

humility that left me craving more. Alex Getlin's hauntingly beautiful "By Your Side," must have made her father, an L.A. Times critic who reviewed the show, immensely proud. By the time Isabel Jordan sang Godspell's signature song, "Day By Day" in English and Spanish and Edwards nailed "Beautiful City," Godspell was doing what it does best--speaking to our times. This time with Black Lives Matter movement resonance.

The brilliant Stephen Schwartz (Wicked and Pippin), has updated his lyrics, once again. Beautiful City was written in 1972 as part of the film and re-written in 1993 after the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles. I was there in L.A. during the riots, so the lyrics took me back to that time and also felt so relevant as I reflected on George Floyd's unjust death. I thought of the hope we all so desperately need living in a divided nation affected by social and racial injustices.

What ultimately defines Godspell is the verve, versatility, and dedication of the 10-member troupe who bear witness to our contemporary moment. The fact that they've been quarantining together shows. Braving twice-weekly testing, adapting to performing in and around plexiglass, temperature checks, and choreographed masking and unmasking has produced a bond that explodes from the stage. I thought the constant movement of shuffling plexiglass and donning masks whenever cast members came close to one another would be wildly irritating, but within minutes, I forgot about it.

This GODSPELL captured the spirit of the original in our current circumstances. As Schwartz has noted, his show is not meant to be a revue or a religious tract, but a real play with a strong narrative arc during which dislocated, distressed characters find community through the principles of love, caring, and mutual respect.

My suggestion: buy a ticket and be a part of the die-hard theatre-loving, safely-distanced audience. The message is clear—love thy neighbor. When we band together, the show can go on safely. It is reassuring to know that BTG's experiment will translate to jobs for over 51,000 out-of-work Equity actors and stage managers. The twenty-two-year-old's opinion: Amazing. It defied reality--art designed around science. It was rewarding to know that The Berkshire Theatre's championing safety protocols to deliver a timely performance will lead to more jobs for over 51,000 out of work Actor's Equity actors and stage managers nationwide.

After five months of dark stages nationwide, experiencing live theater in my backyard was a blessing and a gift. Now, more than ever, we need theatre to remind us of the power of community. Ultimately, thanks to Berkshire Theatre Company and their phenomenally talented cast, I was realized that we don't outgrow GODSPELL. When done right--It grows with us.

Godspell opened August 8, 2020, at the Colonial Theatre, Pittsfield MA, and runs through September 4. Tickets and information:
berkshiretheatregroup.org