

# GODSPELL

**A Proposal for Staging**

By Gibson DelGiudice

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## I. ARTIST STATEMENT

### *The Show*

There are many ways to describe *Godspell*; small wonder, as it's undergone many manifestations since it first appeared on the scene in 1971. Savvy theater types would not be remiss in describing the original production as "the musical theatre's equivalent of *Schoolhouse Rock*." The uninitiated sometimes refer to it as "that other Seventies rock musical about Jesus," with more of a folk edge to its score – mostly a new setting of lyrics from the Episcopal hymnal, psalms, and other religious sources by Oscar-winning composer Stephen Schwartz – than the shade of bombast associated with its equally famous cousin, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (*JCS* for short). In either event, the show is playful and centered on a series of parables primarily from the Gospel of Matthew, interspersed with a variety of modern music<sup>1</sup>, with the passion of Christ treated briefly near the end of the performance. Though often dismissed as its genre's equivalent of "empty calories," it has a lot going on under the surface, much like Schwartz's other early Seventies success *Pippin*.

*Godspell* had its start as student John-Michael Tebelak's Master's thesis project, under the direction of Lawrence Carra, at Carnegie Mellon University in 1970. Tebelak had always been fascinated with both theater and religion; while he once said of himself that he "walked into a theatre at the age of nine and stayed there," he was also a lifelong member of the Episcopal Church, and even attended seminary for a time as he considered becoming a priest. After wrestling with Greek and Roman mythology as a possible source for the thesis, with the deadline two weeks away, John-Michael switched course and re-read the Gospels, becoming fascinated by the joy expressed in them. He was further spurred on by Harvey Cox's 1969 *Feast of Fools*, which argued that for religion to once again reach the people, it had to reclaim its festivity and fantasy. Cox contended that much of organized religion had become so somber, so serious, that the joy had gone out of it.

Tebelak ultimately experienced this for himself when he attended a lackluster Easter Vigil service at St. Paul Cathedral in Pittsburgh. He found that the congregation seemed bored, and the priest in a hurry to finish. He wrote, of this experience, "I left with the feeling that, rather than rolling the rock away from the Tomb, they were piling more on." Adding insult to injury, a plainclothes cop who assumed from his usual overalls and T-shirt, and general hippie look, that he was a street kid who merely ducked into the church to escape the unseasonable snow that day stopped him in the nave and frisked him for drugs. To him, the entire ordeal was at odds with his view of the religious experience; namely, that it should be fun, accessible, and joyful, as he felt his reading of the Gospels had been, and further that one shouldn't be made to feel guilty or unwanted for attempting to participate. And so his impetus for writing the show arose: "I went home, took out my manuscript, and worked it to completion in a non-stop frenzy."

Assembling a cast from his college friends (primarily students from the Music Department), and setting traditional hymns from the 1940 Episcopal hymnal to their

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<sup>1</sup> Schwartz's score incorporates a vast array of sounds ranging from pop to folk rock, to gospel, to vaudeville.

own melodies to serve as a score, the original production in December 1970 was successful enough to transfer to the famous New York coffee house and experimental theater lab, Café La MaMa, for a two-week run the following spring. During this run, cast member Jeffrey Mylett contributed an original song, "The Raven and the Swan," and Peggy Gordon added "By My Side," written in collaboration with Jay Hamburger; otherwise, the original scoring by Carnegie student Duane Bolick was retained.

Seen by New York producers who sensed commercial potential but thought the show needed more polish, including a full, unified score, *Godspell* received its final key ingredient when Schwartz, another CMU grad who had been shopping his idea for a musical then called *Pippin*, *Pippin* around town, was invited to rewrite the music. Completed in five weeks, his score, which replaced both dialogue and the original melodies (with the exception of "By My Side") and was much more accessible to the ticket-buying public than the harder rock of shows like *Hair*, was interpolated into *Godspell*, which then opened in its final form Off-Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theatre.

From there, *Godspell* became a musical mega-hit that ran in New York for six years (transferring to Broadway in 1976), won a Grammy, spawned companies which toured worldwide and a much beloved but woefully dated movie, and evolved into a perennial favorite for high schools and colleges with shoestring budgets and great talent. This has been helped in no small part by the way it's traditionally presented; namely, it is (or should be) done each time with a certain amount of updating and personalization completely at the discretion of director and cast, such as in the enactment of the parables (as long as the actual words are used), additional ad-libs, etc. As Stephen Schwartz puts it, "...the underlying intention, as described carefully in the script, should remain the same, and Jesus' actual words should remain the same, but everything else is up for grabs."

### *My Background with the Show*

As a child, people often said I was a person born outside of time, because I had way more interest in yesterday's hits than today's favorites; I was regularly the only something – only second grader who knew *JCS* inside and out, only Beatles fanatic in the fifth grade, only middle schooler obsessed with *Hair*, etc. – and very enthusiastic about whatever I happened to be into at the time. It was sharing my interest in *JCS*, effusively; with everyone I knew who'd listen, which brought me to *Godspell*. A kindly neighbor who I came to regard as a second mother later in life through my close relationship with her two oldest children and with her family, and who was amazed someone so young had such interest in musical theater, let me borrow a movie her mother taped off Cinemax, which turned out to be *Godspell*.

The colors, the costumes, the clown make-up were all dazzling; the songs were catchy. (Seriously, "Day by Day" has a single verse and chorus. I defy you to forget it once it's taken root in your brain.) Admittedly, it took a few viewings to learn how it worked. I saw that it was based on the Gospel of Matthew, sometimes word-for-word, and parables were faithfully, if playfully, rendered. I recognized "Jesus" and "John the Baptist" (who, to my then-surprise, later became "Judas"), and "disciples." But I didn't see more than that at the time. Except for everything following "Beautiful City," a great number if you like *Partridge Family* pastiche, *Godspell* was fun, but essentially a structure-less

hodgepodge centered on flower children in a carnival environment. Later in life, however, closer study revealed a deep structure, and I grew to appreciate its purpose amid the messy creativity: it emphasized the teachings rather than the life of one who taught them. It was about the message, not the messenger, and how joyful it could be.

When one really loves a show as I do *Godspell*, they can – and often do – come up with more than one notion of how to stage the piece. For a time, I was stuck on a very high-concept idea inspired, oddly enough, by another musical that didn't do nearly as well.

As a member of a Facebook group called [Forgotten Musicals](#) which describes itself as “[a] celebration of the inexplicably less-popular shows in the American Musical Theatre (*sic*) catalog,” I learned about an Off-Broadway show that slipped under the radar back in the Eighties called *Ka-Boom!*, and discovered that if one took its premise and applied it to *Godspell*, they might have a revival worth talking about. Indeed, the *New York Times* critic described the show as “a mixture of *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Babes in Arms*.” Its basic premise, a cross between *A Chorus Line* and *Up from Paradise*, was as follows: God blows up the world, leaving only five survivors, all of them actors. He then announces auditions for a show called *Creation, Part II*; in order to continue the human race, they have to put on this show. More content to watch it than run it, God purportedly sends an angel named Avery to oversee the proceedings. After going through the motions, in an unsurprising twist ending, Avery turns out to be God in disguise and the survivors all end up getting cast. (If you're interested, the recording is floating around out there. It ran for 86 performances Off-Broadway.)

In reading the credits, I learned that John-Michael Tebelak directed *Ka-Boom!*, and *Godspell*'s original stage manager, Nina Faso, who also staged *Godspell* herself the world over, was associate director. Digging deeper, I discovered a later *Godspell* cast member, Valerie Williams, was in the show as well. Rightly or wrongly, noting similarities in structure and style, I connected what I thought were the dots and wondered if *Ka-Boom!* started as a *Godspell* revival with a unique framing concept and somehow turned into a new show along the way. Cue the light bulb in my brain!

Quite simply, I took the overarching framework of *Ka-Boom!* and applied it to *Godspell*. As “darker”/“grittier” revivals go, it couldn't get much darker or grittier than that, if perhaps too esoteric to be commercial. It put God's opening monologue about making man gardener for his own “re-creation” in a whole new light, and seeing the formerly drab “Tower of Babble” opening (which has purpose but, in my opinion at the time, didn't really work well) function as confused humans trying to rally others around their viewpoint in order to survive the apocalypse, and finally finding their way forward in Christ's teachings, plus possible divine intervention, would give it a whole new spin.

But I wondered if this wasn't overthinking things a bit. (And consider how unfair it would be to the creators of *Ka-Boom!*) *Godspell* was only ever high-concept in the traditional sense, of a striking and easily communicable idea. There had to be a simpler way to go about reinventing this show for a modern audience. So I studied its inner workings further to see if a new idea would naturally present itself.

## II. PLAY ANALYSIS

My initial study was helped immensely by Stephen Schwartz's desire for people to better understand *Godspell*. Around the turn of the century, he wrote a set of "director's notes" to be paired with the script sent out by the licensing agencies<sup>2</sup> which represent the show. Schwartz summed up the basic point of what he wished to get across in his notes in an interview for Carol de Giere's career retrospective book *Defying Gravity*:

*What really happens in **Godspell** is that ten separate individuals come together and then turn to the audience and attempt to get them to also become a unit – with them. The show is really about the formation of a community. That is the event of the show. These troubled strangers arrive in a place and then a person comes, and you can think he's a smart guy or you can think he's the son of God – and around his philosophy they become a community. And then there's a point at which the audience is invited to participate in the community, and then they all go through something together and at a certain point the guy leaves. He says, "Well, now I'm going and you've got to carry on without me." The fact that they've become a community allows them to carry on. That's the story of the show...*

In other words, *Godspell*'s actual story is in the subtext, not readily apparent on the surface. Further, that the philosophy is central to the fun can't be overstated; the show's purpose is not merely to be cute, but to communicate serious philosophical and moral concepts in a user-friendly context. Though the show is a lot of fun on its face, the text is taken almost entirely from the Bible, mostly Matthew's Gospel, and the parables are attempting to define a moral code.

I take time to explicitly mention the show's source material for good reason. Since his death in 1985, John-Michael Tebelak's original conception has been relegated to something of a footnote, because Schwartz has so fully curated the public memory of the piece's creation. One wonders whether Tebelak would completely agree with Schwartz's framing of the work as primarily a piece about community in his notes. For what he gets right from one perspective, Schwartz misses a lot on the other, due in part to his own cultural background being very different from Tebelak's. Phrases like "you can think he's a smart guy or you can think he's the son of God" in particular don't present, to my thinking, an accurate reflection of Tebelak's intentions.<sup>3</sup>

At least from where I stand, Tebelak seems to have been after a more explicitly spiritual aim in his original concept than Schwartz gives *Godspell* credit for; namely, he wanted to make the religious experience accessible once again to the broad public. This is abundantly clear from examining *Godspell*'s structure, which is patterned after a mass,

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<sup>2</sup> Unusually for a musical, two separate agencies both license *Godspell*, Music Theatre International and Theatre Maximus, the latter of which was formed specifically to license the show. Each has its own perks: in addition to the original, MTI offers a "junior" edition, and a version derived specifically from the Broadway revival, that Theatre Maximus doesn't, and Theatre Maximus licenses a Spanish translation, *La Palabra*, that MTI doesn't.

<sup>3</sup> Although certainly all very well and good for people uncomfortable with committing to a Christian definition of Jesus.

with readings and lessons alternating with songs/psalms. (Of course, whether or not this was intentional died with him.) Indeed, Tebelak probably recognized that a religious service *is* theater – it has a text/script, structure, use of ritual, and to a degree, standardized blocking and gestures (especially in the Catholic Church).<sup>4</sup>

Reinforcing the parallel between the show and an actual religious service, the majority of *Godspell*'s music, lyrics drawn from the hymnal as they were, falls squarely in the realm of religious song. In a nutshell, religious music is largely about prayer and contemplation, and more specifically about three basic kinds of prayer: those in which we ask for help (especially in becoming better people), those in which we ask for forgiveness, and prayers of thanks. *Godspell* is filled with prayers asking for help ("Save the People"), especially in becoming better people ("Day by Day"), prayers for forgiveness ("We Beseech Thee"), and prayers of thanks ("O, Bless the Lord, My Soul," "All Good Gifts"). These songs aren't just razzle dazzle showstoppers; they are imbued with meaning, and a message which must be conveyed to the audience.

And that message is the most important thing in the show. The parables' main point was to translate complex philosophical ideas into terms easily understood by laypeople. In the Bible, Jesus uses everyday situations familiar to the disciples (all of them average people) to create stories that illustrate his lessons. In *Godspell*, he does the same, but because *Godspell* is set 2,000 years later, the stories' details are similarly modernized. In both cases, he makes religious philosophy easy to grasp. People today can't relate to masters and slaves, innkeepers and silver pieces, Pharisees and tax gatherers, but they *can* relate to contemporary storytelling forms (including pop culture references, "improv," and sketch comedy), contemporary music, and modern slang, thus recreating the situation of Jesus and his disciples in contemporary terms.

Interpret it however you like, but *Godspell* isn't just a revue or variety show about team-building, as important as those elements are; it's literally a religious experience.<sup>5</sup> In too many productions, its spiritual side is flatly ignored in favor of flashy song and dance, or "future *SNL* cast members" shamelessly mugging at the show's (and often the story's) expense. These productions still entertain, but they're not moving. The Last Supper and Crucifixion aren't powerful moments because no emotional base has been created on stage. Those of us familiar with Christianity know we *should* be moved, but we're not. For the show to succeed, the audience (and the cast) must be converted. The experience must be genuine in every sense. The skits and ad-libs are a way into the material, not an end unto themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> It's perhaps no surprise that Tebelak later became resident dramaturge for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Colleagues recall his penchant for liturgical drama could turn anything, from a sermon series to a two-day conference on the environment, into theater.

<sup>5</sup> Making the religious experience into a play or musical isn't easy. There's a difference between dramatizing a religious story or event (*JCS*, *Joseph*, etc.) and dramatizing the experience of formalized worship. When you sit in a church service, there's no dramatic action, no conflict and resolution; you've already been converted. The ceremony is an expression of an already achieved goal: religious faith. *Godspell* dramatizes the conversion leading to the ceremony, which is ultimately its greatest structural flaw (i.e., conversion is complete in Act I, so there's little to dramatize in Act II), but despite that, it can genuinely move an audience – Christians and non-Christians alike.

As a longtime fan, the candy-coated *Glee/High School Musical*-influenced 2012 version particularly missed the mark in this regard. Most noticeably, they made changes to book and score that erased or blunted religious overtones, which had a large impact on the show.<sup>6</sup> For example:

- For no discernible reason they cut the “My name is known...” speech. Derived from the opening of the “Creation” in classic “mystery play” cycles, God’s Voice declares its supremacy and says he’ll give humanity the responsibility of tending his creation and overcoming what separates them from him (it’s no mistake when Jesus reads the line as “I will make him Gardener for his own *re-creation*,” emphasis mine). Without that speech, one has even less idea what the philosopher prologue is (subtextually) about than people who encountered the opening in 1971 ever did. (And they *barely* got it then.)
- On another note, Jesus’ lesson about storing up treasure in heaven as opposed to on earth during “All Good Gifts” was changed to something positively hippie-sounding<sup>7</sup> loosely adapted from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (written well after Jesus died): “So be devoted to one another... and rejoice in hope. Give with simplicity, show mercy with cheerfulness, and do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with love.” Aside from “give with simplicity,” it has a weak association with the song, and isn’t nearly as strong a message as the original. (In fairness, however, I *would* use these lines to *close* the song, as they provide a clear button for the end of Act I, about which I’ll talk more in the next section.)
- Lastly, they cut the first verse of “Alas for You,” which, while it didn’t affect the song’s tone that much, lost Jesus condemning certain people as “fit for hell.” (What, so “...you cannot escape being devil’s food” is hunky-dory, but we’d better not bring up the possibility of “hell” because that’s not cool anymore?)

The director of the 1973 film, David Greene, said in an interview, “The thing about *Godspell*, of course, is it’s ‘based on the Gospel According to St. Matthew,’ but it *ain’t* a ‘religioso’ film, it *ain’t* a ‘Jesus People’ film... it’s a celebration. That was the concept of the stage play.” True enough, but *what* did it celebrate? What the religious experience could – should – be, without skirting its reality. And perhaps the best proof that one shouldn’t skimp on the show’s spirituality is that, in a rare case of adaptation returning to source, *Godspell* became the basis for a popular form of Episcopal Church service.

The November 1980 issue of *Ministry* magazine reported on “the *Godspell* Mass (...) packing people in at Episcopal churches around Rhode Island.”<sup>8</sup> In a *Godspell* Mass, most elements of the traditional celebration of a Eucharistic liturgy were present, but from *Godspell* came the opening premise of a breath of fresh air breaking up traditional

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<sup>6</sup> A lot of these changes run into the same problems one may find with *any* new additions to – or deletions from – a show in a later production. The assertion that one can improve on their previous work with the benefit of experience is not invalid, but it’s generally hard to do it in a way that is “of a piece” with the rest of the show; in most cases, it comes off very forced, clumsy, mediocre, and arbitrary, and incongruous to the voicing of the show overall.

<sup>7</sup> Mildly ironic, considering Stephen Schwartz runs from the notion that *Godspell* was in any way influenced by the hippie movement like Jamie Lee Curtis runs from Michael Myers in *Halloween*.

<sup>8</sup> This was in spite of the fact that it was reported to imbue the traditional service with a somewhat cabaret atmosphere that some churchgoers might disagree with.

monotony (high school kids in uniform costuming moved mechanically as robot-like voices intoned traditional words, until "Prepare Ye (The Way of the Lord)" burst through the staid ceremony), the clown aspect (donning red greasepaint and colorful clothing – "a symbol of baptism, an outward and visible sign of spiritual grace," as the catechism described it; at the prayer of peace, they climbed into the pews and "baptize[d] each parishioner on the cheek with a dab of red lipstick"), the fun atmosphere of handclapping and wall-to-wall music (with the show's songs as hymns, including "We Beseech Thee" aptly placed at the invitation of prayers and petitions), and – in place of the gospel 'reading' – a dramatic presentation of the "Passion of Christ" segment, taking in Jesus' crucifixion and death in pantomime and words, and celebrating the resurrection amid the chants of "Long live God!"

Through this extensive analysis, I arrived at a deeper understanding of *Godspell* and, more particularly, what I wanted mine to be like.

First, *Godspell* is a construct in search of a book. The problem is the music gets lots of attention because Schwartz is still alive, while the book is typically neglected or at least relegated to the sidelines. My priorities would be the opposite. The score *isn't* the glaring issue; they're solid tunes, everyone knows 'em, give the songs a halfway decent arrangement and they pretty much take care of themselves. The book would be *my* primary focus, trying to connect to Tebelak's intentions and follow that track. Unlike other failed major revivals that carelessly rewrite or ignore the script, I'd build on what's given – not reinventing it, just seeing through different eyes – and try to create solid relationships and relatable character arcs (so they have depth, more than just 2-D archetypes blindly following a leader) for the audience to follow.

Second, it ain't meant to be pretty, perfect, or sugarcoated. *Godspell* is at its best when at its rawest. The show exists because a directing major, with a chip on his shoulder about how boring organized religion had become, handed his incredulous friends a typewritten collection of Bible passages and said, in essence, "We're gonna put on makeup and clown our way through this to show people religion can be fun!" Their efforts, combined with a fellow student who had a knack for writing hummable pop/rock hymn settings, paid off against all odds. Your background or how polished the show is don't matter, so long as you respect the material and do what you must to highlight the most emotional, relatable moments.



### III. VISION

#### *Influences*

In arriving at my ultimate vision of *Godspell*, I was influenced by a handful of previous versions and indeed by other shows and groups entirely. I'm going to expound on some of the salient influences, with enough detail to give an impression of where my ideas came from.

First and foremost, in my teens, I started out as a young executive under the tutelage of a noted New York-based writer/director/producer, Richard Haase. Our working association was sparked in part from a mutual love of two shows: *Hair* and *Godspell*. Richard had directed Off-Broadway revivals of both, and his groundbreaking revival of *Godspell* in the late Nineties was particularly noteworthy for being the original Harlem company, a new urban production which played at the historic 500-seat Victoria Theatre (next door to Harlem's famed Apollo) on West 125<sup>th</sup> Street.

With its all-black cast and updated musical arrangements, the Harlem *Godspell* tapped into a genuine spark and sentiment in the African-American Christian community that one rarely finds elsewhere; in Harlem, Jesus is *real*. A religious experience was understood to be the goal in this production, and was often achieved; reportedly, audience members "caught up in the Spirit" danced in the aisles during "O, Bless the Lord, My Soul," or engaged with the cast in the manner of a revival meeting. This *Godspell* was darker than most, with a different theatricality that hearkened to black forms of theater variously referred to over the years as "urban theater," "inspirational theater," "black Broadway," or "gospel theater," as popularized on "the chitlin circuit,"<sup>9</sup> but when it came to balancing the message with humor, it didn't skip the forest to look at the trees.

The urban production reset *Godspell*, predictably enough, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Harlem. The setting was a church basement, during rehearsals for the annual community variety show. The group included various types one would find in such a setting, including a self-righteous "church lady" director, a professional "divo" who thinks he's God's gift to the show (later the John/Judas figure), youth who want to interject a contemporary approach by including rap but are initially frustrated in their efforts, and so forth. (The band was also onstage and in character, as they "ran through" the show.)

Soon a ragged homeless man wandered in – guess who? (Over the course of "Save the People," his layers of "bag person clothing" were removed to reveal the literal white-robed Second Coming.) Through a form of "the Rapture,"<sup>10</sup> he inspired the participants to return to the simple, childlike faith of when they first believed and strive to "see Thee

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<sup>9</sup> For easy reference to a layperson: if someone slapped Tyler Perry's name on footage of this production and purported it to be an example of his early work, no one would be surprised or rush to contest the claim.

<sup>10</sup> Certain American evangelical Christians believe this is when all Christians, past and present, will rise into the sky and join Jesus for eternity at the end of time; Richard, who is both Jewish and Christian, chose to interpret this concept instead as a personal awakening to Christ's message rather than literal union with him.

more clearly, love Thee more dearly, follow Thee more nearly." The show had potent political subtext as well; at its conclusion, echoing Rodney King at the time and eerily presaging the deaths which inspired the Black Lives Matter movement decades later, Jesus was ridiculed, beaten, and executed at the hands of the police. (When it came time to address the story's serious aspects, the Harlem production of *Godspell* more closely resembled *Hair* or *JCS* in tone than any previous *Godspell* to date.)

The production values were by no means perfect. Quoting Richard in an interview with *Playbill On-Line* at the time, "...this production has passion and drama, but it isn't perfect. We have imperfect notes, rough moments, the choreography ain't perfect, my blocking's a little primitive – we don't have that acrylic slickness and polish. There's a rawness you'll find the way you might find in certain points of *Rent*." But it completely reinvented the show for a more contemporary (specifically Christian) audience, bringing them on a deeper spiritual journey. Needless to say, it shattered people's preconceived notions of what *Godspell* was about and what it consisted of.

Though not commercially successful, the production achieved international acclaim, including Stephen Schwartz saying (on tape) that, with more money behind it, and pending a transfer downtown or to another major theatrical hub like Los Angeles with star casting, it could be "the best production of *Godspell*" he'd ever seen. I may have only experienced it much later via archival videotape, but for me, it remains the definitive late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century production of *Godspell*. (Not that I don't think I could tweak it a bit to produce more explosive results.)

In the non-*Godspell* column, learning about the *Godspell* Mass influenced me to look at pieces like *The Gospel at Colonus* and Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* (which also featured lyrics by Schwartz). The latter proved to be a huge influence. While more of a concert piece than *Godspell, Mass*, which was written around the same time, is fully staged and has a dramatic arc, and some of *Godspell's* youthful spirit influenced the piece's content and the character of the Celebrant.

In *Mass*, which is a setting of the Tridentine (Catholic) Mass, the ceremony is performed by a Celebrant accompanied by choirs, acolytes, and musicians. A congregation of disaffected youth (the "Street Chorus") sings tropes that challenge the formal ecclesiastic dogma of the Church. As the tension grows and the Celebrant becomes more and more vested, the cynical congregants turn to him as the healer of all their ills, violently demanding peace. In a climactic moment, overwhelmed by the burden of his authority, the Celebrant hurls the sacraments to the floor and has a complete spiritual breakdown. The catharsis creates an opening for a return to the simple, pure faith with which he had begun the ritual (expressed in a piece called "A Simple Song"). *Mass* challenges divine authority, exposing its contradictions and questioning religion's relevance to contemporary life, but it ultimately serves as a reaffirmation of faith and hope for universal peace. Though darker than its predecessor, one can easily see the structural parallels to *Godspell*.

Inspired by the *Godspell* Mass, the basic premise of the Harlem production, pieces like *The Gospel at Colonus* and Bernstein's *Mass*, and my experience as a singer with local gospel choir RPM Voices of Rhode Island (for whom I've none-too-subtly conceived this version), I wanted to open up *Godspell* – and the Harlem production in particular –

by expanding the casting and turning it into a “gospel Mass” for players, singers, and dancers. Some may call it lazy to just reorient the show’s context and target it at an audience – church crowds and the so-called Tyler Perry circuit – that will readily receive the message anyway and be pleasantly surprised to have a laugh as well, but the idea works, and it’s interesting enough in its own right to be worthy of exploration.

### *Dramaturgy*

The Harlem production introduced alterations to *Godspell*’s structure that I’d retain in mine. Though Richard stated in interviews that the script was “virtually the same, maybe a little more linear,” which is not inaccurate, one would be surprised at the impact seemingly small changes can have on a show.

I will first deal with the opening of Act I, which unfolded differently from typical productions, with slightly more book material that established the *mise-en-scène* in which the show took place.

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#### HARLEM OPENING

In Harlem, *Godspell* started with everyone getting ready to run through the variety show (though it wasn’t referred to in those exact words) in order. A boy who wished to include rap attempted to show how it’d work with his take on the “My name is known…” speech, only to be asked by the harried “church lady” director to just run the lines in the script “the way we rehearsed it the other day.” He launched into Socrates’ monologue which opens the “Prologue,” stumbling over it and being given embarrassing blocking notes, before managing to reach the speech’s end and then, frustrated by this direction, launching into what he’d *really* like to do: a rap version of “Prologue/Tower of Babble.” The rest of the cast showed interest, some even joined in, but the director would brook no mutiny; she firmly shut it down, insisting on “no rap.” Seeing the pall cast over the room, and noticing that Jay (the John/Judas figure) was late, she then rehearsed “the new number we put in,” “Beautiful City,” with female soloists<sup>11</sup>, before Jay finally showed up and attempted in true “divo” fashion to “show y’all how it’s really done” with “Prepare Ye.”

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Bearing in mind the adjustments I’ve made to the show’s setting and cast, this opening would be mostly intact, with some slight tweaks.

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<sup>11</sup> The Harlem production was one of the first to present “Beautiful City,” complete with its new lyrics, in a live setting. It appeared in a peppy arrangement, and, unusually considering Schwartz notoriously regrets writing the movie lyrics, included the 1973 film’s “We don’t need alabaster…” verse.

## REVISED OPENING

We find ourselves at a church in 21<sup>st</sup> century Harlem, in the midst of preparations for a revival meeting which they hope will reach the surrounding community and inspire active members to gain new converts. The central cast consists of a gospel choir which will perform the show within the show, composed from various types one would find in such a setting, including self-righteous “church ladies,” “rebellious” youth that want to interject a contemporary approach by including rap in the event but are initially frustrated in their efforts, over-the-top types who show up to every service, participate in every event, etc., fashionistas who believe they grow closer to God the better they dress, senior citizens trying to do their part but mainly expressing disapproval of new-fangled ways, show-offs who belt every verse and know the words to every hymn in the history of church music, and so on.<sup>12</sup> The choir is led by a perfectionist director, Jay, who thinks he’s God’s gift to the show, and has many highfalutin’ ideas he loves to explain at length, making others feel inferior for not immediately grasping what his “higher intelligence” conceived. A prima donna, who feels – though he only admits it to himself – he’s slumming it with this choir and should be leading the prosperity gospel lifestyle somewhere. At heart, a man who’s lost touch with faith (the John/Judas figure), though he preaches fire and brimstone with ease.

As all of the above arrive, the band is informally tuning up, performing the “Opening” from the 2001 national tour cast recording; it’s a nice medley of the music to follow, and allows time to establish the visual of everyone coming in, getting out their scripts, etc., as they prepare for rehearsal. While the choir warms up vocally, a ragged homeless man wanders in – guess who? – and delivers the “My name is known...” speech, mostly unnoticed by the others. It’s common for a church in a rough, gang-infested community to do homeless outreach, and someone muttering to himself in the manner of certain street people would probably go unnoticed, or barely acknowledged, by those of the choir used to those folks being around. Doubtless they assume someone will attend to him eventually, and he won’t stick around the whole rehearsal. (Little do they know...)

Jay kicks things off, reminding everyone they must run the “new number we put in,” that it’s been discussed, debated, and ultimately decided there’ll be “no rap” in the mass, which draws approval from the older set and disapproval from the younger set, and that they’re still not getting the opening, “so we’ll run that first,” which meets with groans all around. The youth who wants to rap then runs the Socrates speech, stumbling over his words and being given embarrassing blocking notes by Jay, before managing to reach the speech’s end and, frustrated by this direction, asking what this crap is supposed to be. Jay responds with a typical “college” explanation of the “Prologue”: this service is about reconciling our modern world with God and the Bible, but to do that, we have to put both in proper context. The subject of God and organized religion has dominated philosophical discussions for centuries; and at this time in history when organized religion is frequently under fire, we can’t examine where we are morally and

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<sup>12</sup> In other words, an interesting, diverse group of average people from the general populace brought together for a single purpose, capable of going back to various parts of society to spread the word after Jesus is gone. They come from all walks of life, but find common ground in their work, which gives them room to grow together.

intellectually without looking at how we got here. So Jay put together these quotes from some of the greatest minds of the western world about God and religion, and their impact on society, so the audience can follow how religious thought changed over time. "The idea, ultimately, is all these different philosophies conflict, and they've combined over time to confuse how we feel about religion today. Then we lay it on the line: Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."

The youth sees in this the opportunity to turn the long boring speeches into challenge rap, and so the "Prologue/Tower of Babble" occurs. The rest of the cast show interest in this approach, and some even join in as they become more enthusiastic, but Jay damns this idea with faint praise, saying he'll "think about it"; everyone knows what that really means. They move on to the upbeat "new number," "Beautiful City," which rings ironic as its lyrics of togetherness highlight just how different – and conflicting – is everyone's POV about how to reach people with religion through this service.

Finally, to toot his own horn and show everyone "how it's really done," Jay runs his big "holy roller" moment, "Prepare Ye (The Way of the Lord)," kicking off the show proper, as Jesus moves through the choir to waken this up a little, touching everyone, disseminating his "wonder"/"magic," very much in the manner of Michelangelo's ceiling fresco of Adam and God, sending people into religious ecstasy, rapture if you will. (Jay is the last he touches, kicking off the more rhythmic half of the number.) John the Baptist's speech plays as a typical contemporary fire-and-brimstone "altar call," complete with the false modesty of "I need rather be baptized by you" when Jesus approaches in homeless garb, which changes to wonder as Jay realizes who he really is – or *thinks* he really is – during "Save the People."

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As the reader can see, same idea, but tweaked to more readily convey kicking off the journey from adult cynicism to childlike faith. The choir construct isn't 100% necessary, but it does provide a reason for everyone to stick around and take the director seriously instead of just leaving when the show within the show doesn't go their way.

The next particularly noteworthy changes were to the structure of Act II, starting with re-positioning the intermission. In the Harlem run, "All Good Gifts" closed Act I and "Light of the World" opened Act II.<sup>13</sup> When queried as to his rationale, Richard responded, "I don't remember it concretely. [...] I just know that in our particular production, in the play as we rehearsed it, that was the logical place. That was the climax. It's the high point, the faith in him." Ever since seeing it in execution in archival video of the Harlem production, I've liked this particular idea so much that I've adopted it into my many concepts for the show over the years, and indeed I'm often surprised when I see productions of *Godspell* which close Act I with "Light of the World"; at least to me, it makes much more sense as an up-tempo second act opening.

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<sup>13</sup> Oddly enough, this choice unintentionally found precedent in the 1973 film, which seems to clearly define "All Good Gifts" – with its fade to black, and then fade back in to the Prodigal Son parable which kicks off its latter portion – as a natural close of the first half.

"Light of the World" was followed by Judas reprising "Learn Your Lessons Well" in a disapproving tone of the party atmosphere. This led to the scene about the woman taken in adultery, which segued into "Turn Back, O Man." If, in the current #MeToo era, this seems like questionable placement, it was unfortunately followed by the "do not give dogs what is holy..." segment that precedes the Prodigal Son parable, the implied moral seeming to be that Jesus' forgiveness was wasted on her. (Because she sang about repentance with a sultry vibe...? I admittedly still don't follow the logic.)

After the Prodigal Son parable, which proceeded as written, there was a bit I can only assume was meant to be foreboding, where the "rap" that usually opens "Light of the World" when it closes Act I was played like a scene in a horror movie, with the cast gradually leaving Jesus alone onstage, and offstage voices chanting in response to his words. Then the Pharisee moment followed, with two of New York's finest filling in for the ancient doctors of the law. No real explanation, it wasn't clear if they were really there or meant to represent doubt in general; the cops just showed up for interrogation, and were gone almost as quickly as they appeared following "Alas for You." Jesus' end-times talk followed, as well as a subdued rendering of the parable of the Sheep and Goats. "By My Side" finally occurred at this point, and was followed directly by "We Beseech Thee."

From that point forward, Act II proceeded more or less as normal, albeit with a shocking ending: as staged in the Harlem production, the NYPD burst into the room to break up the gathering after Jesus has finished praying, ostensibly summoned by Jay to collect this nut-bag who thinks he's Christ, and give him a Rodney King style thrashing as they taunt him with the "temptations." When Jay sees what they're doing, however, sees a fellow black man treated this way by the police, he's wracked with guilt; he's witnessed something like this on the street, maybe faced it himself at some point. So he relieves one of the cops of his gun and it briefly turns into a stand-off that ends with Jay moving to shoot the cop, the other cop firing, and Jesus caught in the middle taking the bullet, literally dying for Judas' sin, delivering his "Put down the sword..." speech from the floor in the arms of the cast. (It was profoundly emotional to watch, especially in an era that has since lived through Sean Bell, Amadou Diallo, and Black Lives Matter.)

Honestly, viewing the Harlem video for the first time as a fan of *Godspell* well-versed in its structure, I couldn't tell you *what* the hell was going on until I reached the familiar Passion sequences. For the most part, I *still* can't. But I recognize what this revision was trying to achieve. Especially with intermission reoriented, one is forced to make more sense out of the second act's through-line. The more I thought about it, including studying the show's reviews when it premiered, the more I realized Act II of *Godspell* descends too abruptly from a jovial atmosphere into a more serious one. In the show as it's known to most audiences, Act II opens with whatever bright-eyed tune the production chooses<sup>14</sup>, followed by the still relatively jaunty "Turn Back, O Man," only to suddenly slam on the "fun" brakes without nearly enough warning and veer right into the Pharisee scene and "Alas for You." Keeping Act II as is, while making the same changes to the top that Harlem did, doesn't alleviate the problem so well; it merely prolongs the inevitable.

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<sup>14</sup> I've seen the standard reprise of "Learn Your Lessons Well," as well as an up-tempo "Beautiful City," in many productions over the years.

So, taking Richard's changes to Act II as a base, I've loosely reordered the material in a fashion that I think will achieve the desired effect of a more organic, smoother ride from light into darkness, one that makes it clear there is still learning and growing left to do:

- "Light of the World" opens Act II, a moment where everyone thinks, "Okay, cool, we are all on board, and we've got something awesome," so they're grooving, but this unfortunately proves to be a distraction from the show's endgame.
- Jay – now more Judas than John following the previous act's events – is drunk ("Let's have some wine"), disillusioned with the party atmosphere because he doesn't truly feel part of it, and to the extent that he ever believed in Jesus, he is questioning more than believing now. His bitter reprise of "Learn Your Lessons Well" is his condemnation, turning his fellow disciples' words back on them.
- This moment sets up the parable of the Prodigal Son, which gains new subtext: Judas still has a chance to change his mind and turn back from the course that will lead to betrayal, but he'll be forgiven if he goes through with it.
- I've yet to decide exactly how to place "Turn Back, O Man," but it'd occur here. My initial feeling was that it'd form part of the disciples' celebration of the lesson they learned following the parable, but it could easily fit within the parable itself at the moment when the prodigal is "squander[ing] the money on reckless living," as a clue that he's getting it wrong and should "turn back" before it's too late. The placement is kind of "on the nose" either way, but to me, that's the most organic spot without implying a moral that's too judgmental.
- Disapproval of this "sexy" performance would then lead to the segment about the woman taken in adultery. Negative reaction to Jesus' choice not to condemn her<sup>15</sup> bleeds into the Pharisee scene followed by "Alas for You."
- Jesus' despair over the trials to come, starting at his lament for Jerusalem and culminating in the untrustworthy servant parable, then sets up "By My Side," after which Act II would resume its original structure with the parable of Sheep and Goats, followed by "We Beseech Thee."

Again, it's the same idea, but tweaked enough to achieve optimum dramatic effect.

Last but not least, I'd also futz with the placement of "Beautiful City." Its position in the Harlem production was unique – close to the top of the show, where one wouldn't normally think it fit. But this idea, combined with knowledge of the song's history, inspired me to make a choice unprecedented in any other production; a choice I feel imbues the song with new purpose, turning an inconsequential addition to the film into the lynchpin of the piece onstage. In order to properly explain, however, I must first share how it came to be.

"Beautiful City" was written for the 1973 film of *Godspell*, when its director, David Greene, decided "We Beseech Thee" was too theatrical a number to translate to the screen and wanted a substitute. The new song worked well enough, but though Stephen Schwartz loved the melody he'd created, he grew to dislike the lyrics. He's

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<sup>15</sup> If fundamentalist Christians are being honest with themselves, especially in America, this reaction probably wouldn't be out of character, even if they understood the point he was trying to make.

described them over the years as “too sentimental” (once emphasizing they were “so sentimental it sort of makes my flesh crawl”), “drippy,” and “somewhat cloying.” In the early Nineties, he rewrote them for a proposed West Coast production after the L.A. riots; while the production never opened, he so preferred the new lyric to the old that he allows people to include “Beautiful City” in the show at no extra charge, provided the new lyrics are used.<sup>16</sup> This version was also recorded by the late Laurie Beechman on her album *No One is Alone*, with an alternate lyric to the song's new bridge.

Schwartz's opinion of the old lyrics, however, didn't prevent Richard from using one of the film version's verses in the Harlem production. That choice, combined with the alternate bridge lyrics from the Beechman version, the 2000 Off-Broadway recording's removal of a verse from its rendition, and the 2012 version's rewrite of a section of the “Finale,” inspired my idea to use “Beautiful City” in the show three times as a motif:

- First, it's the upbeat “new number” the choir runs through toward the top of the show; in this instance, I'd use the film version. Drippy and cloying as the words are, they also sound insincere, which is right for the moment – these people are trying to “build a beautiful city,” instead of letting differences divide them, but it sounds fake because they're not a community yet.
- Then, in Act II, the song returns in its solo “new lyrics” form (as it often does in newer *Godspell* productions) to replace the scripted “Day by Day” reprise as the Last Supper begins. Jesus wonders whether he has prepared them sufficiently to go on without him, and to pass on what he has taught them, so he prays, putting his faith in their ability to do so. Here I make the same cut as in the 2000 Off-Broadway version, removing the “We may not reach the ending” verse.
- Finally, in the “Finale,” I take my cue from one of the 2012 version's few intelligent choices, with minor changes; after Jesus dies, a solo voice sings the bridge from the Beechman recording (“When they finally put the flame out / When your final tear's been spilled / You can stand there, portioning the blame out / Or begin at last to build”), and the cast follows that with “We may not reach the ending...” I'd leave in the “God save the people” counterpoint, but take out the “Long live God” and “Prepare ye...” stuff, saving that for its own build after the “Beautiful City” portion is complete. At last, they sing “But finally a city of man,” a line which hasn't been heard in any other variation of the song so far, and the note on “man” is the same as the first note of the traditional “Long live God” chant, which takes over and gains strength as Jesus' followers do.

### *Music and Lyrics*

For the Harlem production, the *Godspell* score was completely rethought and rearranged by my colleague's late wife, Davina Haase, a talented woman in a class by herself as an arranger, to reflect both the score's strong gospel influences, and also the then-current wave of popular cutting-edge black music formats (hip-hop, rap, R&B). It was performed by a small “combo” of twelve-string guitar (which played what was formerly a recorder solo in “All Good Gifts” as well), 2 keyboards, bass, and drums, with the cast frequently joining in on tambourines. In general, I wouldn't depart much from

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<sup>16</sup> In the junior and 2012 versions licensed by MTI, the new “Beautiful City” is written into the show, saving presenters the trouble of asking.



her arrangements and orchestrations, which were on the mark, particularly in such numbers as "O, Bless the Lord, My Soul" and "We Beseech Thee."

However, I'd like to give "Save the People" more of a reggae feel, to present Jesus in a light-hearted yet recognizably activist role following the combined "weight" of the rap "Prologue," the drippy "Beautiful City," and the soul-shouter "Prepare Ye (The Way of the Lord)." Also, of necessity (as she's sadly not around to do new charts), re-arrangement of the "Finale" and its "Long live God" section would partially rely on Michael Holland's 2012 version.

My vision would also necessitate some other specific choices related to the music and lyrics. They follow in show order below.

#### **INCIDENTAL MUSIC CUES**

- There are three incidental music cues in the score for the 2012 Broadway revival ("Bell Tree" and "After 'All for the Best'" in Act I, "Pharisees" in Act II) that are unique to that production. It doesn't harm anything to find similar (or new) uses in the context of this production, and make them organic to moments we create. Additionally, the 1973 film adapted melodies such as "Save the People" and "Beautiful City" as incidental underscoring at points; it'd be interesting to explore use of it, or perhaps base an arrangement of the songs themselves on it.

#### **PROLOGUE/TOWER OF BABBLE**

- The Harlem production turned this number into a loud, aggressive rap sequence, which is appropriate given the material and what it's trying to convey. However, it did so unaccompanied by any music. While the choice worked for that production, I'd like to include some of the "Prologue" melody to make the "Babble" section, where every philosopher shares their view in counterpoint, seem like "babble" and not a bunch of people shouting at once (Harlem cut everything after "What does it matter if they don't agree," and it's not hard to discern that this was likely the reason). The 2012 version, in another of its few inspired moments, developed a cappella arrangements we could (partially) use.

#### **LEARN YOUR LESSONS WELL**

- In the original version, between the verses is a spoken section using a fascinating style known as "echo talk," in which each word of a sentence is spoken by different people, creating an echo effect. It's admittedly strange, and has been lost on certain audiences in contemporary productions. For the 2012 revival, director Daniel Goldstein asked Stephen Schwartz to turn "Learn Your Lessons Well" into a bigger number by setting this spoken section to music. I'd keep the number's original structure, but add this musicalized "Lamp is the body of the eye..." section into the relevant area of the song. Let's face it, the "echo talk" is lost on a contemporary audience, but I don't want to lose that message of the lesson learned, so even though the harmony of the new section is a little tricky, I'd like to use it here.

### BY MY SIDE

- This incredibly moving number, a personal favorite of many of the show's fans, is also the only song in *Godspell* not written by Stephen Schwartz (and a slew of lyricists from the Episcopal hymnal). Original cast member Peggy Gordon wrote this song with Jay Hamburger for an entirely different play, and after sharing it with the cast during rehearsals, it was woven into the fabric of *Godspell* in its Café La MaMa run before Schwartz joined the show. When he did, he loved the song so much he didn't think it needed replacing, and it's stayed ever since. But few know the song was a victim of editing before it was heard in the version we all know and love. In rehearsals back in 1971, as they were putting in Schwartz's score, the show was running long, and they had to get Act II (which was longer than Act I) down to no more than 45 minutes. One thing they cut was a verse from "By My Side" which took place before "Let me skip the road with you..." Since it was expositional and not active, Gordon advocated cutting it, a choice that bothered Schwartz, as it was his favorite musically. I've heard the verse, and since hearing it, I feel the song is incomplete without it, so I'd restore it. The show has been at its "acceptable" length long enough now that I think more productions, if they become aware of this verse, should explore including it.

### The Last Supper (not a formal musical number)

- The Harlem production used a traditional setting of the Hebrew Seder prayers which sounded positively otherworldly, as most Jewish liturgical music does.<sup>17</sup> I'd include this setting in my production as well.

### ON THE WILLOWS

- There are three things to note about this number. First, the lyrics are derived from the 137<sup>th</sup> Psalm, in which the line rendered in *Godspell* as "we hung up our lives" (and varies in literal wording, though not meaning, through many Bible translations) refers to "lyres." The adaptation of the lyric was suggested by Tebelak, who wanted to be clear it was their entire life that had changed for each of the disciples, and was worried the audience wouldn't get the metaphor of the "lyres" since the explanatory line about singing the Lord's song in a foreign land doesn't occur until much later. In a Q&A on his website, Schwartz once said he wasn't sure he'd make the same change today<sup>18</sup>, and indeed, in the 2012 version, the lyric officially reverted to "lyres." I'm personally inclined toward "lives"; I've never lost a dollar underestimating my audience's intelligence. Second, musically speaking, I want the song to have a certain sound, a "humming" resonance which might be achieved by an organ drone or bass, or a few of the actors humming sotto voce under it. Lastly, I'd like to expand the number slightly in length (adding a repetition of the "Sing us one of the songs..." section) to allow the cast to give the audience Communion, under Jesus'

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<sup>17</sup> Humorist Lewis Black refers to this phenomenon in his autobiography *Nothing's Sacred*, describing a piece traditionally heard at Yom Kippur as "one of the spookiest pieces of music ever written. You hear it and are literally surprised that bats and shit aren't flying around. I think Alfred Hitchcock based all of his film scores on it."

<sup>18</sup> Proof this was a disputed decision can be found in the published mass market vocal selections, and the piano/vocal score sent out by Theatre Maximus, both of which still include the word "lyres" even though the traditional script says "lives"

instruction, as the band sings the bulk of the song, before the cast takes up the repeat as they say their goodbyes. This substitutes for the lack of cast-audience bonding over grape juice in the traditional intermission, and heightens the emotion of the moment. Done right, the scene should be funerary in its reverence and its driving sense of loss. The entire Last Supper scene must radiate tremendous tension, for slightly different reasons in each character on stage. The audience should feel the loss and fear the disciples are experiencing, the blow of the coming events being digested and processed together, and the fear Jesus is feeling as well. When the cast takes over singing the number, I'd stage this moment with a design like the light is "shrinking," creating a slowly-eroding "island" around the main group.

## FINALE

- In addition to careful editing of the "Beautiful City" segment from the 2012 version, I'd like to use a moment from the 2000 Off-Broadway recording which may or may not have occurred in the actual show (I was too young to see it). In that moment, as Jesus makes the speech which kicks off the number ("Put down the sword..." etc.), each of the cast sings a snippet of their song of discovery, or commitment to the message, at the same time. It's a haunting moment, the subtext being they are suffering a crisis of faith as they witness their leader in peril. Especially as staged in the Harlem production, the image of the choir powerless to stop the beating of this man, frozen in fear, not sure what to do or what to say, each moment with him flashing before their eyes in an instant, has quite the impact.

### *General Staging Ideas*

Aside from what I'd tweak about the Harlem production as discussed above, I'd also like to discuss more general points of contention when approaching this piece, both from a dramatic and from a musical point of view.

First, I'd dispense, as many modern productions do (and as Harlem did), with the concept of clown makeup or other tokens/totems. This image may have been familiar to Seventies audiences, but it would be lost on today's, and I think it's unnecessary even if that's not the case. In the original production, the clown makeup and costumes signified dramatic change, but I always felt this came too instantly, too easily. For better or worse, we're more skeptical, more cynical, today. If someone came up to one of us and told us he was Christ, we'd naturally assume he was delusional. The conversion would instead be a gradual one, no clown makeup necessary. Some will immediately accept Jesus as teacher; others won't. Depending on each character's personality, some will become involved in the stories more quickly than others. But each has to consider what Jesus is saying, doubt him, weigh the risk of trusting him, and finally decide to let their guard down. As the first act's dramatic action is almost entirely in the conversion, letting it happen more slowly provides more of a dramatic arc. And, especially with the "Prologue" in place as Schwartz prefers, we can see a different conversion – the cast changes from philosophers to "believers" before our eyes. We see the dramatic difference between philosophy, something complex that is forged in the brain, and faith, something very simple that resides in the heart. As

opposed to *JCS*, where Webber and Rice portray the disciples as uncomprehending, the audience should be struck by how aware they are in *Godspell*.

With regard to parables, the 2000 Off-Broadway revival cast recording states in its liner notes that their production started by building the parables, to tease out performers' natural personalities and shape the dramatic arc from there. The creative team handed out a 15-page script stripped down to *just* the parables. The cast knew what solo they'd sing, Jesus and Judas obviously knew who *they* were, but other than that, they discovered organically what worked personality-wise and built backwards from there. My reading of Carol de Giere's books *Defying Gravity* (in its first edition) and *The Godspell Experience* suggest this occurred in the original production as well.

I'd employ the same practice in my production; if it ain't broke, don't fix it. To avoid the show turning into a two-hour long *SNL* audition tape, however, I'd bear in mind a story told by Peggy Gordon in the latter book which illustrated Tebelak's distinguishing between clowning with a purpose and comic shtick: "Richard Nixon was president so we had reams of material had John-Michael wanted *Godspell* to be topical. John-Michael said the humor 'could not upstage; could not obscure.' There was one irresistible thing that Joanne [*Jonas*] and I showed John-Michael in rehearsal. He turned to Andy, our Cherry Lane Theatre box office guy and asked, 'Can you tell me what that parable was about?' All Andy could remember was something about Nixon. John-Michael said to us, 'Congratulations, you just subverted *Godspell*'s singular purpose.'" It's fine to include pop culture references; after all, those have always been part of the show. But they can't overtly distract from each parable's moral. This isn't stand-up comedy; it should inform the overall story.

From a musical standpoint, for a late addition to the show, Stephen Schwartz's score for *Godspell* is surprisingly well-integrated and functional. It is also unique<sup>19</sup> in that it is composed of both book songs and diegetic songs<sup>20</sup>. These two different kinds of songs should be staged and acted differently to help the audience see the distinct function of each.

Switching gears back to tweaking Richard's changes for the Harlem production one last time, I would slightly modify the staging of the ending for maximum emotional impact: Jay goes for the gun, prompting the officers to focus on him and stop beating Jesus. "Put down the sword; he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword," says Jesus. We are spellbound watching Jesus caught in the middle between Jay and the cops, as he speaks frantically, decrying this foul treatment as he tries to figure out what he's

<sup>19</sup> For a rock musical anyway; other more conventional (for lack of a better word) examples include *Follies* and *Cabaret*.

<sup>20</sup> Book songs grow out of the action; the characters say something in the context of the situation onstage, and they are most like traditional musical comedy songs in that they function like speeches and the characters aren't aware they're singing. Examples of book songs in *Godspell* include "Save the People," "Day by Day," "Alas for You," "By My Side," and "On the Willows." Diegetic songs are those in which the act of singing is part of the story, like when a character in a musical sings in a nightclub, and the characters are aware that they're singing, the type of song that would still be there even if it wasn't a musical. Examples of diegetic songs in *Godspell* include "All for the Best," "Turn Back, O Man," "We Beseech Thee," or pretty much any numbers in which lessons are summarized or the cast is just having fun.

supposed to do, robbed of the chance to think clearly: "Do you not suppose that I could appeal to my Father..." He looks deep into the eyes of Jay and the policemen; he speaks now as if in realization, "But all this has happened to fulfill what the prophets have written!" On the first three chords of the "Finale," in rapid succession, Jay moves as if to fire, Jesus stands to shield him, and the police fire on Jay, hitting Jesus instead. And into the "Finale" we go, with its distorted electric guitars, the driving beat of the drums, the flashing lights, the cast writhing in agony on the floor, beating their fists on the stage, screaming, moaning, etc., their grief so consuming and extreme, uncontrolled, anguished, over the top, that it can't be expressed just through the voice. They are watching their friend, teacher, father, and God die – the power of the scene depends on extreme emotion.

This rollercoaster of events and feelings would pay off with the "Beautiful City" reprise as they all gradually realize they must go on, and must pass on what they've been taught, that this is what this experience has been preparing them for. When the women rise as they sing "Long live God," and the men begin "Prepare Ye" in counterpoint, Jesus' spirit is given life when his body has failed him: they will now prepare the way for the teachings of Christ.

Harlem opted to close the show with a literal Resurrection; lights faded during "Long live God," bumped back up when the rhythm picked up in the "Prepare Ye" section, and the cast discovered – gasp! – the body had gone. Though this isn't what the creators of the show intended, it's always been implied to a certain extent. I'm not so literal-minded, but I recognize that one doesn't simply turn *Godspell* into a gospel mass and get away with robbing it of its natural climax in that context. However, I'd try to have my cake and eat it, too; Jesus wouldn't physically reappear until the last bow of the curtain call (a reprise of "Day by Day"), to build anticipation before letting the audience off the hook and giving them what they want. That's just good theater, as Addaperle, the Witch of the North, put it in *The Wiz* once upon a time.