

A Detailed Synopsis of *Godspell* (referred to on p. 23 and p. 353, note 35, in Paul R. Laird, *The Musical Theater of Stephen Schwartz: From Godspell to Wicked and Beyond*)

*Godspell* can vary greatly in terms of content between productions. Although there is a script based on the original New York production that one receives from Music Theatre International when obtaining a license to perform the show, aspects of the script are negotiable. Indeed, in his "Author's Note to the Director" (1999), Stephen Schwartz wrote: "While a creative director is free to alter the specifics, it is important to remain true to the subtextual content, motivations, and dramatic structure."<sup>1</sup> Schwartz includes among these "specifics" all stage directions, unusual freedom in the world of licensing plays.

Consideration of the original New York production provides a glimpse into the original intentions of the *Godspell* creators about three years after the production opened. The show was taped on 23 August 1974 at the Promenade Theater for preservation in the NYPL Theatre on Film and Tape Archive. The cast included: Lloyd Bremseth, Scotch Byerley, Laurie Faso, Delores Hall, Dean Pitchford, Patti Mariano, Gilmer McCormick, Leslie Ann Ray, Marley Sims, and William Thomas Jr. Only Gilmer McCormick had been in the original cast.

The show opens dark with the cast in a physical lump from which they gradually withdraw. They hum at a low pitch. Jesus speaks in a voiceover about God as creator and humans in bliss in the Garden of Eden. The Prologue opens with the "Tower of Babble," which shows allegorically how chaotic society can be with no sense of community. A spotlight falls on Socrates, and then the entire cast is lit as they portray Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, Leonardo da Vinci, Edward Gibbon, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Buckminster Fuller. They sing part of the song together, but it deteriorates into eight-part cacophony as they espouse their philosophies and remove their sweatshirts and throw them at each other, as well as other refuse on stage. When they reach a point of great frustration, they freeze and the stage goes dark when John the Baptist blows the shofar from the audience and sings "Prepare Ye," a solo that explodes when lights return and instruments enter as the eight "philosophers" become joyous; at this moment John playfully baptizes each from a bucket. They run into the audience and sing the song. When John is alone on stage, lights dim to applause.

John the Baptist preaches, decrying the world's evils and predicting the arrival of a great leader. Jesus enters in his underwear and socks, seeking baptism. The band begins "Save the People," which Jesus sings while John baptizes him. For the final verse, John hands Jesus a microphone, and the remainder of the cast enters in clown outfits. They end the song together with John acting as a crazed musical director. The cast assembles a "table" at center stage from two sawhorses and planks, which remains through several parables.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Schwartz, "Godspell Script Notes and Revisions" (1999), consulted in electronic file of *Godspell* script made available by Schwartz's office.

Jesus now wears a “Superman” shirt and preaches that he has come to complete the law, not replace it. John brings on a box with bright colors of greasepaint, and Jesus paints each actor’s face as he speaks. With this act, he claims each cast member as his own, and they start to build their community. They begin the first parable, that of the judge and the widow. Jesus starts a childish refrain (“la, la, la”), which the cast repeats at various moments while he tells the story and the cast acts it out. Jesus acts like a gospel preacher, and that attitude flows into the cast as they tell the next parable, about the Pharisee and the sinner. The narrator is Sonia (characters are identified by names of original Cherry Lane cast members), and her colleagues act it out. Jesus delivers the moral, as occurs commonly in the first act. Jesus follows the moral with teaching about getting along with one’s brother.

The parable of the ungrateful servant follows immediately, narrated by the Jeffrey character in imitation of Ed Sullivan. He tells the parable in rhythm and other cast members join him. Afterwards Robin stands and sings “Day By Day,” making her the first member of the community to make a public declaration for Jesus. She moves to the floor during the song as the cast sways, harmonizes, and provides stage business before the song ends with the Robin character again singing alone to Jesus.

Jesus preaches in a lengthy segment, mostly from the Sermon on the Mount. Others continually interrupt him with antics, including imitations of Groucho Marx and the Three Stooges. The next parable is that of the Good Samaritan, narrated by the Sonia character. Jesus presents the moral, followed by arguments and Jesus admonishing that we must love our neighbors. The cast has group hugs that Jesus interrupts, warning them not to make too much of a show of their religion.

Jesus gestures for Judas to tell the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man dies and goes to Hades. The actors act the parable out with heaven on the table and Hades on the floor. Gilmer launches into “Learn Your Lessons Well,” with other cast members acting like the sinners that she names. Jesus follows with brief teaching about God and money with cast members again acting out his words. He designates the Joanne character to tell the parable about the rich man who decides to build more barns after his successful harvest. This she does, and then she sings “Bless the Lord My Soul.” She gives it full gospel treatment with handheld microphone and other cast members acting as backup singers.

Jesus resumes preaching, telling how one should not worry about clothing or other needs, but think only about God. The cast takes part, and then they offer Jesus the first phrases of several Beatitudes, which he completes in an accelerating rhythm. Judas states enthusiastically that one is blessed when persecuted, but Jesus is unable to answer the man who will betray him in the second act. In a humorous rejoinder, Jesus says that he reads feet, and a silly exchange precedes him singing “All for the Best” with Judas. Before the final time through the number, with everyone participating, Jesus and Judas turn some teachings into a vaudeville routine.

Jesus preaches to his flock that they should not judge others, provoking stage business. He encourages the Peggy character to tell the parable of the sower, which she does like a nervous little girl. They act out the parable with cast members taking the parts of seeds falling into different types of soil.

Music begins for "All Good Gifts," with the Lamar character as soloist. After he sings the first verse, he hands the microphone to Jesus, who speaks about building up treasures in heaven while another character plays recorder. The number ends with all singing in a close formation and another recorder solo. After applause, more teaching about appropriate behavior ensues, followed by the parable of the prodigal son told by the Herb character.

Jesus comes forward with hand-held microphone and begins gospel-style preaching, bringing the cast to a fever pitch, chanting "the law and the prophets," before the Herb character sings "You Are the Light of the World." The song concludes with Jesus announcing intermission and inviting audience members to the stage for wine. Many come and mill about with the cast. When the lights come on, one sees the set. In addition to the sawhorses and planks, there is a chain-link fence to the rear arranged in three sides, with the left and right segments veering out towards the audience. The band is on a raised platform behind the fence, playing a bluesy tune unrelated to *Godspell's* score during intermission.

The intermission closes when a male African-American member of the cast sings a gospel version of "Learn Your Lessons Well." The cast cleans up after the wine and enters. After the song, the lights dim as "Turn Back, O Man" starts. The Sonia character sings it with a microphone as she makes her way forward in the theater, flirting with the audience. The cast is seated on the front of the stage with Jesus stage left. From there he sings his verse ("Earth shall be fair..."), and the cast sings and dances through the end of the song.

The cast has placed the table of planks and sawhorses in the middle of the stage. Three actors arrange themselves on or in front of it. They are Pharisees who question Jesus, starting with the basis for his authority. His answer confounds them, and he tells the parable of two sons who go to work in the vineyard, which Judas helps him act out. The Pharisees continue to question Jesus, who finally lectures them on their hypocrisy and sings "Alas For You" with microphone. After dealing with Pharisees, the cast assembles at the stage's apron, and they beat the stage and moan as Jesus begins a monolog about end times.

Jesus tells the parable of the talents, acted out by the cast as if it takes place in a French restaurant. The cast comes to Jesus speaking of the woman caught in the act of adultery. The woman is the Peggy character, and each picks up garbage to throw at her, in lieu of stones. Jesus says the one who is faultless may throw first. Even this serious moment includes levity: when the final actor to leave is the Herb character, he imitates Cookie Monster.

The Peggy character makes her declaration of loyalty to Jesus with "By My Side." The song becomes a duet, and then a choral number. During breaks, Judas says that he accepted thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus. Following the song, Jesus sits on a sawhorse and begins the parable about separating sheep from goats, which the cast acts out. The piano starts the active accompaniment for "We Beseech Thee," sung by the Jeffrey character. The song's finale is the famous effect from the original cast recording of several cast members producing different sounds.

The music for "Day By Day" starts, and while the cast sings Jesus removes paint, first from Judas's face, and then others. Jesus says that a follower will betray him. Judas asks if he will be the traitor; Jesus replies that he has stated so himself

and advises him to do it quickly. Judas runs away. Jesus distributes communion bread and wine, blessing each. He enjoys an individual farewell with each disciple as the band performs "On the Willows." As the song ends, they re-enact what took place in the Garden of Gethsemane, with Jesus asking the cast to watch while he prays, but they fall asleep. He upbraids them, and they promise to never fall away, but Jesus says that each will betray him three times before a cock crows. The cast becomes demons, tormenting Jesus.

Judas enters and mimes that he is in a three-sided box; the only direction he can go is to betray Jesus, who kisses Judas on both cheeks. Judas blows a whistle and sings a familiar circus tune. Under low lighting, he grabs Jesus and takes him to the center of the fence, where Jesus spreads his arms out as if crucified. The remainder of the cast writhes around him against the fence, and Jesus sings of his death in three short verses with choral responses. Following a blackout, the cast carries his body through the audience as they sing, "Long live God," followed by "Prepare Ye." Then suddenly the cast re-assembles on stage, Judas and Jesus in the middle, singing "Day by Day" with energetic handclaps.

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