Godspell

Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelak

MTSU Theatre

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Meredith Aydelott

Godspell is a musical that originally opened Off-Broadway in 1971, and it was revived on Broadway ten years ago in 2011. The show's music was, for the most part, written by Stephen Schwartz, except for a few songs that were written by original cast members, and the book was written by John-Michael Tebelak. The Theatre Department of Middle Tennessee State University did a production of the revival this semester, directed by Kristi Shamburger, from April 8th through April 11th, and I was lucky to be a part of the cast playing the Uzo track. I will try to remain as objective as I can throughout this critique. MTSU's *Godspell* tried to tell a story about a broken community coming together to rebuild through the teachings of Jesus.

Godspell is about people from very different walks of life who all start out with varying philosophies about life and death and human nature. This is seen in the opening prologue as each actor represented a different philosopher. Then, John the Baptist enters and announces the coming of the Lord. Once Jesus arrives, he and the ensemble begin to tell parables that get them to come together as a community. I think the director had a strong vision when it came to the storytelling and plot, but not necessarily when it came to the design. I believe that the biggest themes that the director wanted the audience to understand was the coming together of a community and each individual's connection with Jesus. Both of these themes were symbolically represented during the show. The caution tape that each actor tied to some part of their body or costume symbolized the community that they would come to create. During their solos, each individual had a "moment" with Jesus that was accompanied by a gesture or movement. These moments represented the individual's connection with Jesus. The gestures were also repeated during the song "On The Willows" towards the end of the show as each person said goodbye to Jesus before his crucifixion. I think that the crucifixion was a big moment in the show that stood out to me. It contrasts so heavily to the rest of the show, which for the most part is lighthearted.

As a performer, it was definitely the most intense part of the show. Even looking around the stage and seeing all of my castmates "in pain" was difficult to watch. The lighting, music, and sound were also much more intense during this moment. The crucifixion even ties back to the theme of the community, because all of the actors felt the pain of Jesus' electrocution. One thing I really enjoyed about this production was the creativity the actors were given. It allowed the actors to decide what felt comfortable to us, and since this is such an ensemble heavy show, I believe that to be very important. This show had a good balance of hands-on direction and freedom.

I believe the design side of the show was where *Godspell* fell short. I think there was a certain aesthetic that was wanted by the director that was definitely achieved, but was not necessarily relevant to the show. The set looked like a rundown city, and in combination with the "protest" posters in the prologue of the show and the civil unrest from the past year, it almost seemed like this was supposed to be taking place the day after a Black Lives Matter protest. While I think doing shows about racism and injustice are important, I don't think *Godspell* is the show for that message. I do believe the set itself was well-designed. If we take the politics out of it, the set designer created an environment that looked broken and rundown, quite literally "out of the ruins and rubble." I really enjoyed how the set was movable and customizable, as the actors moved around parking barriers, sawhorses, and crates to create different playing areas. With a show like *Godspell* where all of the actors are on stage the whole time, this movable set creates interest and dimension so the set is not stagnant the whole time. I also liked that the fixed set design allowed for different playing areas, with the large set of stairs, the dumpster area, and the trash can on stage right. This meant that the points of interest could be moved around, and people didn't always have to stand in one spot to be seen. I loved the parts of the set that the

designer added to make things look more broken down, with my favorite element being the fallen power lines and poles. I also appreciated the hidden cross design in the poles. It was amazing to see those power lines light up in the crucifixion. That was an intriguing example of collaboration. I think the set design really listened to what the script called for whilst bringing the show into a modern world.

Godspell is a show that is all about the actors and the story. The show relies on the people, not the spectacle, so it was important that this production have a really strong ensemble. It's a small cast of ten people, and everyone carried an important role. I believe that the ensemble gelled really well as a whole. Speaking as an actor in the show, we did a lot of team building exercises and warm-up games during rehearsal to create a stronger bond. The show lends itself to having a fun and enjoyable cast onstage because of the amount of improv and ad libbing that we were allowed to do. The one actor I wanted to focus on was Kaleb Stone, who played the role of John the Baptist/Judas. Judas is the most complex role in the show, as the actor has to blend in with the ensemble and be a part of the silly games and songs, but he also has to turn around and betray Jesus in the end. He has quite the journey to make by the end of the show, and I believe that Kaleb Stone was able to portray this character's journey honestly and truthfully. His physicality was often very relaxed and casual, which helped develop his whole devil's advocate role. A lot of the ad libs that Kaleb would make were very sarcastic and sardonic, adding even more to the smart-aleck character for which he was going. Still Kaleb allowed himself to be a part of the fun and games, dancing around and being goofy with the storytelling. This began to change in Act 2. His physicality became more withdrawn, especially after the moment in "By My Side" where it is revealed to the audience that he will betray Jesus. In the parable following that song, Kaleb chose to stay out of the way and he sat in the back while the rest of the cast was

near the apron of the stage. After this moment Kaleb became more and more reluctant as he came closer to the last supper. His physicality was introverted and unsociable, especially compared to his big presence in Act 1. After Jesus revealed the betrayal, Judas ran away, seemingly angry as he slammed the door on his way out. I believe Judas had become angry that he had made this decision to betray Jesus. When he returned, he had become even more unstable and angry as he tied Jesus to the chain link fence. When the electrocution started however, I saw regret and tears in his eyes. It was a beautiful and tragic journey to watch every night on stage.

Overall, I believe that *Godspell* was a successful production, especially on the performance side. There were some director and designer choices that were definitely questionable in today's political climate. The music was fun and entertaining, and it seemed like the actors were enjoying themselves, especially in Act 1 which held the more upbeat numbers and parables. There were definitely moments of heartbreak and tragedy that were portrayed truthfully by the cast. The message about building a community after hard and broken times was prevalent in the direction, certainly in the final reprise of "Beautiful City" as the actors began to clean up and rebuild their stage.