

## **Godspell @ Stray Dog Theatre**

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Schwartz

Concept and Book by John-Michael Tebelak

Based on the Gospel of Matthew

Running August 3 - 26, 2023 @ Tower Grove Abbey

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I'm a huge fan of high-concept musical theatre, especially when it comes to productions that present a show in a way that deviates from the original text but speaks to our current times. Fly North Theatrical's 2022 production of *Assassins* is a fantastic example of this. Now, in 2023, Stray Dog Theatre presents us with *Godspell*, a musical that lends itself to high-concept stagings like nothing else. I was looking forward to seeing what they would do with a show that has a banger score but with little to no story or character development at all. What they gave us is quite possibly the most unexpected concept you could possibly conceive for a show like this, which is commendable. But for me personally, it took a long time for the concept to really click, and when it did, I found myself very uncomfortable with its implications.

*Godspell* is a contemporary adaptation of the Gospel of Matthew. The show starts with a group of eight people who enter the space as perfect strangers with diverse backgrounds and philosophies. All of them are united by John the Baptist, who is the very picture of a fire and brimstone preacher trying to convert them. Soon enough, they are joined by Jesus Christ. He enters simply wanting to be included in their community; his pleas for salvation, combined with his natural charisma, win over the group and they replace John with Jesus as the leader. Jesus takes them all through a series of well-known stories from the Gospel – the Parable of Lazarus, the Parable of the Sower, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, etc. – in the form of pop-rock songs, improv sketches, and interactive games. It's all very ritualistic. In Act II, things start to take a turn towards the dark as John, who has been competing with Jesus for the title of community leader for all of Act I, reveals himself to be Judas Iscariot, setting in motion a series of events that lead to a reenactment of the Passion of Christ.

What makes *Godspell* so unique is that there is no stated time or place, so you can have it take place pretty much whenever and wherever you want. You can place it in modern times or decades past; you can set it in the theatre we are in or a location like a city street, a restaurant, or even a classroom. The trick is to place *Godspell* in a setting that would naturally bring in a community, one that makes the audience feel included and feel safe. This is the one aspect of Stray Dog Theatre's production that fails, in my opinion, and it's a big one.

Director Justin Been sets the action of *Godspell* in an underground New York City subway stop during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The strangers are Rachel Bailey as a pediatric nurse, Sarah Gene Dowling and Kevin O'Brien as married tourists, Stephen Henley as an actor, Laura Lee Kyro as the group's token atheist, Grace Langford and Chris Moore as college students (Grace being more outgoing and Chris being more reserved), and Dawn

Schmid as a hippie busker. Alexandar Johnson plays John the Baptist as a street preacher trying to show the commuters “the way of the Lord.” Then there’s an explosion outside, followed shortly after by Jesus, played here by Kevin Corpuz, tumbling down the stairs to the station in a bloody mess. The first Tower has been hit, and Jesus got caught in the debris cascade. After nursing Jesus’s wounds, they stay sheltered from the disaster by reading from John’s Bible and reenacting the parables, singing songs, and all that good shit. The show progressively gets darker and more serious as the attacks rage on, climaxing with the collapse of the World Trade Center that reigns destruction on the subway, killing Jesus. The rest of the characters are bereaved, having no other choice but to flee the subway and leave Jesus pinned underneath a heap of rubble. They all promise to carry on Jesus’s teachings and build a “Beautiful City” from the smoke and rubble the attacks have left behind.

It wasn’t until the song “Beautiful City” that setting *Godspell* during 9/11 made sense to me, given the lyrics and the events that it leads to, but I can’t help but feel that it goes against the reality of the text. It’s made clear in the script that Jesus’s death is not real, that it’s all part of the ritual. The wailing and grieving from the characters are supposed to be a way for them to know that it’s okay to experience a strong reaction to massive trauma, that it’s okay to be emotional, to make mistakes, and to be destructive if need be. I will give credit to Stray Dog that killing Jesus for real without providing any sort of closure brings home the message that there will never be any closure for the 9/11 attacks. If this show really was about 9/11, I could accept that, maybe even call it one of the bravest pieces of theatre I’ve ever seen. But here’s the problem: it’s fucking *Godspell*, for Christ’s sake. This is not a show that is supposed to evoke these feelings. There’s an intense aura of dread that encompasses this entire production, even during the lighthearted moments. What makes it worse is that any time there are updates on the attacks, Jesus forcibly shuts them out, trying to keep everyone positive. It’s this shutting out of the outside world that seals Jesus’s fate, which is true to history, but it’s a mentality that does not fly today, not even before 9/11. It genuinely felt like these people were being coerced into accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. A few of them may have been with Jesus from the jump, but that doesn’t speak for everyone else. Manipulating these people into doing these things under such a horrible situation with pretty much no hope of escape is honestly kind of disgusting.

In my opinion, for a production of *Godspell* to work, you have to embrace its artificiality. The text of *Godspell* is explicitly theatrical; the script makes it clear from the very beginning that there is no such thing as a fourth wall. You are required to make the audience feel comfortable with this material; you have to invite the audience in with every song, no matter how deep or serious it may get. The fact that we are clearly watching a show is what makes us, the audience, feel like we are in a safe space to explore the ideas and themes *Godspell* presents us with. By setting the show in such a grounded, real-life tragic event, inside of a place where there is no salvation, and no consistent reality within this “fourth wall” they’ve created, director Justin Been has gone in the complete opposite direction of how to produce *Godspell*.

As much as I’ve gone on and on about how the direction fails Stray Dog’s production, everything else is great. The cast really put their all into the characterizations, and they ably perform Sara

Rae Womack's fun choreography. Musical director Leah Schultz leads the unseen band well, featuring herself and Jennifer Buchheit on the keys, Jonathan Beck on guitar, Michaela Kuba on bass, and Mike Hansen on the drums (I think, too, the band should be a part of the show that the characters interact with, but I'm rambling again). Rob Lippert's unit set is a vividly detailed portrayal of the subway stop, featuring a poster of the 2001 film *Soul Survivors* that has to be one of the weirdest period references I've ever seen in a set. There's also some striking lighting by Tyler Duenow and vibrating sound effects by Justin Been.

Obviously, Stray Dog Theatre has not presented us with the definitive *Godspell*. In fact, I would dare say that it's kind of an insult to the text. To be fair, I don't think there ever can be a definitive version because *Godspell* really is one of those musicals that is what you make of it. However, a lesson can be learned from this: if you're going to do a high-concept production of any musical, or create an interpretation of the text, no matter how strange and uncomfortable it may be, please, for the love of Jesus, *stick to the script, people!*