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Contra Costa's 'Godspell' a moving slice of history

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THE CAST OF 'Godspell,' showing now through June 26 at the Del Valle Theatre in Walnut Creek.
Courtesy Michelle Campbell

*Theater review by Elizabeth Warnimont
Special to The Herald*

When "Godspell," the musical by Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelac, landed on the Broadway stage in 1976, it was current, unique and inspiring. It reflected the age of flower children, promoting love and peace after the shock and tragedy of Vietnam. Jesus and the Christian ethic enjoyed a new kind of popularity among the rising youth.

The age-old story of the Godspell (an old English term for "gospel" or "good news") was retold in a hip new way, together with modern music and dance. The message was expressed in a way that resonated with the new generation.

In 2010, the message of the play is no less valid, but it doesn't speak to the new millennium the way it did at the time of its debut. Presented this month by the Contra Costa Christian Theatre in Walnut Creek, "Godspell," now offers a

slice of history, a snapshot of the ideals that drove the radical societal changes of the 1960s and '70s. It is not a timeless piece of literature, because its cultural themes are unique to the period. It is, however, a classic portrayal of an incomparable era.

Kimberley James directs a talented cast in this slightly modernized production in which the spirit of community and the messages of the New Testament gospels of Matthew and Luke are effectively presented in a simple and natural setting. Since the play draws its material primarily from the Bible, it may be more of an educational experience for some audiences and more of a religious celebration for others.

For all comers, it provides an accurate if narrow glimpse of the changing American values of the 1970s.

“Godspell” dramatizes several widely recognized parables from the New Testament gospels of Matthew and Luke with a playful, contemporary twist. There’s the story of the sower whose seeds thrived best where they fell on fertile soil; the prodigal son who squandered his inheritance but was still welcomed with open arms when he returned home penniless and ashamed; and the good Samaritan, who helped his enemy when he found him robbed, beaten and dying by the side of the road.



CAST members of 'Godspell,' including Alexander Murphy at Jesus (right).

Courtesy Michelle Campbell

The deeper meanings of the parables are explained by the character of Jesus (Alexander Murphy). As each story is told, characters are chosen to act the parts, with varying enthusiasm. In keeping with the historical context, for example, nobody wants to play the Samaritan, a people reviled in the actual Bible story.

Overall, Contra Costa's “Godspell” is a successful production. The stage set (designed by director James) and choreography (by Kate Leland) are excellent. Vocal standouts include Jennifer Malman (“Jennifer”) and Michelle Fetterly (“Michelle”). Jesus is well played by Murphy, and the musical accompaniment, directed by Bill Ludtke, is top notch.

On the down side, the dialogue is at times difficult to hear, and singing is not a strong point for all players. The occasional moments of slapstick comedy sometimes feel out of place. But a high caliber of acting, dance and musical ability is predominant, and the play's message is clear.

It all makes for a pleasant evening of inspiring entertainment in a comfortable and acoustically superior venue.

If You Go

“Godspell” continues at the Del Valle Theatre, located in the old high school building near Rossmoor in Walnut Creek, through June 26. Tickets are available by calling the Leshner Performing Arts Center at 925-943-7469 or online at www.lesherartscenter.org.

Elizabeth Warnimont holds a BA in Germanic language and literature from the University of California-Santa Barbara. She is currently a substitute teacher for the Benicia Unified School District.

Written by beniciaherald

June 14, 2010 at 10:25 pm

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2 Responses

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1. Opening this weekend: “Barnum,” a musical celebration of the “world’s greatest showman.” At the Contra Costa Civic Theatre in El Cerrito. Tickets available at <http://www.ccct.org>.



Elizabeth Warnimont

June 14, 2010 at [10:50 pm](#)

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2. Thank you so much for coming Elizabeth. And GO GAUCHOS! Class of 1989 😊



Michelle Campbell

June 16, 2010 at [2:07 am](#)

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