

Decades later, still under the spell of 'Godspell'



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

I can't quite wrap my head around the reality that "Godspell" came out almost 50 years ago (1973). The film, based on the Gospel of Matthew, was adapted from an off-Broadway play. I've been watching clips from the movie, finding myself singing along, laughing, wiping a few tears. It seems even after all these years "Godspell" still has me under its spell.

The film depicts Jesus with a clown-face in a Superman suit with "big hair" leading his motley crew of disciples around a mostly empty New York City (one eerie scene shows the troupe dancing on the roof of the World Trade Center). Baptism is splashing in a public fountain, parables are told in junk yards and gardens, in pantomime and skit. All very light-hearted and freeing. It makes you smile at the wild colors and clothes of the '70s, while, at least for me, it brought back the sense of joyful exuberance missing from so much religion we see.

Our church youth choir had a lot of fun with the songs. No acting, just the joy of singing. Tunes were catchy and could be deeply meaningful: "Prepare Ye the Way," "All Good Gifts," "By My Side," "Day By Day," "Turn Back, O Man" and many others. "On the Willows" is a haunting piece, sung as the shadows of suffering and death (on a chain-link fence in Central Park) approach. I'll never forget one Sunday morning when our



Cast of "Godspell." COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND/GODSPELL

choir got to church early and spread out through the congregation. After everyone was gathered for the service, one of our guys walked in from a side door and began to sing: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" One by one we each stood to join the song, walking forward until we were all assembled as a choir. Simple, but emotive and effective. At the end of the service we all sang "Long Live God" as we walked down the aisle. Most of the adults seemed to be moved by our uplifting performance—at least they were smiling as they left church.

Alongside the serious rock star savior of "Jesus Christ, Superstar," the more intimate portrayal of the rebel rabbi of Nazareth in "Godspell" was like a spiritual drug for some of us. We were tripping out on a jazzy Jesus we could easily imagine hanging out with as a brother and friend—Lord or not. We were getting our "high" off a God who could giggle and wiggle his hips.

As youthful evangelicals we were a little shocked by "Superstar," though we loved the music. Yet there was something delightfully playful, even sinful, about "Godspell." They're all clowns, clowning around, teasing, dancing, kissing. John the Baptist turns out to be Judas. The Romans are the police. The crucifixion is on a fence. And, there was no resurrection! Or so we thought, until we thought about it.

At the end, the sad but hopeful followers, singing "Long Live God" and "Prepare Ye the Way," carry their dead Clown Christ down an empty street in New York and round a corner. The camera follows but the cast is gone. The sidewalk suddenly crowded with humanity coming and going—life goes on.

Some of us were bothered by that finale. That couldn't be the end! He was resurrected! Later we figured it out: they became us; he became a part of everyone. Death can't stop Life. That was re-

assuring. We could handle that. Besides, the music was endlessly enlivening.

Now as a secular person I find myself enjoying the story again as the characters, the scenes and lyrics come back so easily, as if I was one of the "Jesus People" again. My own "brothers and sisters" from those days also disappeared. Maybe we thought we'd soon meet up in a heavenly park greeted by the exalted Clown in a Superman costume. I don't know, but what I do know is that down-to-earth Holy Hippie set my faith dancing.

Jesus would never again be wearing a long white robe up in the sky, separated from me, my family and friends. He loved me too much to be angry with me or waste time judging humanity. I couldn't see him entering a church, let alone joining one. He wouldn't hand us a Bible, he'd reach out an open hand. His stories and parables were silly and significant. His life wasn't otherworldly but radically this-worldly. A life we could live just like he did.

Some of us may no longer follow the Jesus of Church, but we might dance with the Compassionate Clown now and then.

I read that Victor Garber, the actor who played Jesus, is a Canadian-American of Russian-Jewish descent. I recognize his face. Maybe the clown's face, too.

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