

Musical take on gospels tackles modern racism; [Final Edition]

HARRY CURRIE. *The Record*. Kitchener, Ont.: May 28, 2005. pg. C.3

Full Text (734 words)

(c) 2005 *The Record (Waterloo Region)*. All rights reserved.)

Ran with "STAGE" which has been appended to the end of this story

From the very first appearance of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John some 2000 years ago, writers, speakers, historians, scholars and theologians have attempted to analyse, interpret, categorize, correct, and rewrite them to make them more relevant, and even set them to music.

Handel's Messiah and Bach's St. Matthew Passion are two classic examples, while Andrew Lloyd Webber's Jesus Christ Superstar, Mel Gibson's film The Passion of The Christ, and even Dan Brown's novel The Da Vinci Code are recent attempts to reinvent the story for today.

Not surprising, then, that an even more colloquial version should appear in book form called The Cotton Patch Version of Matthew and John, by Clarence Jordan, or that it would be turned into musical theatre as Cotton Patch Gospel by Tom Key and Russell Treyz, with music by the legendary, late Harry Chapin. Many say it's the best work Chapin ever did.

Lost and Found Theatre, the region's newest, yet oldest, theatre ensemble, is staging Cotton Patch Gospel, The Greatest Story Ever Retold, complete with music, at Emmanuel United Church in Waterloo beginning on Thursday.

Director Allan K. Sapp spoke with me about the concept and their upcoming production.

"Mike Peng and Andrew Lakin have wanted to do this piece for a long, long time," he said, "but the support was never there. Now we're in a position to follow some of the projects, like this one, which we've been unable to pursue."

Key, one of the originators of the musical play, felt that it was important to tell the Jesus story with the implication that racial equality is a gospel cause.

"Key is based in Atlanta, Georgia," said Sapp, "and in the southern states you can do plays that have a biblical strain and no one even blinks an eye, for everybody accepts that as part of the fabric. We felt that there is a relevance here for two main reasons: the strong Mennonite community, and the music, for this area is rich in its appreciation of so many kinds of music."

This version by Lost and Found Theatre is closer to the original concept by Key and Treyz.

"We have two actors, Mike (Peng) and Andrew (Lakin), who play all of the parts," said Sapp. "The very integral band consists of Ken Brown, Andre Clouthier, Miriam Clouthier, Terry Riddoch and Tim Thorne. Both the band and the actors sing, and the style of the music is very blue grass, for the play is set in the southern states."

In Cotton Patch Gospel, Mary is the daughter of a deacon of a Baptist church, and Jesus isn't crucified by Pontius Pilate but lynched by the Ku Klux Klan with the support of Georgia's Governor Pilate.

"The transfer of the setting brings both amusement and shock," said Sapp. "There are funny sections with the angels, the televangelists and the various deacons, and there are tragic and serious sequences which are all part of the story. Some people have walked out of performances because of the inference of racial equality. I guess there are still some who don't believe that racial equality is a necessary part of Christianity, and I know that makes Tom Key very sad, but that's what makes him realize that this interpretation is very essential for today's audiences."

Sapp feels that this play is ideal for Peng and Lakin.

"This play is perfect for Andrew and Mike's performing styles," he said. "This shows the chemistry between them and it suits them both so well. This is the other reason for wanting to do the production."

hcurrie@therecord.com

STAGE

What: Cotton Patch Gospel

Who: Lost and Found Theatre

Where: Emmanuel United Church, 22 Bridgeport Rd. W., Waterloo (at Albert Street).

When: Opens Thursday, June 2 and runs Thursday to Saturday until Saturday, June 11 at 8 p.m., with matinees on Saturday, June 4 and Saturday, June 11 at 2 p.m.

Tickets: \$29 adults, \$25 for students and seniors, available through Centre in the Square box office, 578-1570 or 1-800-265- 8977. Student eyeGo rates apply.

[[Illustration]]

Photo: MATHEW McCARTHY, RECORD STAFF / Michael Peng is surrounded by fellow actors (from left) Tim Thorne, Miriam Clouthier, Andre Clouthier, Ken Brown and Terry Riddoch at a rehearsal of Cotton Patch Gospel. The musical opens Thursday at Emmanuel United Church in Waterloo.

Credit: RECORD STAFF

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

Section: *ARTS*

Text Word Count 734

Document URL: