

Lee C. Moorehead

Godspell

Just over two years ago I arrived in New York City one early afternoon considerably ahead of a meeting that I was to attend. On the way downtown from the airport I read a copy of the New York Times. On the entertainment page I read about a new musical play that claimed to be based on the Gospel According to Matthew. Since that very summer I was lecturing in several Schools of Mission on the Gospel of Matthew my interest was immediately aroused. As soon as I got to my hotel I called the theater to see if there would be any seats available for that evening's performance. I was informed that there might be but that I would have to appear at the ticket office to reserve the seat. At once I boarded the subway headed for Greenwich Village in lower Manhattan. There in a labyrinth of curving streets I had quite a search for the ~~theater~~ Cherry Lane Theater. Eventually I found it at the end of a dead-end street, with an appearance that looked anything like ~~a~~ <sup>but a</sup> theater. This had to be off-off Broadway! At the ticket ~~summer~~ window I was told that one seat - that a temporary one - was left. There was an exchange of money and I had the ticket. It was about 4 o'clock in the ~~later~~ afternoon and ~~the~~ "Godspell," the show for which I had just purchased a ticket, did not start until 7:30 P.M. So I spent the next three hours somewhat reluctantly exploring on foot the lower end of Manhattan. At 7:15 I found the Cherry Lane Theater again and was ushered to a seat at the very back of a small performing hall, a ~~in~~ folding chair on the aisle. I began to think that perhaps I had been had.

I had. I looked around to see that I was in an old building that looked more like a brick barn, scarcely seating 200 people. But when the show began I was quickly transported into an unutterably beautiful experience. Soon that little "hole in the wall" was made electric and radiant with ten young people, attired as ragmuffins in a circus or carnival, who jumped and danced jubilantly about in what one hardened New York reviewer called "an agape - love feast - dedicated to light and joy and love." (Joseph H. Mazo in Women's

Wear Daily. When I emerged from the theater into the dingy, dirty streets of Breenwich Village some two hours later, my heart and mind were aglow with one of the most beautiful and moving experiences I have ever had in my life.

So what is ~~the~~ "Godspell" all about? It is a musical play, employing several modern styles of music, including a gentle rock, that is loosely based on the Gospel According to Matthew. It takes the Bible both jubilantly and seriously. It was conceived and directed by a young man, John-Michael Lebelak, as a Master's <sup>thesis</sup> ~~thems~~ project at Carnegie Tech. Nobody ever heard of the ten young people who comprised the original cast. Several of them had been students at Carnegie Tech. But in the two years since I emerged that night from the Cherry Lane Theater "Godspell" has played in London, Canada, Hawaii, and every major city in the United States, with a very long run in Washington, D.C. Road companies are now criss-crossing the country with this traveling festival of joy. One of those companies will present "Godspell" in Green Bay on Saturday evening, November 17, 1973, at the West High School Auditorium. In Green Bay "Godspell" will be sponsored by the Key 73 Committee of the Brown County Association of Pastors as its major offering of the Key 73 year. Because of an anticipated heavy demand for the 1572 available seats at West High School in this single performance, our church has been selected as one church where next Sunday, September 16, there will be a pre-public sale of tickets.

You must know that that term "Godspell" is an old English word meaning "gospel." I wish I could convey to you the feeling that lingered with me for days and months after seeing it for the first time. Learning that the "Godspell" cast was to be on the "Today" tv show the very next morning, I went straight back to my hotel to make certain that the TV set in my room was going ~~work~~. I was dismayed to discover that, as usual, I had a faulty hotel set. At once I rang up the desk clerk asking if something could not be done. At 1 o'clock in the morning I got them to move me into another room where the TV ~~alledgedly~~ would work. At 7 o'clock I was wide awake so that I could fasten on every word that was sung and spoken about "Godspell."

I don't think I gave or received much at the very important meeting I had to attend all that day. On the following day when my meeting was at last over I had just a short time to catch my flight back to Illinois. Having learned that the record album for "Godspell" had just been released I raced up and down the streets of mid-town Manhaattan, all of the while toting a heavy suitcase, looking for the album. At the very last moment when my time had already run out I found a store that had it in stock. I think I can report that I almost literally "flew" back to Illinois. You see, I was powerfully under the spell of "Godspell." Deep in my heart I believe it was, even more literally, "the spell of God." In a most refreshing and exciting way I had a new vision of the Gospel. Hoping so very much that you will take advantage of this opportunity, too, on November 17, I want to share with you a bit more about this "spell," which was for me, an irresistable influence.

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"Godspell" is first all about joy. As one reviewer put it: "(it is) a work that believes in God - and people - and possibility." (Jerry Tallmer in the New York Post)

Many of the New York critics, generally sophisticated and callous, gave "Godspell" unusually generous reviews. Some of their comments are:

"(It is filled) with energy, gaiety, honesty, spirit." (1)

"Staged as a sort of clown show in a series of sketches, scenes, narrations, songs and dances." (2)

"A friskey, exhilarating little show, full of ozone and light-headedness." (3)

"Innocence reigned like thunder at the Cherry Lane Theater, where last night a new musical called 'Godspell' opened." (Clive Barnes, New York Times, (6)

"Except for the ending, a solemn reenactment of the Crucifixion, 'Godspell' suggests that religion can be fun." (7)

For the most part the Gospel parables and sayings are acted out in pantomime, child games, minstrel shows, improvisations, and dancing, word games, and finger games. The ten actors are dressed as clowns and performers in a Carnival or Circus.

The figure of Jesus might at first trouble some. He appears as a clown, with a Superman symbol on his shirt, and a bright red heart painted on his forehead. That heart is very important indeed to the characterization he gives Jesus. There is another symbol on his face - typical of the traditional clown - that I want to mention later, for it, too, is very, very important. In the scenes and sketches that fairly tumble over one another the parables of the prodigal son and the Good Samaritan are retold, the Pharisees are driven from the <sup>temple</sup> ~~temple~~, and Lazarus is revived. There is, as another reviewer put it, "Infectious joy in their freewheeling retelling of the Scripture. There is jubilation in their robust delivery of Schwartz's palm-smacking and widely ranged rock numbers." (11)

Perhaps a key to "Godspell" was best spotted by Walter Kerr, the distinguished critic of the New York Times. Kerr noted that the play begins with the ~~ten~~ actors huddled against the back wall of the stage. When they break it is seen that they carry signs indicating ~~some~~ of the great figures of the literary and philosophical world: Socrates, Thomas Aquinas, Leonardo da Vinci, Martin Luther, Edward Gibbon, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Buckminster Fuller. Overhead are electric wires at the ends of which dangle bare light bulbs. Each ~~xxxxx~~ actor representing one of these characters pulls on a light, stepping into the harsh glare, and recites a line from one of the greats. Kerr noticed especially the quotation from Buckminster Fuller: "I seem to be a verb - not a noun, not a category, not a thing." Kerr continues: "Within ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ a few seconds after that Fuller line is spoken, the Cherry Lane stage is suddenly aswarm with tumbling, teetering, never-still clown children making a verb, not a weary noun out of the Gospel of St. Matthew." (5)

Some time ago I got a very thoughtful letter from a distinguished member of our church in which there was an effort to relate feelings about the church. In part the letter read: "It is very difficult to express feelings about such a subject as religion in writing, but I suppose my particular complaint with the organized church is that I find my religion is very joyful and my relation-  
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with God, one which is very full of joy. I seldom find that feeling in ~~church~~ any church that I have attended." (Vivi Dilweg, Aug. 24, 1973) No doubt that is a most telling commentary about our church and our church life. Many of us have missed the robust joy that is inherent in the Gospel. I want so that this morning you, ~~will~~ too, will fall under the spell of "Godspell." "Godspell" is child-like without being childish. Perhaps it takes children, or these youth, to restore in us the joy of the Lord.

## -II-

There is another part of "Godspell," though that affects one so powerfully that he is simply overwhelmed.

The first hour and half are all bounce and beauty, but quite suddenly the closing moments shift one into a mood of deep seriousness and solemnity in which feelings of the most powerful poignance are aroused with him. The closing episode is a reenactment of the Crucifixion.

Remember, I told you that ~~the~~ Jesus is pictured as a clown with a gorgeous red heart painted on his forehead. Some people wince at the sight of Jesus being portrayed as a clown. But they ~~don't~~ miss the significance of the traditional clown portrayal. Indeed, the great clowns have been those who have brought joy and release to people burdened with the woes and the weights of the world. There is healing in laughing at the foibles and frailties of men. Joyous laughter can be cleansing, spiritually and morally. But you must note the other symbols painted on the clown's face in "Godspell." Under his eyes are large, black tears. In tradition the clown has been so much more than a jester, a fool. He has been seen as one who beneath his clown-lit face bears a heavy burden of sorrow. And so it is quite appropriate that he is portrayed, too, as one with tears falling from his eyes. Did not our Lord, Jesus Christ, so enter into our humanity that he bore our sorrows, suffered and died for our sins? After so many games and dances and pantomimes in "Godspell" some of the streaks of gay paint disappear from the faces and we are carried into the heart of Christ's passion. Against the chicken-wire background he he fastened to an imaginary cross, and there in the simplest song

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he pours out his anguish before Almighty God. Soom he dies, and then this rag-tag<sup>band of</sup> carnival figures, with all of their gaiety gone, take him down tenderly from the cross, and in deep love and sorrow they slowly carry his lifeless body out through the transfixed audience. But listen to what they sing, a single line that rises softly and slowly at first, then bursting into a full-throated, roaring affirmation: "Long live God! Long live God! Long live God!" In that moment in that ~~little~~ dreary little Cherry Lane Theater I experienced in every fiber of my being the death and passion of our Lord. Never before in my life had I been so deeply moved.

What would our worship be like this morning if in the midst of a bitter and broken world, with tragic and towering problems overwhelming us, if we were to rise from our places and sing exultantly: "Long live God! Long live God! Long l ive God!"

But "Godspell" is not over, for after a moment of breathtaking silence and dread, the entire cast bounds back upon the stage joyously singing

Day by Day, Day by Day,

~~Dear Lord, Dear Lord~~

Oh, Dear Lord, three things I pray

To see Thee more clearly

To love ~~Thee~~ more dearly

To follow Thee more nearly

Day by Day

Oh, how I want all of you to have that experience! I tell you that unless your minds are entirely closed, and your hearts irreparably hardened, you, too, will fall under the spell of "Godspell." And you may believe that it is truly the spell of the Gospel, which means, that you will have fallen under the spell of God.