

THE SUMMER PLACE THEATRE
PRESENTS



STUDY GUIDE

A SOURCE OF DISCUSSION, REFLECTION,
AND INTERPRETATION



Conceived and Originally Directed by **John Michael Tebelak**

Music and New Lyrics by **Stephen Schwartz**

Originally Produced on the New York Stage by
Edgar Lansbury Stuart Duncan Joseph Beruh

About Godspell

Godspell is based on the Gospel According to St. Matthew. In the Gospel, Jesus Christ preaches through parables and storytelling. The show, which is not built on a traditional plot, utilizes clowning, pantomime, charades, acrobatics, and vaudeville to tell the story of Christ. A pageant that moves from moment to moment, *Godspell* is a reflection on the life of Jesus by ten performers.

This is a **theatrical interpretation** of biblical events, not a historical account. By studying *Godspell*, it provides us an opportunity to reflect upon our own spiritual journey.

Godspell opened at the Cherry Lane Theatre on May 17, 1971 and was an immediate hit with audiences. Because the Cherry Lane was too small for the crowd, the production moved uptown to the Promenade Theatre where it played 2,124 performances until it moved to Broadway in 1976. *Godspell* then played for an additional 527 performances on Broadway.

Summer Place Theatre's *Godspell* transports us into the world of Vaudeville to a simpler sweeter time in history. Vaudeville theatre comes from the term "voix de ville" meaning "voice of the city." It presents a variety show atmosphere where magicians, burlesque, dancers, opera stars and comics dominated the stage to entertain and educate the audience. We start out in the modern day where technology has sped up to a cacophony. Upon the arrival of John the Baptist, who is a vaudeville-era magician, our cast is transported back in time to the 1920's. The theatre changes from a stark modern stage to a colorful Vaudeville house. The duration of the play is done in that style, with the actors adopting various Vaudeville personas. When we come toward the end, we are back in the present day, Jesus is gone and the cast is now a loving community of people, ready to take Jesus' lessons out into the world.

CAST OF CHARACTERS , THEIR VAUDEVILLE PERSONAS, SOLOS THEY SING:

Jesus: A gentle, charismatic leader. Solos: Save the People, All for the Best (duet with Judas), Alas for You.

John the Baptist/Judas: Magician. Charismatic, slightly "dangerous" at times. Through much of the play, he's Jesus's right hand man. Solos: Prepare Ye, All for the Best (duet with Jesus).

Herb: Comedian (also known as Baggy Pants Comic). He's the funny one. Solos: Some solo lines in songs, but no solo per se. He's also our "director" at the top of the show.

Lamar: Ventriloquist. Shy and sweet. Maybe a little slow on the uptake. Lets his dummy speak for him from time to time. Solos: All Good Gifts

Jeffrey: Cowboy. Very playful (does rope tricks or juggling). Solos: We Beseech Thee.

Joanne: Grand Dame / Opera Diva. Confident and rather mystical. Bold and not afraid to take things on. Solos: O, Bless the Lord My Soul

Robin: The Ingenue. A real sweetheart. Has a gentle, maternal nature. Solos: Day by Day

Peggy: The Hooper. Great energy and enthusiasm. Loves to take the stage and will carry many of our vaudeville act placards. Solos: By My Side (duet with Gilmer), Day by Day Reprise (part)

Sonia: The Burlesque Dancer. Has a playful sexuality, maybe a bit campy and vampy. Solos: Turn Back, O Man

Gilmer: The Comedienne. She's rather a tomboy. Throws many a character voice. Solos: Learn Your Lessons Well, By My Side (duet with Peggy), Day by Day Reprise (part)

Themes And Topics To Explore

GODSPELL AS DRAMA

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- The title, "*Godspell*", is the Old English word for "gospel" and means a "good tale". What is the theme of *Godspell*? In what ways is it a "good tale?"
- Is *Godspell* a comedy or a tragedy? Why? What is the source of its tragedy? Its humor?
- Did you recognize anything that reminded you of yourself in any of the characters?
- How do JESUS and the PLAYERS change by the time the play ends? How does this place responsibility upon mankind? Why is the song *Beautiful City* significant to our finale?

ASSIGNMENT, RESEARCH AND WRITING PROMPTS

- List the elements of the plot and theme of *Godspell* which you believe to be universal.
- Make a list of details about the characters. Where did you learn this information? From dialogue, lyric, music, or design elements such as costumes?

THE OPENING OF GODSPELL

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- How does a play, musical, or movie grab your attention?
- What is your favorite opening scene in a play, musical, or movie? Why?
- Exposition is defined in the dictionary as "explaining." We refer to the opening moments of a dramatic work as exposition. List all the things you learn in the first scene in *Godspell*.
- The opening moments of *Godspell* contain several declarations by Jesus and the philosophers. There is no dialogue between characters. Instead, the performers speak directly to the audience. Were you engaged by the opening moments of *Godspell*? Why or why not? Did you feel the performers were speaking directly to you?
- Does what someone says determine their character? Can someone lie in their declaration?

STORYTELLING IN GODSPELL

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Godspell is presented as a story being shared with the audience by a group of storytellers.

- What is a story? What is the function of storytelling in a society? Between generations?
- What is the first story you can ever remember hearing? Reading for yourself?
- What was the role of the storyteller in a primitive society?
- Who are the storytellers in modern life? List all the ways in which stories are transmitted from one person to another in contemporary culture.
- Why do you think the authors of *Godspell* chose to relate their musical through the voices of storytellers? Who do the storytellers represent in the piece?
- What is the role of the internet in conveying stories in contemporary America? In what ways does communicating stories over the internet resemble the way in which our ancestors used to trade tales?
- What is the value of relating tales from the Bible through the medium of musical theatre? What is added in the process of experiencing the tales in this way?

ASSIGNMENTS, RESEARCH AND WRITING PROMPTS

Stories that are meant to teach lessons from one generation to another are told in a variety of forms including parables, fables, and allegories. A parable is usually a short fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle.

- Tell the story of one of the parables in *Godspell* presenting a different interpretation than the one presented in the show.
- Write your own parable using an object from the everyday, modern world.
- What is a fable? Create a fable of your own which addresses one of the aspects of human behavior dealt with in *Godspell*.
- What is an allegory? Create an allegory of your own which addresses one of the aspects of human behavior dealt with in *Godspell*.

- Orally retell a story from the Old or New Testament of the bible in a compelling and dramatic way. Write the same story down. How are the experiences of telling the story and writing it down different? Which is the more powerful means of expression?
- Read a collection of folk tales from another culture. Write a contemporary folk tale of your own that you can imagine being told several centuries from now to portray something that took place on New Year's Eve 1999.
- Tell a continuous story. One person begins a tale and tells it for two minutes. Then another person picks up the tale and adds their continuation of the story for two minutes. Then each other person in the group adds their two minutes. What happens to the story as it is passed from one mind and voice to another? Discuss ways in which the Gospel of St. Matthew could have been transformed over time in a similar way.
- Read about the history of the Bible. When were the Old Testament stories first written down? What do we know about the people who wrote them down?
- Research major religions of the world other than Christianity and Judaism to learn about their Holy Books. What is the importance of a sacred book such as the Bible to the members of a religion?
- Read and listen to other musical theatre treatments of literature from the Bible including JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT, JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR, and CHILDREN OF EDEN.

THE TOWER OF BABEL

In *Godspell*, the philosophers talk over each other and become a "Tower of Babel" where not a single voice is heard coherently.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Ask everyone in the room to talk at once for thirty seconds. Don't try to have individual conversations. Just talk out to the air. Talk about anything. After thirty seconds of babel, answer the following questions.
- What did you hear? Did you hear whole thoughts or fragments? Could you hear the person across the room or just next to you? Did you verbally respond to anything you heard?

- What did you say? Do you feel it was important? Did you find yourself speaking louder or softer than everyone around you?

ASSIGNMENTS, RESEARCH AND WRITING PROMPTS

- Write one page about a time you felt you were in a "Tower of Babel." Did you like it or not?
- Write a description of noise. What does noise mean to you?
- How many known languages are there in the world? Why do we have so many different languages? In what ways does the existence of so many languages complicate relationships between human beings?
- Do you speak the same "language" when speaking to your parents as you do when speaking to your friends? Your teachers? Strangers?
- Make a list of the sound sources in contemporary life that contribute to the noise around us. Are they having a "Tower of Babel" effect?
- Can a conversation between two people be a "Tower of Babel?"

JOHN THE BAPTIST

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- What is the impact of the entry of John the Baptist in *Godspell*?
- Why does John the Baptist sing "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord"? What do those words mean to you?
- Why does John the Baptist baptize Jesus? Why does he kneel before Jesus?

ASSIGNMENTS, RESEARCH AND WRITING PROMPTS

- What is a baptism? What is its function in the Christian religion? What does it symbolize? What are its origins?
- Do research on the life of John the Baptist. What eventually happens to him?

JESUS AS A CHARACTER

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- What does Jesus want to do in *the* course of the musical, *Godspell*? What are his goals?
- Does Jesus achieve what he wants to achieve? Or does he fail? Does he ever have a moment of doubt?
- Do you care about Jesus as a character? Do you feel empathy for him? Do you see any of yourself in him?

ASSIGNMENTS, RESEARCH, AND WRITING PROMPTS

- Write a description of Jesus's costume. Why do you think he is dressed this way?
- Make up your own costume for Jesus. In your production of *Godspell*, how would you dress him?
- How did the character of Jesus in the production of *Godspell* fulfill, surpass or fall short of your expectations?

JUDAS

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- If someone is called a "Judas," what is his or her main characteristic?
- Why doesn't Jesus stop Judas?

THE END OF GODSPELL

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- What happens at the end of *Godspell*?
- What are the last words spoken or sung in the play?
- What happens to Jesus after the musical is over? What happens to the company?
- Did you feel the play ended in the right place or did you want more?

ASSIGNMENTS, RESEARCH AND WRITING PROMPTS

- Write a resurrection scene in which Jesus rises from the dead. Write the scene in the style of *Godspell*.
- Describe your favorite ending in a movie or play. Why is that ending your favorite?

PRODUCTION ELEMENTS IN GODSPELL

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Props are objects which are used in performance. Usually, they are things which are held or handled by actors. What are the props used in *Godspell*?
- How are the props treated? Are they tossed around or held with respect?
- Are objects ever given a different use? For example, is a shoe given a more significant purpose?
- How do the props draw you into the world of the musical? Are they ever distracting?
- Do the objects onstage ever seem to have more power than they would in every day existence? Do they ever seem magical?
- The production design for *Godspell* is usually minimal in nature. Why is this appropriate to the story?

ASSIGNMENTS, RESEARCH AND WRITING PROMPTS

- Research the origins of the word, "props".
- Design your own sets and costumes for *Godspell*. Explain the reasons for your choices.
- Draw costumes for each of the ten clowns which depict their individual personalities. Be sure to include shoes for each of them. How can you differentiate Jesus and Judas from the rest of the clowns?
- Read about set designers and lighting designers to learn more about their role in creating musical theatre.

THE CREATION OF MUSICAL THEATRE

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

The musical *Godspell* was created by two collaborators: John Michael Tebelak, who wrote the book and Stephen Schwartz who wrote the music and lyrics.

- What is collaboration? In what other fields does it play an essential role?
- What is the role of the individual in a collaboration?

ASSIGNMENTS, RESEARCH, AND WRITING PROMPTS

- Read a biography or autobiography of another famous musical theatre collaborator or collaborative team. Report on their creative and collaborative process.
- Read and listen to other works by Stephen Schwartz to obtain a broader view of his approach to his craft and a deeper understanding of his artistic sensibilities.
- Write about a positive collaborative experience in your own life. Write about a negative collaborative experience in your own life.

GODSPELL AS MUSICAL THEATRE

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Would *Godspell* have been as successful as a straight play without music? Why or why not? How does the score heighten the basic storyline? How does it move the action of *Godspell* forward? What do we know because of the music that we might not know otherwise?
- How does the music contribute to our understanding of the larger themes of the show?
- Discuss the ways in which music and lyrics can compress and elevate the importance of information.
- What role does music play in your life? If you were to choose moments in your life worthy of being set to music, what would they be?
- Find examples of duets or shared songs in *Godspell*. How do these duets help to define relationships?
- Select two songs from *Godspell* from the following:

"Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord"

"Save the People"

"Day By Day"

"Learn Your Lessons Well"

"Oh Bless the Lord, My Soul"

"All for the Best"

"All Good Gifts"

"Light of the World"

"Turn Back O Man"

"Alas for You"

"By My Side"

"We Beseech Thee"

"Finale"

1. Summarize the contents of these songs. Discuss:
 - a. What do we learn about the character or characters who sing the songs and their personal philosophies?
 - b. What do we learn about the larger themes of the show from the songs?

- c. What makes the character or characters sing at these moments? Why do they sing instead of talk? What is the emotional energy of the moments that push them into song?
 - d. What do the songs accomplish in terms of the plot? Where is the action when the song begins and when it ends?
 - e. Every dramatic scene has a "main beat" or central moment of importance. Do the songs you chose become the "main beat" of the **scenes in** which they appear?
 - f. Do the songs exist in real time, suspended time, or compressed time? In other words, do they represent the amount of time that it would really take to express their contents? Do they magnify the moment? Do they speed up time?
- g. What is the physical action of the character or characters during the songs?

- Imagine you have been asked to create a new song for the show. Who would sing it? Where in the show would it take place? What would it be about? What kind of music would it involve?
- Why do some theatre song lyrics rhyme? Write a *few* verses in prose about something you are wishing would happen and then write it in rhyme. How is the experience of writing in the two forms different?

ADAPTATION AND MUSICAL THEATRE

- *Godspell* was based on the gospel according to Matthew in the New Testament. Musical theatre works are frequently adapted from sources such as films, plays, novels, tales, short stories, and television shows. How many examples of musical theatre works that were adapted from such source materials can you name?
- Name five musical theatre works that were original and not based on any other sources.
- What does a team of musical theatre collaborators add to a work from another medium in the process of adapting it for the musical stage?

ASSIGNMENTS, RESEARCH AND WRITING PROMPTS

- Read the Gospel According to Matthew. Think about the important ways in which the show differs from the Gospel. What were the qualities of the Gospel According to Matthew that make it a good source for a musical?
- What were the source works on which the following musicals were based:
 - Fiddler on the Roof*
 - Hello Dolly*
 - Sweet Charity*
 - The *King and I*
 - Cabaret*
 - Guys and Dolls*
 - A Little Night Music*
 - South Pacific*
- Select a film, non-fiction book, satirical book, play or group of short stories that you think would make a strong musical theatre work.
- Why do you think this piece "sings?" What about it is inherently musical? What can music add to its existing form?
- What elements of the source will be hard to transfer to musical theatre form?
- Write a two-page description of a musical theatre work based on your source.
- What role will music play? Will the work be all sung? Will it include dialogue? What role will dance play in your work? What will the musical style of your adaptation be?
- Create your own New Testament Musical.
- Write a story based (as *Godspell* is) on a section of the New Testament. Use this story as the basis for a musical.
- Outline your musical scene by scene.

- Make a list of the characters.
- Make a list of musical segments you might include.
- Will your work include dance? How will dance be used?
- Try to write the first scene, a turning point scene, and the final scene of your musical.
- Try to write a lyric or melody for one of the musical segments.

GODSPELL AS A REVUE

A revue is a musical cycle of songs and scenes which work around a certain theme.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Is *Godspell* a revue? Why or why not?

ASSIGNMENTS, RESEARCH AND WRITING PROMPTS

- Read the libretto and listen to the score of one of the following revues: *Bring in Da Noise*, *Bring in Da Funk*, *Smokey Joe's Cafe*, *The World Goes Round*, and *A... My Name is Alice*. Why is each song or moment important to work as a whole?
- Create a concept of your own for a revue. What will your theme be? Why would this idea work better as a revue than as a "book" musical—a show which tells a story from start to finish? Make a list of segments—songs, sketches, etc. Outline how the show would build on itself to add up to a coherent evening. Divide the segments up among yourself and some other members of your group and create the revue.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

ASSIGNMENT/WRITING REPORT

- Write a review of a performance of *Godspell*. You may wish to include any combination of the following elements in your review:

1. Did the show hold your interest and why?
2. Describe the manner in which the story was presented to the audience. What was the dialogue like?
3. What was the structure of the story? Was there a simple story or multiple stories? Was anything about the story unexpected? How did the story begin and end?
4. Describe the way music and lyrics worked in the show.
5. Describe the sets, costumes, lighting, and musical accompaniment. How did these elements add meaning to the show?
6. Discuss the effectiveness of the performers.
7. Discuss the ideas presented in the show. Analyze their importance to your reader.

Explain why your reader should make an effort to see the show.

APPENDIX

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

STEPHEN SCHWARTZ:

Stephen Schwartz was born in New York City on March 6, 1948. He studied piano and composition at the Juilliard School of Music while still in high school and graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1968 with a B.F.A. in Drama. Upon coming back to live in New York City, he went to work as a producer for RCA Records, but shortly thereafter began to work in the Broadway theatre. His first major credit was the title song for the play *BUTTERFLIES ARE FREE*, the song eventually being used in the movie version as well. In 1971, he wrote the music and new lyrics for *GODSPELL*, for which he won several awards including two Grammys. This was followed by the English texts, in collaboration with Leonard Bernstein, for Bernstein's *MASS*, which opened the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. The following year, he wrote the music and lyrics for *PIPPIN*, directed by Bob Fosse, and two years later, *THE MAGIC SHOW*. Next were the music and lyrics for *THE BAKER'S WIFE*, which closed before reaching Broadway after an out-of-town tryout tour. However, the cast album went on to attain cult status, leading to several subsequent productions, culminating in a London revival directed by Trevor Nunn in 1988. Mr. Schwartz's next Broadway project was a musical version of Studs Terkel's *WORKING*, which he adapted and directed, winning the Drama Desk Award as best director; he also contributed four songs to the score. A television version of *WORKING*, co-directed by Mr. Schwartz and Kirk Browning, was presented as part of PBS-TV's "American Playhouse" series. Next came a one-act musical for children, *THE TRIP*. In 1986, Mr. Schwartz provided lyrics for Charles Strouse's music for *RAGS*, which after a disappointing initial Broadway run, followed the now familiar route of successful cast album and subsequent productions, culminating in a well-received revival at the American Jewish Theatre in New York. He has also contributed music to the off-Broadway revues *PERSONALS* and *A ... MY NAME IS STILL ALICE*. Mr. Schwartz's latest work for the theatre is the score for *CHILDREN OF EDEN*, book by John Caird. The cast album of the recent Papermill Playhouse production of *CHILDREN OF EDEN* has been released on RCA Victor records in both double-CD and single-cd "highlights" versions. For films, he has collaborated with composer Alan Menken on the scores for the Disney animated features *POCAHONTAS* (for which he received two Academy Awards); *THE HUNCHBACK OF*

NOTRE DAME, which is currently being adapted as a stage musical; and PRINCE OF EGYPT, for which Mr. Schwartz has written music and lyrics for six original songs and received another Academy Award.

JOHN MICHAEL TEBELAK:

John Michael Tebelak originally wrote *Godspell* as his Masters Thesis project at Carnegie-Mellon in 1971. Subsequently, he directed productions of *Godspell* at La MaMa Theatre, the Cherry Lane Theatre, the Promenade Theatre, and on Broadway. He received the 1971 Drama Desk award for Most Promising Director. In 1972, Mr. Tebelak directed the play, Elizabeth I on Broadway, and off-Broadway staged The Glorious One in 1975 and Ka-Boom in 1980. He is also co-writer of the 1973 film of *Godspell* with David Greene. He was dramaturg for the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine in New York and staged liturgical drama there, and the church's theatre bears his name. John Michael Tebelak died April 2, 1985 of a heart attack in New York City.

ABOUT THE SOURCE MATERIAL FOR GODSPELL

Godspell is based on the Gospel of St. Matthew, first book of the New Testament. Scholars conjecture that it was written for the church at Antioch toward the end of the 1st century. Traditionally regarded as the earliest Gospel, it is now generally accepted that it postdates the Gospel of St. Mark and drew considerable material from it. However, Matthew differs from the other Gospels in its narration of Jesus' birth, in the arrangement of the Sermon on the Mount, and in the length of the discourse on the end of the world. There are more allusions to the Old Testament in this Gospel than in the others; it was clearly written for Jewish Christians, the purpose being to prove that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament. Much of the book is devoted to his teaching. The Gospel can be divided into five sections: the origins of Jesus the Messiah; the first two years of his ministry in Galilee; his third year of ministry, including his rejection by religious opponents and his journey and stay in Jerusalem; the passion and resurrection; the instruction to the disciples to evangelize. The traditional ascription of the Gospel to St. Matthew, which dates from the 2nd century, is questioned by most scholars.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

CLOWNING & MIME

Talking About Mime: An Illustrated Guide by David Alberts with photographs by J.J. McClintock. Heinemann 1995.

Staging a Pantomime by Gill Davies. A&C Black 1996.

Clown Skits for Everyone by Happy Jack Feder. Meriwether Press 1991.

Creative Clowning by Bruce Fife, Tony Blanco, Steve Kissell. Piccadilly Books. 1992

The Mime Book by Claude Kipnis. Meriwether Publishers 1988.

The Most Excellent Book of How To Be a Clown (ages 9-12) by Catherine Perkins. Cooper Beech Books 1996.

Be A Clown! - The Complete Guide to Instant Clowning by Turk Pipkin, Walt Chrynwski, Chris Reed. Workman Publishing Company 1989.

Clown Scenes by Tristan Remy. Translation by Bernard Sahlins. 1997.

MUSICAL THEATRE PRODUCTION

Musicals!: Directing School and COMMUNITY Theatre by Robert Boland, Paul Argentini, William Gibson. Scarecrow Press 1997.

Acting Games: Improvisations and Exercises: A Textbook of Theatre Games and Improvisations by Marsh Gary Cassady. Meriwether Publishers 1993.

Elegantly Frugal Costumes: The Poor Man's Do-It-Yourself Costume Maker's Guide by Shirley Dearing. Meriwether Publishers 1992.

Let's Put on a Musical!: How to Choose the Right Show for Your School, Community or Professional Theater by Peter Filichia.

Stage If With Music by Thomas S. Hischak. Greenwood Publishing Group 1993.

The Costume Designer's Handbook: A Complete Guide for Amateur and Professional Designers by Rosemary Ingham, Liz Covey.

Broadway Costumes on a Budget: Big Time Ideas for Amateur Producers by Janet Litherland, Sue McAnally. Meriwether Publishers 1996.

Stage Lighting in the Boondocks: A Lawman's Handbook of Down-To-Earth Methods of Lighting Theatricals with Limited Resources by James Hull Miller. Meriwether Publishers 1987.

Staging Musical Theatre by Deborah Novak. Betterway Publishing 1996.

Way Off Broadway: A Complete Guide to Producing Musicals with School and Community Groups by Lynn M. Soeby

Theater Games for the Classroom: A Teacher's Handbook by Viola Spolin. Northwestern University Press 1986.

Stage Makeup Step-By-Step: The Complete Guide to Basic Makeup Planning and Designing by Rosemarie Swinfield. Betterway Publishing 1995.

Staging a Musical by Matthew White, Stella Mary Newton. Routledge 1999.