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Theater: "Godspell" Resurrected

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GODSPELL ** 1/2 out of ****

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How to put this? Jesus is politely, wholesomely but unquestionably sexy in the thoroughly rethought revival of *Godspell* playing on Broadway in the ideal space of Circle In The Square. This is no small thing. In the film and original version of *Godspell*, the combination of clown makeup (blessedly gone), the hippie aura and an emasculated Jesus all emphasized the cloying nature of the material as presented here.

Hunter Parrish -- who first appears in white boxers and a t-shirt, looking as buff as Jesus ever has -- could and

should go even further in playing down the child of nature, wide-eyed, grok-like vibe of this Jesus. In the first act, he is at times too breathless and goofy for me, more Forrest Gump than Son of God. It is surely in line with how the show was conceived, but the more real and direct and unadorned, the less gee-ain't-this-nifty he is, the better.

As someone who is wildly resistant to earlier incarnations of the show, this production has strong new arrangements, a solid cast with excellent vocals all around and during the best numbers ("Day By Day" and "Beautiful City") achieves the simplicity and grace it yearns for. If the audience I saw it with is any judge (they were caught up in the charms of the cast and pin-drop quiet during the crucifixion) then this show should be in for a solid run if word of mouth can spread.

The concept is simplicity itself. A group of people come together to share stories of the Bible, with Jesus instructing his followers in a gentle, playful manner towards the lessons to be learned. There is no set as such, just a bare stage with trap doors leading to a pool (for baptism and play) and later trampolines for bouncing. As [Mark Oppenheimer pointed out in the New York Times](#), the show captured a style of retelling Bible stories and creating religious music influenced by pop and rock that was a signal moment for the evolution of spiritual services. Anyone remotely familiar with Christian worship over the past 40 years will feel right at home in the songs crafted by Stephen Schwartz.

In retelling tales and parables, the show cannily leans on stories that have endured for thousands of years. Those with a low tolerance for flower power (like me) will wince when Jesus is being helped into his clothes and one of the cast turns white socks into sock puppets for one brief, dorky moment. It's an unimportant and passing moment but encapsulates the whimsy that can strangle it.

But the cast wins you over, whether rapping to new arrangements a la the Beastie Boys or re-enacting tales with dollops of modern references like cell phones or turning the rich man in the tale of Lazarus into Donald Trump. It's the sort of show actors love; like *Hair*, they get to improv their asses off and play with the crowd and indulge their inner child. However, director Daniel Goldstein keeps them reined in by and large, albeit without fully committing to a more restrained and adult Jesus that would truly re-imagine this work.

The staging is modest but clean and the elimination of clown makeup is very, very welcome. Yet the costumes by Miranda Hoffman have a Seventies vibe without being strictly period -- they immediately date the show when *Godspell* would be far better aiming for a timeless mood. The pop references have been updated, so why not update all the clothes as well? One actor does sport a t-shirt that says "WE'RE HERE," a very discrete pro-gay message that might go over the heads of tourists but is nice to see anyway in this multi-cultural, welcoming show, the sort where Judas is forgiven and embraced by everyone just moments after betraying Jesus.

Some of the staging is off. When Jesus first appears, John the Baptist (a very good, strong-voiced Wallace Smith) doesn't blink an eye but immediately realizes this is the Christ. Surely a moment of awe is called for? Further, when Jesus is baptized, here John is at his feet humbly bathing Jesus's feet and wrapping his arms around Jesus's legs in worship. But the baptism of Jesus by John could and should be a moment of humbleness for Jesus, emphasizing his modesty. This scene immediately glorifies and idolizes Jesus, which is out of keeping with the moment in the gospel of Matthew and the mood of the entire show.

"Day By Day" begins sweetly but soon turns into a sing-along. You know it's going to be reprised at the finale, so it's a shame that number isn't allowed to stay simple and true on its first appearance. It's sung nicely by Anna Maria Perez de Tagle. Uzo Aduba has great fun in numerous comic roles and like most everyone else has a strong singing voice. And Telly Leung sneaks past fellow Warbler Darren Criss of *Glee* back to Broadway to showcase a terrific voice and presence that wins over the crowd in the middle of the show; I'd love to see him tackle the role of Jesus down the road.

At the heart of it all is Parrish as Jesus, though *Godspell* is designed to give everyone a moment in the spotlight and Jesus is as much observer as Teacher. In the first act, Parrish mostly smiles (quite winningly) and delivers parables with that exuberant boy-man demeanor the text calls for. In the second act, he improves mightily thanks to a more serious tone (stories include the attempted stoning of an adulteress) and the chance to dig into some conflict as Jesus prays for the strength to endure the trials he

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will soon face.

Unfortunately, the songs in the second act are notably weaker, with one shining exception. Parrish delivers the plainspoken and moving "Beautiful City" with perfect clarity and sweetness. It's the best song in the show and he lights up the stage while delivering its hopeful lines urging people to not simply wait for salvation but build a better world right here and now. The emotional truth Parrish achieves here is quite moving and should inform his entire performance.

The audio mix also seemed murkier in the second act, perhaps because the songs were heavier in their arrangements. Throughout the music had a certain piped-in quality about the mix; with musicians scattered throughout the theater, this might be somewhat inevitable but it could surely be improved. In general, however, the Circle In the Square is a perfect venue, with its round stage and the "let's sit in a circle and hear a story" layout absolutely ideal. It's hard to imagine *Godspell* working half as well in any other Broadway house.

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to this show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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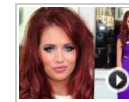
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