

Stephen Schwartz Comments about Religion as it Relates to musicals like *Godspell*, *Children of Eden*, *The Prince of Egypt*, and *Bernstein's Mass*

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Q and A: Schwartz on Religion/Censorship

Question:

Why do you choose religious material for your work?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In general, I have not chosen religious material, it has chosen me. With one exception, I was asked to do the projects which were based on religious material: GODSPELL and THE PRINCE OF EGYPT by the producers and the Bernstein MASS by Mr. Bernstein. All were jobs I would not have dreamed of saying no to for professional reasons. That being said, it is true that the subject matter in all three cases proved interesting to me. The exception is CHILDREN OF EDEN, which I pursued after the idea was suggested to me by Charles Lisanby. But I have always considered CHILDREN OF EDEN a story about families, the relationships between parents and children, and generational conflicts, not a story about religion.

Question:

Do you feel that by writing with religious contexts you expand the appeal of the material as most of the stories are already familiar to the audience?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think doing religious subjects both increases the appeal to audiences in some ways (people's familiarity with the story makes whatever spin one puts on it clearer and more interesting) and decreases it in other, perhaps more significant ones (many people just don't want to see something about religion.) I have been told by some producers that the reason they are not interested in doing CHILDREN OF EDEN on Broadway, despite their enthusiasm for the quality of the show, is the subject matter, which they consider a hard sell. And there is no question in my mind that, despite the relative popularity of THE PRINCE OF EGYPT, it would have been a far more successful film commercially, given its quality, if it had been about something else.

Question:

Does your personal faith influence your choice of material?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

No.

Question:

Do you write with a specific audience in mind?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

No. The audience I always write for is myself. I hope and assume that if I would like something, find it interesting and moving, and consider the work of high quality, others will too. I find that makes me tougher on my own work and avoids pandering and second-guessing.

Question:

Has censorship affected your writing in any way?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I have experienced only one instance of censorship based on religion. In the case of THE PRINCE OF EGYPT, when it was very important to the film company, DreamWorks, not to offend religious audiences, I was asked to change a lyric in the song "When You Believe". The original first line of the chorus was "You can work miracles when you believe", and some religious advisors, taking the line more literally than it was intended, objected that "only God can work miracles". So I changed the line to "There can be miracles when you believe", not as good but acceptable. Later I was also asked to change the line "Who knows what miracles you can achieve" and I refused.

Religion in the arts/Religious perspective

Question:

I am a senior in high school currently researching for a paper I will eventually have to write. My topic is religion in the arts, including books, movies, musicals, etc. I read an article that the religious perspective is generally invalid and that novels with religious themes should mostly be avoided. As a strong Christian, I was shocked at this statement, but as I thought about it more, it seemed like what society does in fact says (sadly). I was wondering if you could please answer a few quick questions in regard to your musicals.

Although "Children of Eden" takes place in Biblical times and with Biblical characters, the focus is more on family relationships than religious content. How effective do you think this backdrop is in showing this theme? How have critics responded differently from the material in "Godspell"?

In your opinion, is some of the obvious religiously-based works generally accepted by criticism authors who don't take things from a Christian perspective? Why do some authors, playwrights, or composers continue with the religious theme, when some critics have said that that type of work has "burned out"? Do you think it has? Any amount of insight would be greatly appreciated. I apologize for the length of this post, and thank you for taking the time to read this! Sincerely, Matthew Yosua

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mr. Yosua: I think the article you read is off-base. It goes without saying that many, many classic works over the centuries, from novels to plays to paintings to great pieces of music, have been inspired by religious themes. Perhaps this article complains about using art to proselytize, and under those circumstances, I tend to agree, not because it makes for bad philosophy but because it tends to make for bad art. But people have been basing art on religious themes for thousands of years, and I doubt very much that this is "burned out" as subject matter.

That being said, I don't see my works as promulgating any particular religious philosophy. The closest I suppose is GODSPELL, which although it is essentially about the formation of a community, does espouse the point of view that one should "always treat others as you would have them treat you". But as you have pointed out, a show like CHILDREN OF EDEN, although using Biblical stories as plot, basically spins those stories in an original way to explore family relationships and issues of personal responsibility. I'm happy to say that critics have generally responded very warmly to both shows.

I hope your paper turns out well. I don't know if this response is helpful to you, but in any event, that's my personal point of view. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

God as a Dramatic Character

Question:

I was wondering how you approach God as a dramatic character in your work. Do you base Him primarily on the book you're working with, or do you bring a little of your own perspective to it? Do you treat Him as you would an historical figure, or a fictional character, or a concept or type?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The short answer is that I approach all characters in shows of mine as dramatic characters, rather than as types or historical figures. This goes for God as well as all other characters, be they Pocahontas or Charlemagne.

Actually, the only time I have used God as an onstage character in any of my shows is the character of Father in CHILDREN OF EDEN. In that work, because the Bible story is used as a metaphor for a story of dysfunctional families and how the problems of one generation are perpetuated by the next, the character of Father begins as the Old Testament jealous and vengeful God, and then changes during the course of the show to the more forgiving and loving God of contemporary religious belief. But he is depicted in that show more as an autocratic Father who learns to let his children go than as "God" per se.

For those who believe in the divinity of Jesus, I suppose that therefore God also appears onstage in GODSPELL. In that work, of course, his words are direct quotations from the New Testament. His character, the idea of the original conceiver of GODSPELL, John-Michael Tebelak, was greatly based on ideas discussed by Harvard Divinity Professor Harvey Cox in his book, FEAST OF FOOLS.

Hope these responses prove useful to you for your paper. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Religious/Historical Material: Why?

Question:

Your music is largely pop/rock inspired, but many of the projects you have worked on are based on traditional themes (stories from history, or from the Bible, etc.). Why?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The short answer is that it has been mostly coincidence -- most of the Bible-based projects I have done have been offered to me (GODSPELL, MASS, and PRINCE OF EGYPT.) CHILDREN OF EDEN was something that I engendered, although the idea was suggested to me by Charles Lisanby, but I have always viewed that show as metaphorical and really dealing with issues of family relationships and personal responsibility, not "the Bible". That being said, I think that I do well with these subjects because I like dealing with the ethical and moral issues they raise, and I find that the big dramatic sweep of the Bible stories lends itself to dealing with those issues in a theatrical way. By the way, I have sworn off doing any more stories involving religious themes, at least for now, since I think I've said what I have to say in that area.

Why Religious/Biblical Material?

Question:

"Religion and gospel music seem to be a main theme in your work starting with Godspell and Mass and returning in Children of Eden and Prince of Egypt. What prompted that?"

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Many people ask me about the number of works I have done based on religious material and stories from the Bible. I agree this is surprising from someone who grew up in such a secular environment that when I went to grade school and heard the Pledge of Allegiance for the first time, I thought the phrase "under God" was another way of saying "beneath the sky".

As you may know, I never discuss my own religious beliefs publically, because I don't want audiences to respond to my work based on the extent to which our personal beliefs coincide. When asked, I often say that much of my doing these works was coincidental -- I was offered GODSPELL, the Bernstein MASS, and PRINCE OF EGYPT, and in all cases, it would have been professionally foolish to turn the projects down. But I admit that begs the question -- CHILDREN OF EDEN, for instance, was a project I avidly pursued. I think once again, some of my attraction to this material has to do with the attempt to reconcile romanticism and realism. But the truth is, I think most people have given a lot of thought to their personal beliefs -- what the meaning and purpose of their lives are, why they're here, and if there's some guiding force behind it all, etc. It's just something you don't talk about in polite company, unlike money or sex, which everybody feels free to talk about all the time.

Religion

Question:

Mr. Schwartz: I've noticed in many of your discussions of your work, you've side-stepped the question of religion, and avoided talk of God all together. Yet, you also speak a lot about "personal responsibility," and your most successful work has revolved around Biblical stories. I think that it's all well and good to talk about personal responsibility, and ethics and morals and family, but without the grounding of religious traditions, and some personal relationship to and with God, this all becomes a lot of pop-pysch mumbo-jumbo. Why do you think so many of the writers and artists of your generation have gone down this relativistic route which leads, in my opinion, to some pretty shaky ground, indeed. (William F. Buckley might call it "an epistemological wasteland.") Without God, without a recognition of transcendent Truth and Reality, talking about morals and personal responsibility and what's right and wrong becomes nothing more than vague speculation and opinion, subject to whim, fads, and trends. and worse: New Age rubbish. I think that's why so much of pop music today is truly awful and disposable. all this "nod and a wink" irony and cleverness -- horrible. I'm not asking you to bare your soul for us, an I will confess that I am a firmly practicing Catholic (shame that in this day and age one has to "confess" such a thing), but i am interested by the place of God and religion in modern art and, especially, pop. To many of us, Jesus is a lot more than a star of the stage and screen, you know?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

You are quite right that I don't discuss my own personal religious views, and I will continue to refrain from doing so. However, I strongly disagree with your contention that belief in God is a requirement for strongly held and valid ethical philosophies. Nor is a moral philosophy that is not based on belief in a Supreme Being necessarily "new age" or relativistic. I cite, for instance, the existentialists, or going much further back in history, the Greek philosophers. I am not saying that I necessarily agree with them (certainly I don't agree with a great deal of what Plato had to say), but I don't think their way of looking at the world was any less valid than, say, Thomas Aquinas'. And it is certainly empirically true that the followers of the non-religious philosophers have caused a great deal less bloodshed, cruelty, and violence throughout history than the followers of Jehovah, Jesus, or Allah. So I don't feel this is nearly as

simplistic as you make it. I thank you for your impassioned EMail, but I respectfully disagree with its content. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Continued discussion

Question:

Dear Stephen, And thank you for your impassioned response. As stated, I was NOT asking you to bare your soul by discussing your personal religious views -- though I have actually read your comment that you "don't follow any religion, particularly," posted in response to a question from a girl in Isreal. That, and the "it's not a religious story" marketing spin given by DreamWorks for the "Prince of Egypt" are what motivated me to e-mail you. I thought it'd be a bit more interesting than "My favorite show is "Pippin" what's yours?" And you seem like a person that enjoys and encourages such dialogues. I don't think that the views of Greek philosophers are "invalid," in that they indeed contain truth and insights that are valuable. At the same time, I think these philosophies fall short of the Truth as I believe is expressed in the Old and New Testaments. Existentialism comes in many shapes and forms. For example, Kierkegaard (forgive my spelling) is cited as the father of Existentialism, and he was a Christian. If you're talking along the lines of the French (Sartre and Genet, and Camus) then, yeah, I still think that's a lot of high falootin' dribble, interesting over espresso but no way to live in the real world. I'll take St. Thomas over those guys any day. I'll have Chesterton, Merton, Augustine: they probably make better espresso, too!

As for the view that followers of Jehovah, Yahweh, Jesus, and Allah have cornered the market on violence and bloodshed, take a look at what happened under Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, which outlawed religion and made atheism a state mandate, and the nazis had their own religion (or was it more of a philosophy?) People can kill in the name of religion, but that has to do with the people, not the religion. The main point of my e-mail, however, was to express some concern over revisionistic, trendy, pop interpretations of stories and beliefs which are sacred to many people.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Once again, I enjoyed hearing your interesting and intelligent point-of-view, even though I don't agree with it. Since our last correspondence, I have thought of other philosophies which do not acknowledge the existence of a deity per se but have proven valid for millions of people, specifically those of the Asian philosophies of Confucianism and Buddhism. While I'm not a big fan of the conservatism and rigid class structure of Confucianism, I do like a lot of what Buddhism has to say (to the extent that my superficial knowledge of it is accurate) about how to live one's life. In any event, I really have enjoyed this dialogue. Best, Stephen Schwartz

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

See specific musicals in this Forum archive for comments on religion in terms of particular shows.