

Godspell – Stephen Schwartz Answers Performer’s Questions

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The following questions and answers are from the archive of the StephenSchwartz.com Forum.

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SECTION 1 - Jesus

Godspell: The Role of Jesus

Question missing.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The main thing to remember is that the story of the show is that Jesus comes into a group of disparate and desperate individuals and leads them into becoming a community. The word "leads" is important -- he is the driving force in the show; therefore he needs to have the most energy, the most humor, and the most will- power of all the characters. He starts the games, he teaches the lessons, he motivates the action. When the show goes wrong it is usually because Jesus is played too reverently, standing off to the sidelines and watching beatifically as the rest of the cast clowns around. The exact opposite is what is needed. Stephen Schwartz

Godspell: Casting Jesus as a Female

Question:

hi everyone, i have a quick subject I felt i have to bring up for discussion. Our local community theater is doing Godspell this year...and during auditions our best performers were females...well the cast list has been posted and low and behold.....JESUS IS A BLACK FEMALE!! The director changed the role to Stephanie. She was the best choice and can do the role justice; I was just wondering what other's thought. I am a black male, so please don't read this to be racist because it is not...it is just that I am amazed to see a black female playing Jesus! What do yaw think?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I, for one, have no problem with it. The only place it might be a little strange is in "Turn Back, O Man", when the Sonia character mock-vamps Jesus. But as long as this moment is re-thought, I think the rest of the show could be very effective. I don't think I would have made this choice for the first production of the show, but here and now, why not? Let me know how it goes. Sincerely, Stephen

Godspell Jesus, John the Baptist, Judas

Question:

This question is directly for Mr. Schwartz. I am currently rehearsing for the role of Jesus in "Godspell" at Jonathan Dayton High School in Springfield, NJ. I've never fully understood the biblical story of Jesus, and that has added to the difficulty of portraying him on stage. I know that much of the show is based on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew, but I feel that you and John-Michael Tebelak added your

own spin in the show. Please correct me if I'm completely off-base in the following, but this is how I view Jesus' character and how I'm portraying him on stage:

I think Jesus, in the show at least, is deceiving everyone else. He is vastly intelligent, charismatic, and religious, but he's also manipulative. He knows the biblical stories of Noah and Lot, and sees that times are again how they once were - and God is doing nothing about it. So he takes matters into his own hands the only way he knows how: by appealing to everyone's sense of religion. Jesus is a man - mortal just like everyone else - and he consciously deceives everyone for the mutual benefit of mankind now and in the future, and not for any gain of power. I believe that much of what Jesus says has a connotive power that is stronger than the literal meaning and is meant to place him above all the others and secure his authority over the community. I think John and the Baptist and Judas are the same character because John is the leader of the community before Jesus comes. Judas and Jesus are very close friends, but as Jesus begins to commandeer John's followers, Judas becomes jealous and resentful, and in the fit of his rage, betrays Jesus - and later strongly regrets it. When Judas first separates himself from the rest of the followers, All For the Best is sung. I interpret Jesus' lyrics as directed toward Judas. He's essentially saying, "When you feel jealous, and resentful, and all these things you feel against me, just remember that you will be blessed when you get to heaven. In the end, for all of humanity, it's all for the best." Then Judas says, "Some people, such as Jesus, have it all and it comes easy. But some people, like myself, constantly get the shaft. But hey, in the end, I guess it is all for the best." I interpret lines and lyrics in this way throughout most of the show. And I believe there is no resurrection scene to reiterate that Jesus is a mortal man, but it is his teachings that will live on in everyone. I know that Godspell is not about Jesus, and is not a show meant to preach Christianity. It's about community, and family, and friendship, and ultimately, about betrayal. Godspell speaks a beautiful message, but it's important for me to understand the character in order to get that message across to the audience. Please set me straight if I'm completely on the wrong course, but I've spoken with my very talented director about all this in much more detail, and she likes where I'm taking it.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

As I've often said, it is immaterial to the content of GODSPELL whether or not Jesus was mortal. Each audience member can draw his or her own conclusions, and similarly, each actor portraying Jesus in a production of the show can make his (or I suppose her) own decision about it. The content of the show, in contrast to many of the other re-tellings of the Jesus story, focuses (as you correctly mention) on Jesus' teachings, what he actually said, and the power of those teachings to lead to a sense of community in a fractured and fractious world. As I have also often said, we would all be a lot better off if many of today's so-called "Christians" actually paid some attention to what Jesus said and worried less about whether or not belief in him would protect them from death. They might pay particular attention to what he characterized as the greatest commandment: "Always treat others as you would have them treat you." I hope you, your director, and your fellow cast members have a wonderful experience doing the show. And don't forget to bring your sense of humor to rehearsals and performances! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 2 – John the Baptist/Judas

Godspell: John the Baptist/Judas

Question:

Why are the roles of John the Baptist and Judas played by the same actor?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The reason John the Baptist and Judas were played by the same person in the original was that we were not trying to stick exactly to the Bible story and the director and conceiver of the show, John-Michael Tebelak, felt it was important that there be a special relationship between the "Jesus" character and the disciple who was ultimately going to betray him. The fact that there was an early one-on-one scene between them (the baptism when Jesus first arrives) helps to establish that relationship. It's the same reason the number "All for the Best" was written. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Godspell: John the Baptist/Judas

Question:

Could you shed any light on the transition of character between John and Judas, and possibly any specific motivation for Judas to betray Jesus?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

John and Judas are not two separate characters. They are sometimes referred to that way because the character combines the actions of two Biblical figures -- that is, he is both the baptiser and the betrayer. But in GODSPELL he is one person, and therefore no transition is needed. He is Jesus' "right-hand man", the one who has more information about Jesus' true purpose there than the others (as revealed during the "blessed are ye" section). But, as is shown in his verse of "All for the Best" and in his response to the Phasisees among other places, he is expecting something different from Jesus than Jesus actually offers. Judas wants Jesus to be more of a revolutionary -- to sweep out the old order and the fat cats, by violent means if necessary. When he begins to see that Jesus' philosophy is "turn the other cheek", he grows disillusioned, and it is this that leads to the betrayal. He believes that if Jesus is put to death, that will cause the revolution he wants (and looked at in the long run, that's exactly what happened historically.) The challenge of the role is to have all that going on inside you, but still to participate in the parables and numbers and be part of the community -- not to stand too much apart so that you pull focus or bring down the joy and humor of the show. But I have often seen it done successfully, and I hope this advice will help you to be successful with the role as well. Have a great time doing the show! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Re: More on John and Judas....musically speaking

Question:

I was wondering about how Judas' verse should be sung...If he's trying to convince Jesus of something, should there be more of a convincing sound to his part? Do you think that too much has been made of the Vaudeville thing over the years? and is the point of the song being lost? I guess what I'm really wondering is....What do you think is the best way, musically, to get the point of the song across? Thanks for your time.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

No, he's not trying to convince Jesus of anything. He is functioning in his role as Jesus' right-hand man, trying to help him cheer up the others after the gaffe in which he gives away the dire events to come ("Blessed are ye..."). However, he can't keep his own sardonic philosophy from entering into what he sings. I have seen it performed where Judas is apparently unaware that the words he is singing are the opposite of Jesus' message, and also where it's clear that he is aware but simply thinks he is "clarifying". And yes, there are subtle elements of competition with Jesus. But basically, he and Jesus are doing a vaudeville number together as a team. Hope this doesn't confuse you further! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

A female betrayer?

Question:

I know that a lot of questions have been posted on this forum already about Godspell, and in particular the dual role of John/Judas, but my question is this: What thoughts, comments, or suggestions do you have for a WOMAN playing the role of Godspell's proclaimer and betrayer? Would you change anything in the show (either in the text or in the subtext) if you knew that John/Judas was to be played by a female? Just wondering, thanks in advance to anyone with any insight or advice to share.....LM

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear LM: I think some specific problems arise. For instance, the moment when Judas says "Oh, Jesus Chr ..." and Jesus slaps him across the face, during the "turn the other cheek" section. I don't think it will work if Jesus is slapping a woman across the face, so that moment will have to be given to someone other than Judas, which is a loss. Less importantly, Judas' slightly randy ad libs re the Sonia character ("Let me chastise the vixen", etc.) obviously won't work and will have to be reassigned or eliminated. I would also try to be very careful, in the playing of it, to make sure there is no hint of sexual tension between Jesus and Judas or of any physical desire -- particularly during the kiss at the betrayal. As you can see, I think casting Judas as a woman poses problems, and I don't recommend it. But if your production is determined to do so, I hope you will keep the above caveats in mind. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 3 – Music and Lyrics

Using aspects of your own personality/riffing

Question:

Dearest Stephen, before I ask my question, I would like to point out that I think it is wonderful you take your time out to answer questions, add to discussions, and much more-- it is very exciting that we can talk to you one on one. Now, for the actual question: I have recently been cast as "Robin" (rather I sing Day by Day) in my high school production of Godspell. I wanted to know if you had any secrets on how to play this character, or any suggestions on how I can interpret her-- is there any story behind this "playful tomboy"? Is there anything you can impart on me before I start rehearsals? Oh, and how much freedom and liberty do you think I can take when singing Day by Day-- in terms of my own interpretation and my love for "jazzing" up different tunes. I wanted to say-- I am extremely excited to be singing the beautiful music from Godspell and to be part of this cast at all-- and I would love to hear advice from the man behind the beautiful music-- that's you! Thank you for your time...Sincerely, Jo

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The descriptions of the characters in GODSPELL are simply based on the personalities of the original cast. Since Robin Lamont was in fact sort of a playful tomboy, that's how she played it. I don't think you (or anyone doing GODSPELL) have to limit yourself to playing a role by trying to imitate an original cast member whose performance you never saw. The point is to try to use aspects of your own personality. That being said, it is clear that whoever sings "Day by Day" is the first of the disciples to make a commitment to the Jesus character (since that is the first song in which a commitment occurs), and therefore her character needs to have the openness and courage to be first. But by all means use yourself.

As to how much you can "jazz up" the song: I would recommend singing the first verse straight, and then letting yourself do more variation and riffing as the song progresses. Obviously, the song is written for you to riff a great deal over the last extended chorus.

Thanks for your questions, and I hope you have a great experience doing GODSPELL. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Herbie Character/ Light of the World

Question:

Hi Stephen, A question and a comment (if you don't mind!) How come in Godspell there is no song for Herb? Was the original "Herb" a terrible singer? When I played Herb I sang On The Willows. Why wasn't this song "given" to Herb? Why have the band sing it? Oops, I guess that was more than one question.v BTW, I love Godspell! I met my wife during a production, and now we're both doing the show again, it means a lot to the two of us. (This time I get to be Judas/John The Baptist - I can hardly wait!!)Thanks for taking the time to answer my question and I love the forum!!

Answer from Michael Cole:

Sorry - you didn't sign your post - I've found some of Stephen's posts that will answer your questions: "...Herb did not lip-sync; he sort of spoke-sang his lines in "Light of the World"; he sang along with the rest of the cast in chorus numbers, since he could carry a tune, just not well enough to sing solo in an off- Broadway show." (On The Willows) The song is sung by the band because it is meant to accompany action (the goodbyes) that is better performed if the cast is not singing while it is occurring. Of course, if the band is unable to sing the song, one has no choice, but ideally, it's better if the song can serve as sort of movie-like scoring to the action. Hope this answers your questions. Have a fantastic production!
Best, Michael Cole

Godspell Question...

Question:

Dearest Stephen,

I'd first like to tell you how much I admire your work- I just finished playing Eve in a production of CofE; I'll be auditioning for Godspell soon. Your music is just exquisite. The Finale of Act 1 in CofE is so moving... all of the shows that you write bring out this raw emotion that is so hard to get to. I appreciate all that you've given to musical theatre.

I was wondering if you could tell me which characters in Godspell sing which song in the show, and if you have any recommendations for audition songs for Godspell (I'll be auditioning for the character who sings Bless the Lord- I'm a mezzo/alto-belter, belt break is G/A below high C, full range is to a D). I'm having trouble finding something belty that will show my upper range as well. Thank you so much.
Always, Abby

Answer from Michael Cole:

Dear Abby,

I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get an answer out of Stephen in terms of audition songs as he he currently swamped with work on WICKED. Here is a run-down on who sings what in Godspell:

Prologue/Tower of Babel: All
Prepare Ye: John the Baptist
God Save the People: Jesus
Day By Day: Robin
Learn Your Lessons Well: Gilmer
O Bless the Lord: Joanne
All for the Best: Jesus/Judas

All Good Gifts: Lamar
Light of the World: Herb, Peggy, Jeffrey, Robin/All
Turn Back, O Man: Sonia
Alas for You: Jesus
By My Side: Peggy
We Beseech Thee: Jeffrey
On the Willows: Band
Finale: Jesus
Long Live God: All

Hope this is helpful. Best, Michael

Godspell vocal ranges

According to the frequently asked questions post on Musicals.net Godspell forum they are as follows:
What are the singing ranges of the characters?

Jesus - Tenor High G#
Judas/John - Baritone E
Lamar - Tenor High A
Jeffrey - Tenor High D (falsetto)
Herb - Baritone E (does not sing any real solo, but should be able to carry baritone harmonies)
Robin - Alto
Peggy - Alto
Sonia - Low Alto (D below middle C)
Gilmer - Mezzo
Joanne - Soprano (High A in "Bless the Lord", High C in "We Beseech Thee")

Joanne in Godspell (and All Good Gifts)

Question:

Hello there! I have just been cast as Joanne in Godspell for my school's production. As well as getting to play Joanne and sing her song, I have the opportunity to sing All Good Gifts. I was simply wondering exactly how you feel Joanne should be played, and what the best Joanne you have ever seen did to bring the character out. For example, do you enjoy Joanne being played as the cheerleader type, or as more of just a girly girl. Also, how do you think I should sing All Good Gifts in order to really make the song stand out and do it justice. Thanks! Any help is greatly appreciated, and thank you so much for writing the fantastic show, Godspell! God bless!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It's interesting to think of the same character singing both "Bless the Lord" and "All Good Gifts" -- you must have an exceptional voice to have been chosen to sing both, so congratulations. I would think because you are doing both songs, you might want to emphasize the growth of the character between "Bless the Lord" and "All Good Gifts". Therefore, you might want to choose a brash, self-confident Joanne (which is the traditional way of playing the role) at the top, and then show how she is softened and tempered by her association with Jesus and the rest of the group, so that "All Good Gifts" is sung very simply and sincerely. Just a thought anyway. I hope you have a great time doing the show and that your production proves a great success. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Godspell: We Beseech Thee

(Original question lost)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

You are correct that darkness has started to come into the picture, and that in fact, "We Beseech Thee" is the last unalloyed celebratory moment. But I think the emotional transition is aided by the fact that Jesus, having recognized that things have begun getting a little dire, has picked up the mood with the sheep and goats parable. And in that parable, he promises his faithful followers "eternal life". Therefore, I don't think it is necessary for your character to "find your faith" within the song (though there certainly can be an emotional progression within it as the song builds), but rather to be reacting to the happy promise that you have just heard from Jesus. This can certainly lead to a feeling of gratitude and joy. I hope this is helpful; thanks for your very intelligent question. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Godspell: Jeffery - We Beseech thee

Question:

I don't have a script for the show, but is there any reason that a girl couldn't sing this song, but still have a guy in Jeffery's part?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

None that I can think of. I do think it's important that each of the disciples have his or her moment of commitment to Jesus, so if Jeffrey's not singing this song, he needs to find another place to do it. Actually, in the original production, Jeffrey did it at the end of "All Good Gifts", for which he played the recorder. But absolutely, a girl could sing "We Beseech Thee" if preferable for your production, though of course you'd have to transpose it.

Godspell: Sonia/Forswear Thy Foolish Ways

Question:

I am to play Sonia in an upcoming performance of Godspell. I was wondering if you could help me to get insight into the character. Tell me what she thinks like... and what her motives are other than being a "naughty-type" person. That seems to be all the advice people can give me... is to shake your money maker. I know there is a message that this song needs to convey as well as being "seductive playful". I need to understand that message before I tackle the song. Please someone help me.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Sonia was originally played by Sonia Manzano (Maria on SESAME STREET), and the song "Turn Back, O Man" was specifically written for the character she created. Sonia combined a kind of street-wise humor with a Mae Westian send-up of sexuality. Ultimately, it was all very innocent and very funny. I think those ingredients are still essential to the character. The point is not that she is "sexy" in the Pamela Anderson way, but that she's kind of kidding about the whole thing. When Sonia did the "striptease" during "Turn Back, O Man", she sat on the edge of the stage and alluringly rolled down her sweat sock ... to reveal another sock underneath it. That to me is quintessential to the kind of humor she used. Hope this is useful to you; good luck with the role, and above all, have fun! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Turn Back O Man

Question:

I read the posts about the meaning of the song "Turn Back O Man." However, I had a question about one particular line. I am playing this part in my school's production of Godspell. I was wondering what

exactly the line reading of the line "C'mere Jesus I got something to show ya," was? Is it directed in a somewhat sexual way towards Jesus? Thanks!!!Mal

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mallory: There's no question that the line "C'mere, I've got somethin' to show you" has come-on and "stripper-esque" connotations, and yes, it is directed to the Jesus character. Needless to say, in the context of the show, it is a joke and obviously not acted upon in any way (since they all immediately go into a cakewalk or some equivalent dance step.) But yes, it should be delivered enticingly. Hope this clarifies the moment for you. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Godspell: Turn Back O Man

Question:

I am part of a cast preparing Godspell for a community theater in Burlington, Wisconsin. I saw the show twice in its first Chicago performances back in the early 1970's, and have always loved it. I've enjoyed the different references to Godspell posted at this forum, but have some questions I haven't seen addressed. Is there a direct scriptural reference for the song Turn Back O Man? Why is this number positioned where it is in the show, as opposed to earlier during the references to cutting off your hand etc.?

Is Mr. Schwartz willing to give us his personal interpretation of its meaning? Is it simply a representation of temptation, or does it concern the final coming, or have I missed the point entirely.

As should be clear I'm no Biblical authority, I just love the show. The opportunity to go over it (and over, and over, and over) has me interested in what the original interpretations might have been. Thanks for the opportunity to ask. Tom Niccolai

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mr. Niccolai: Thanks for your message and your enthusiasm for GODSPELL. The words for the song "Turn Back, O Man" were indeed originally written as a cautionary hymn which can still be found in the Episcopal hymnal. One of the original cast members in GODSPELL, Sonia Manzano, who has since gone on to be one of the cast members, writers and producers of "Sesame Street", had a kind of Mae Westian naughty/naive quality to her character, so I thought it would be fun for her to do a Mae West style number. The words to "Turn Back, O Man" seemed perfect for a bit of a send-up, and the director, John-Michael Tebelak, and I decided that it would be a fun way to open the second act, particularly if we could contrast the slightly ribald and innocent fun the rest of the cast was having with the concerns of Jesus, who knows the challenge they face ahead. Thus he sings a more serious third verse of the song, then gets caught up in a little of the fun. But as soon as the song finishes, he quiets the rest of the celebrating cast members immediately and tells them "This is the beginning." And we are into the second act. I don't know if this specifically addresses your question or not, but as near as I can reconstruct it, that's what we were thinking about at the time. Thanks for asking, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 4 – Auditioning and Performing

Audition Songs?

Question:

I am auditioning for a community theatre production of 'godspell' in about three weeks time and i need to prepare 2 contrasting songs from a musical of a similar style to 'godspell.' Do you recommend anything? Thanks.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I would think any pop song that shows off your voice would be a good choice. If you must do something from a musical (and I don't know why that would be necessary), it seems obvious you should choose something from one of the more pop-oriented scores, of which there are several: for instance, RENT; TICK, TICK, BOOM; AIDA; LION KING; JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR etc.; all the way back to THE ME NOBODY KNOWS. But as I say, unless the people doing the show are insisting on a theatre song, any rangy pop song ought to do. Good luck! Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Godspell: My own personality as onstage Persona?

Question:

We are doing Godspell for our high school musical and I'm an ensemble member of the cast. The director wants us to have our character on stage be what we are. I'm into punk and hard-rock music and dress differently than everyone. Can that be my onstage persona??

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I don't see why not, if it's OK with the director. The point is that each of the characters should "dress differently than everyone". The joining of these separate individuals into a community is the underlying story of the show. So if your director thinks it's appropriate, go for it! And have a great time doing the show. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

See the other Godspell sections of this Forum archive.