

# ARKANSAS REPERTORY THEATRE



Study Guide  
Prepared by Robert Neblett  
May 2017

*the rep*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS



<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Play</b>	<b>4</b>
4    Synopsis	
5    Characters	
<b>The Creators</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Production History</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Q&amp;A With the Creative Team</b>	<b>8</b>
8    Q&A with Director Donna Drake	
9    Q&A with 2 Ring Circus	
<b>The Bible as a Musical</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>The Fool of God</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Circus in America</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>In the Classroom</b>	<b>16</b>
16    Fun Facts and Trivia	
17    Activities	
18    Questions for Writing and Discussion	



## NOTE FOR EDUCATORS:

Throughout this Study Guide you will find words, names, and phrases in **bold type**. These items are key terms and phrases towards understanding the world and context of *Godspell* in greater detail. We encourage you to identify these items as vocabulary terms and as suggestions for further research and study among your students, both before and after you attend the performance at The Rep.



# INTRODUCTION



***“We can build a Beautiful City, not a city of angels, but we can build a city of men...”***

Where do you find your joy? Who makes up your community? What beliefs would you be willing to die for?

These are all questions at the heart of John-Michael Tebelak and Stephen Schwartz’s classic musical *Godspell*. From its first incarnation Off-Broadway in 1970, to its most recent Broadway revival in 2011, *Godspell* enchants audiences with its unique theatrical approach to the birth of Christianity. Originating in the “Flower Power” movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the story is couched in the world of a ragtag collection of clowns whose antics explore the highs and lows of the human experience in song, dance, and inventive storytelling.

Arkansas Repertory Theatre’s production reimagines the world of this iconic musical within the framework of a struggling family circus in the Civil Rights-era American South. Teaming up with Director Donna Drake and 2 Ring Circus, a theatrical circus company, The Rep’s exhilarating and high-flying approach to *Godspell*’s songs and stories, will transport you to a Beautiful City of wishes, dreams, and boundless possibilities.



The Rep is thrilled to bring back 2 Ring Circus, last seen onstage locally in The Rep’s *The Little Mermaid*. *Godspell* audiences can expect to see aerial skills, Spanish web, trapeze, lyra, hula hooping, juggling, acrobatics and more!

# SYNOPSIS



A small group of people help **Jesus Christ** illustrate different **parables** by using a wide variety of games, storytelling techniques and hefty doses of comic timing. An eclectic blend of songs, ranging in style from pop to **vaudeville**, is employed as the story of Jesus' life dances across the stage. Dissolving hauntingly into the **Last Supper** and the **Crucifixion**, Jesus' messages of kindness, tolerance and love come vibrantly to life.

Source: *Music Theatre International*

**Arkansas Repertory Theatre's production of *Godspell*** expands upon the original concept of Jesus Christ as a clown figure, by setting the show in a newly bankrupted family circus at the height of the Civil Rights movement in 1968. The small, family-run circus has just given its final performance and is facing foreclosure on the outskirts of Birmingham, Alabama. The ragtag team of outcast circus performers are lost in a new world of political, economic, and religious unrest when Jesus, a hunted prophet and peacemaker, takes sanctuary in their camp. They welcome in this miraculous man and, over a brief course of time, each are transformed by his teachings.

Using *Godspell's* traditional script and score and building upon the circus theme, The Rep's production includes aerialists, acrobats, singers, dancers, jugglers and clowns.



# CHARACTERS



**Aerialist** - A young and flighty spirit who sings and performs all manner of aerial acts including a rope and Spanish web feature.

**Animal Trainer** - A young, energetic quadruple threat performer, she sings, dances and performs all manner of aerial and ground circus acts including solo trapeze, lyra, whip cracking and duo acrobatics.

**Barker** - The front of house operator and stage manager. He has been with the circus through many ups and downs but has always stuck by. He is fearful of where to go now that they are closing. He wears many hats, but never asks for any special treatment or thanks.

**Bearded Lady** - The star of the side show and beloved by all. She is a woman in every way. She loves her specialty and the attention that it brings to her. She has no problem flirting and being a sex symbol. In fact, she owns it with pride.

**Dog Clown** - A dynamic and energetic clown. Just like a dog, he is devoted to a fault. He is married to the TALL CLOWN and adores her. He lets her be the queen and is happy to be her sidekick.

**Fortune Teller** - A prophet. A woman with a motherly and gentle yet intense character. She is the caretaker of the WHITE CLOWN but provides a caring nature for all who come to her. She truly has visions and is the impetus that leads JESUS to the circus.

**Hobo Clown** - The newest to join the circus family. A true carnival spirit. He goes where the wind takes him and where he can perform the skills that make him happy. A living breathing hobo clown.

**Hula Hooper** - A vaudeville style variety performer. He is multi-disciplined and sings, dances, plays characters, instruments and performs a variety of aerial and acrobatic features including a hula hoop act. He is a bright spirit. He has been with the troupe for a few seasons and feels comfortable and at home here.

**Jesus** - A hero. Free, charismatic, genuine in every sense, and could be comfortable and in control in any environment with little effort. A breath of inspiration everywhere he goes. When he speaks, people listen. He can't help it: it is just the way he is. People are drawn to him for his truth and he delivers it because he is compelled to. He has the power to unite opposite sides and inspire change. It is his destiny and he is willing to go the distance.

**John Judas** - The ringmaster and owner of the John Judas Family Circus and older brother of the White Clown. It has belonged to his family for generations and he is the only one remaining to run it. Despite all of his hard work and effort, the traveling tent circus is failing in America. He is a strong and proud showman who takes his heritage seriously and tries not to show the others that he is heartbroken on the inside. He secretly dreams of a miracle, but often lacks faith that they can happen. He welcomes Jesus in the hopes that he will bring some inspiration or even salvation, but also doubts and fears the outside world and what could happen to his company of performers. Like a devoted father, he will always put them first even if it means the ultimate sacrifice.

**Roustabout Woman** - The one behind the scenes that ensures all of the magic happens. She is a hard worker who does a million jobs to help keep the show open. Surprisingly, behind her hardworking demeanor and wonderful work ethic, she actually is a very shy and quiet person. She lets the entertainers entertain and is happy to enjoy the fun from behind the curtain. But deep down, she has the heart and spirit of a star. She just needs a little encouragement to let it out.

**Tall Clown** - A very tall and powerful comedienne. She is the head clown of the troupe and rules with a ferocity and insistence of perfection. A brilliant comic performer with amazing stage presence and the ego to back it up. She is married to the Dog Clown who is much smaller than she is. She is the dominant one of this relationship in every way.

**White Clown** - The spirit of innocence. He has been through a lot of trauma, yet has never become spoiled or disheartened. He is a joy to all in the circus family. They hold him in high esteem and would do anything for him. Crippled from an aerial accident and silent ever since, he was born into this circus and has been here his entire life. It is all that he knows and he is content with that. When they close everyone worries what the change will do to him. He is a gifted aerialist, acrobat and clown.



# THE CREATORS



Photo Credit: Ralf Rühmeier

## **Stephen Schwartz (Composer/Lyricist)**

Stephen Schwartz is a musical theatre lyricist and composer born in New York City on March 6, 1948. Growing up, he studied piano and composition at the Juilliard School of Music and graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1968 with a B.F.A. in Drama. Upon returning to New York City, he went to work as a producer for RCA Records, but shortly thereafter began to work in the Broadway theatre.

With a Broadway career spanning over four decades, Schwartz is best known for the following musicals:

*Godspell*  
*Pippin*  
*The Magic Show*  
*The Baker's Wife*  
*Children of Eden*  
*Wicked*

Schwartz has also written the music and lyrics for films, including:

*Pocahontas* (lyricist)  
*The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (lyricist)  
*The Prince of Egypt* (music and lyrics)  
*Enchanted* (lyrics)

Schwartz has won many major awards including Grammys, Oscars, Drama Desk Awards, and Golden Globe Awards. In 2015, he was granted an honorary Tony Award for his lifetime commitment to serving the arts and nurturing new talent.



## **John Michael Tebelak (Book/Original Concept and Original Direction)**

John Michael Tebelak originally wrote *Godspell* as his Master's Thesis project at Carnegie-Mellon University 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.

# PRODUCTION HISTORY



In 1970, Carnegie Mellon University graduate student John-Michael Tebelak created a musical with fellow CMU composers Jay Hamburger and Peggy Gordon to fulfill his master's thesis requirements, a play that would eventually become *Godspell*. Tebelak wrote the basic textual shell of the show based on biblical verses and hymns and allowed the actors to **improvise** the rest of the script, developing some of the musical's iconic moments through **theatre games**.

It caught the attention of several New York City **producers** when it ran for a limited run **Off-Off-Broadway** at Cafe La MaMa. The producers hired fellow CMU alumnus Stephen Schwartz to compose a new score, although they kept the song "By My Side" from the original CMU production. The newly revised version of *Godspell* opened Off-Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theatre in May 1971, directed by Tebelak.

With the exception of Jesus, John the Baptist, and Judas, all of the characters are named after the actors who played them in the original Off-Broadway cast. These names are usually adapted from production to production to reflect the names of the current actors.

The Off-Broadway production played for five years before opening on Broadway in 1976. The Broadway production was nominated for a 1977 **Tony Award** for Best Score but lost to mega-hit *Annie*, which dominated the NYC award season. It closed in September 1977.



1972 Canadian cast of *Godspell*

In 1972, a celebrated production opened in Toronto, Canada, that launched the careers of some of the decade's most recognized television and film comedians - including Gilda Radner (*Saturday Night Live*), Andrea Martin, Dave Thomas, Eugene Levy, Martin Short (all four known for their work on *SCTV*), Victor Garber (*Alias*, *Titanic*, *The Flash*), and Paul Shaffer (*Late Night with David Letterman*).

The following year, a film version of *Godspell* was released, featuring many members of the original Off-Broadway cast, Victor Garber as Jesus, and introducing Lynne Thigpen (The Chief on *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?*; *Lean on Me*, *Bear in the Big Blue House*). The film was shot on location in Manhattan, and is distinguished by the utter lack of any other people populating the busy streets and parks of New York City but the cast. One famous sequence ("All For the Best") includes a dance number on the top of the North Tower of the **World Trade Center**, while the WTC was still under construction.

Several Off-Broadway productions, national tours, and international productions, as well as regional professional and amateur stagings, have kept the musical in the popular consciousness for decades. The musical's distinctive style and 1970s optimism have also caused it to be lampooned in popular culture as well.



Hunter Parrish in *Godspell*

In 2011, *Godspell* was revived on Broadway, with a cast that featured Hunter Parrish (HBO's *Weeds*, *Spring Awakening*) as Jesus, as well as company members Telly Leung (*Glee*, *Allegiance*) and Uzo Aduba (Crazy Eyes in *Orange is the New Black*; Glinda in *The Wiz LIVE*). Parrish was replaced by *High School Musical*'s Corbin Bleu. In this production, Jesus' iconic Superman shirt was replaced by a baseball jersey that read "Co-Pilots" on the front.



Gaten Matarazzo and Corbin Bleu in *Godspell*

On May 27, 2012, the adult *Godspell* cast was replaced by "*The Godspell Cast of 2032*," a group of talented young actors introduced as a preview of the next generation of Broadway stars. One of these young actors, Gaten Matarazzo, who played Jesus during the special encore performance, is best known to audiences today as Dustin from Netflix's runaway hit *Stranger Things*.

# Q & A WITH DIRECTOR

## Interview with Donna Drake



Donna Drake, Director

**What is it that attracts you to *Godspell* in general and in 2017?**

The attraction for me is that I have been on a spiritual journey for most of my life seeking to become love and light. I constantly falter but I continue to seek.

The story is timeless. If we look closely at 2017, we will see that humankind is still trying to learn the same lessons they were generations ago. We still struggle today to attain a consciousness of purity, based solely on the giving of love to one another.

**Donna recently directed *Mary Poppins at The Rep!***

**What is your history with this show? Do you have any potent memories associated with the musical?**

The history with this particular production began a year ago when my partners, Ben Franklin and Joshua Dean at 2 Ring Circus, approached me with an idea to add cirque to *Godspell*. We have spent the past year creating and re-imagining an environment in which an enlightened master (Jesus) could find sanctuary in a circus troupe, share his insights, and perhaps touch the hearts of those who would listen. This process of working on *Godspell* has been joyous.

***Godspell* is pretty well rooted in the Christian traditions and narrative of the New Testament. How does/can the show speak to non-Christian audiences who may not have associations with the parables or the larger story that the musical conveys?**

You don't have to be Christian to understand the teachings and parables. The concept is universal. It speaks to all who choose to listen. Because we have set the show within the tent of a circus, it is the troupe of performers, especially the clowns, who will give meaning to the songs and parables.

**Why did you choose to set this production of *Godspell* in a circus in the South in 1968?**

People who spend their life in the circus have been referred to as freaks or misfits. How fitting that Jesus who was also called names escapes for a little while within the world of a circus. Circus people (be it a bearded lady, a clown, an animal trainer, or a misfit) formed a united bond of respect and acceptance. By setting the piece in 1968, we get a lookback to a time of social unrest and we ask ourselves today, have we learned? Do we truly open our heart to all? Are we all equal? This is the perfect world to bring *Godspell* to life.

**What advice would you give to area students who might be interested in a career in the theatre, particularly as a director?**

Follow your heart. Get an education, study your particular field relentlessly. Go to the theatre constantly and learn from the works of those who have come before. Try not to judge art. Art is something you give to the world. Take your talents and share them with the world.



# Q&A WITH 2 RING CIRCUS



2 Ring Circus is known for their high-flying circus entertainments that combine Broadway style song and dance with aerial & ground circus arts. We sat down with Ben Franklin (Co-Managing Director/Performer) and Joshua Dean (Artistic Director/Performer) who will choreograph and perform in The Rep's production of *Godspell*.



**What is it that attracts you to *Godspell* in general and in 2017?**

**Joshua:** I have always enjoyed this music and felt inspired by the diversity of the score throughout the show. It gives me a great variety of styles to play with choreographically and conceptually. Many productions, including the original, have played with circus ideas in the show, mainly clowning. I wanted to take that to the next level. I wanted the show to actually happen in a circus instead. This would open up the clowning, acrobatic, and aerial work to fit into the story seamlessly.



**Ben:** The score called to me at a young age. I instantly loved it. I purchased every recorded version that was available. I have really enjoyed the challenge of creating a version that keeps true to the style of music in the score and also uses the themes and scriptures in the script to offer a message of hope, love and acceptance – especially when I feel our country is at such a crossroads. This production of *Godspell* is a “period” piece, but the story we are telling is just as relevant now to our current political and racial climates and can speak to people of all ages and demographics.

**What is your history with this show? Do you have any potent memories associated with the musical?**

**Ben:** I have a very strong history with *Godspell*. I grew up in rural Virginia and come from the second smallest county in the state. In high school, I had the great opportunity to play Jesus. Being a small town, country kid with show business dreams frightened my father, who like many parents, worry about what a professional actors' life might mean. This was the first show where I feel I truly let go and let the performance and emotion rush over me. After the show, my Dad looked at me and said, “Son, whatever you want, I’m behind you.” This confirmation and support from my parents gave me the courage to go forward and pursue my dreams. I never looked back after that moment.

**Do you have a favorite moment from *Godspell* (either from other productions you have seen or worked on)?**

**Joshua:** I have always been partial to the Finale. Imagine being there, witnessing a man’s murder, feeling the rage building up and wanting to let it out. However, you also remember all this man has taught you and what he wanted for the world. The only way you can honor him is to take the love, joy, knowledge, and understanding that he has shared with you and journey on to be a better person. There are so many layers to that one song and it really speaks to me.

**Ben:** If I had to choose, I would choose the song “Beautiful City”. I consider it the most important message that Jesus gives in the entire show. Musically, it started out as this upbeat, bouncy celebration song, but in the 2010 Broadway revival, “Beautiful City” was this simple, heartbreaking moment with great emotional resonance. Within the context of our production, I like to think that this moment resembles Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” or “I’ve Been To The Mountaintop” speech. Such honest, hopeful and uniting words.

# Q&A WITH 2 RING CIRCUS



**When you are layering a concept onto a theatrical text, how do you approach that process as you work with a director/creative team? What are the advantages and potential pitfalls of crafting such a distinctive new framework for the show?**

**Joshua:** I always start with the story that is written and build from there. For this show, the next step was to find the players. Once we knew the circus archetypes we wanted, we started crafting which characters fit best into the individual parables and songs.

**Ben:** Every person selected for this cast brings something unique and special, and we incorporated their skills and talents into the show. It actually was quite organic. When you find inspiration from other performers, it just lets everything fall right into place. It has been a pleasure to create this world with both the cast and design teams.

**How would you describe the work that 2 Ring Circus creates, and your role(s) within the troupe?**

**Joshua:** We like to use the phrase “A Theatrical Circus Company.” We all come from musical theater and dance backgrounds and wanted to infuse that into our work to combine the two worlds. I am the creative head of the company and from there we all input ideas and build together. It really is a team effort.

**What advice would you give to area students who might be interested in a career in circus/aerial arts?**

**Joshua:** Train, train, and train. It takes a great deal of motivation to get the skills and keep them up to par. It is a constant effort with training, stretching, and learning new skills, but it is such a blast. We are so lucky because our life is play.



Ben Franklin as the Hula Hooper in *Godspell*.  
Photo by John David Pittman



Lani Corson and Joshua Dean as the Animal Trainer and the White Clown in *Godspell*. Photo by John David Pittman



Joshua Dean as the White Clown in *Godspell*.  
Photo by John David Pittman

# THE BIBLE AS A MUSICAL DRAMA

As long as there has been theatre, the art form has been linked to religion. Whether annual sun festivals to the Egyptian god **Osiris** or **liturgical** call-and-response during **medieval** Christian Easter services, drama has a vital connection to man's spirituality. In Japanese nature mythology, for example, theatre is expressly linked to a legend surrounding the sun goddess **Amaterasu**: while she hides in a cave during the winter, a young dancer ultimately lures her out with a performance, not only signaling the beginning of spring but also the origin of a distinctive theatrical tradition that includes **Noh**, **Kabuki**, and **Kyogen**.

Drama with distinctive Christian themes originated from an evangelical desire to appeal to the common man during the late **Middle Ages**, so the **Catholic Mass** (delivered in **High Latin**) would often be supplemented with short scenes in the **common tongue** of the lower classes (who were usually illiterate) acting out important moments from the Bible. These scenes became so popular that they soon began to cause Church leaders to question their value, and they were moved outside of the sanctuaries. They soon became the property of local **trade guilds**, who would create annual festivals that centered around "**pageant dramas**" performed on wagons that paraded through the town. These plays incorporated low-brow humor (much like a **Punch and Judy** puppet show) and sometimes marginalized the Bible stories they were intended to portray.

*Godspell* is one of many musical theatre pieces based on Bible stories and has become a favorite among audiences because of its infectious pop score and its "flower child" innocence.

Others include:



***Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat (1969)***: a musical about the story of **Joseph** and his brothers from **Genesis**, written originally as an hour-long piece for a boys' school in England by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. The show, which uses a variety of musical styles from rock to country to reggae - including an Elvis-impersonating Pharaoh, was expanded and ultimately opened in London's West End in 1973 and on Broadway in 1982.



***Two by Two (1970)***: a musical about the story of the **Flood** from **Genesis**, featuring music by Richard Rodgers, the original production starred Danny Kaye as **Noah**.



***Jesus Christ Superstar (1970)***: originally a concept album, **Superstar** is a "rock opera" based on the **Passion** of Christ told from the perspective of **Judas Iscariot**, with a score by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. *JCS* is often the target of criticism from Christian groups because of its contemporary rock score and mood, its portrayal of a potential romantic relationship between Jesus and **Mary Magdalene**, its lack of a **Resurrection** scene, and the seeming sacrilegious anger behind the title song, among others. The musical was made into a film in 1974.

***King David (1997)***: an oratorio by Alan Menken and Tim Rice about the life and psalms of King David, originally written to commemorate the 3,000th anniversary of the city of **Jerusalem** and subsequently marketed to Disney Theatricals.



# THE BIBLE AS A MUSICAL DRAMA



In addition to *Godspell*, Stephen Schwartz contributed to several works based on Judeo-Christian stories. He wrote lyrics to a theatre-dance piece *Mass*, composed by Leonard Bernstein (with text and lyrics by Schwartz) for the official opening of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 1971; *Children of Eden* (1991), which relates the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah from the Book of Genesis; and *Prince of Egypt* (1998), a musical animated film about the life of **Moses** that featured the hit song “When You Believe,” popularized by Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey.

*Godspell* is not without controversy, however. Like *Jesus Christ Superstar*, there is no Resurrection scene written into the script, which angers some Christian audience members. Responding to this concern, composer Schwartz has issued this statement:

“Over the years, there has been comment from some about the lack of an apparent Resurrection in the show. Some choose to view the curtain call, in which Jesus appears, as symbolic of the resurrection; others point to the moment when the cast raise Jesus above their heads. While either view is valid, both miss the point. *Godspell* is about the formation of a community which carries on Jesus’ teachings after he has gone. In other words, it is the effect Jesus has on the others which is the story of the show, not whether or not he himself is resurrected. Therefore, it is very important at the end of the show that it be clear that the others have come through the violence and pain of the crucifixion sequence and leave with a joyful determination to carry on the ideas and feelings they have learned during the course of the show.”



# THE FOOL OF GOD



One of the most distinctive elements of the original 1971 production of *Godspell* is the fact that Jesus and his disciples are portrayed as clowns, wearing baggy mismatched costumes of rags and face paint that is a combination of circus makeup and “flower child” body decor. As the company members transform into the Apostles, they apply this face paint to distinguish themselves; during the Last Supper, Jesus washes the paint off as an analogy of the foot-washing incident in John 13:1-17.

The origins of this choice by *Godspell* creator John-Michael Tebelak come from a very personal experience he had at an Easter Mass:

TEBELAK: ...Finally, I turned toward the Gospels and sat one afternoon and read the whole thing through. Afterwards, I became terribly excited because I found what I wanted to portray on stage.

BARKER: Which was...

TEBELAK: Joy! I found a great joy, a simplicity—some rather comforting words in the Gospel itself—in these four books. I began immediately to adapt it. I decided to go to Easter sunrise service to experience, again, the story that I had gotten from the Gospel. As I went, it began to snow which is rather strange for Easter. When I went into the cathedral, everyone there was sitting, grumbling about the snow, and the fact that they had already changed their tires. They weren't going to be able to take pictures that afternoon. Snow was upsetting their plans. As the service began, I thought it might be a little different. Instead, an old priest came out and mumbled into a microphone, and people mumbled things back, and then everyone got up and left. Instead of “healing” the burden, or resurrecting the Christ, it seems those people had pushed Him back into the tomb. They had refused to let Him come out that day.

As I was leaving the church, a policeman who had been sitting two pews ahead of me during the service, stopped me and wanted to know if he could search me. Apparently he had thought I was ducking into the church to escape the snowstorm. At that moment—I think because of the absurd situation—it angered me so much that I went home and realized what I wanted to do with the Gospels: I wanted to make it the simple, joyful message that I felt the first time I read them and recreate the sense of community, which I did not share when I went to that service. I went to my teachers at Carnegie and asked if I could work at my own special project for my masters' degree, and they agreed. That following fall, in October, we began rehearsals at Carnegie.

(Excerpt from interview in *Dramatics Magazine*, January 1975)

Additionally, Tebelak found inspiration in Harvey Cox's 1969 book *The Feast of Fools: A Theological Essay on Festivity and Fantasy*. Cox's book examines the identity of Christ and his message through a variety of perspectives related to comedy and clowning, as a means of seeking to restore a sense of vibrancy and joy to what he interprets has become a contemporary utilitarian vision of Christianity in contemporary America. In one chapter in particular, “Christ the Harlequin,” he explores the inherent value of clowning and play and seeks to connect it to Christ's identity and message. Harlequin (or Arlecchino) is one of a number of stock characters from the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, an improvisational form of theatre popularized in the 17th and 18th centuries, and adapted into other comedic forms by dramatists such as Molière. In fact, the rehearsal process for the original production of *Godspell* seems to have been adapted from many of the improvisational techniques of the

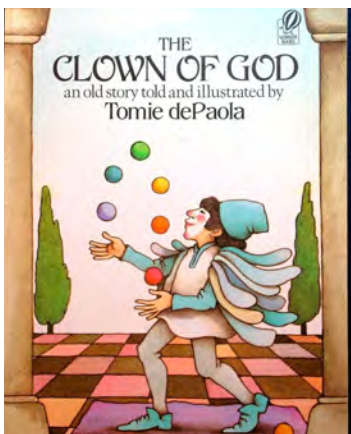


# THE FOOL OF GOD



commedia. Additionally, the fool Pierrot, based upon a commedia character, is often portrayed as a broken-hearted clown with tears painted on his face, a juxtaposition of what audiences expect from a comic character. This is also reflected in the original makeup for Jesus in the 1971 production of *Godspell*.

Cox equates the Christian message to the medieval Feast of Fools, a church holiday in which traditional roles were reversed in a manifestation of Christ's exhortations that "the first will become last." Perhaps the most popular portrayal of this holiday occurs in Victor Hugo's 1831 novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (also known as *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*), when the deaf and deformed Quasimodo is cruelly mocked and named "The Pope of Fools." This mockery is seen as a parallel to the public mockery of Christ during his trial and crucifixion. Cox goes on to study the clownish characters of silent film (Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton) and the Theatre of the Absurd, a mid-20th century dramatic form that personified the philosophical crisis of existentialism. The primary Absurdist playwrights include Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, and Samuel Beckett; in fact, the two main characters of Beckett's classic *Waiting for Godot* have even been interpreted as the two thieves crucified alongside Christ in the New Testament.



Other portrayals of holy fools include characters from *The Second Shepherd's Play* (a medieval mystery play about the birth of Christ), children's author Tomie dePaola's *The Clown of God* (1978), and even the Roberto Benigni role in the 1997 concentration camp film *La vita è bella* (*Life is Beautiful*).

*Godspell's* portrayal of Jesus and his followers as clowns has not been without criticism and controversy, however. Some Christian leaders have condemned the musical as blasphemous for its reliance upon comedy and lack of a resurrection scene, but especially because of its representation of Jesus as a clown. Even so, despite these objections, millions of audience members have rejoiced in the musical's message of community and its ability to restore a sense of joy and humility to the teachings of Jesus in what the film version refers to in its marketing tagline as "The Gospel According to Today."



Costume sketches by Rafael Castanera for *Godspell* at The Arkansas Repertory Theatre.



# CIRCUS IN AMERICA



The idea of the circus was born in England in the 18th century by military officer turned showman **Philip Astley**, who started a display of equestrian skill and tricks. Later, he incorporated acrobats, trapeze artists, jugglers, and clowns to accompany his feats of horsemanship. Because of the round shape of the building in which he originally performed, the show soon became known as a “**circus**.” While these European circus performances were housed in permanent theatre buildings, a new aspect was soon to be added to the identity of the entertainment form, across the ocean.

The traveling tent circus as we know it today originated in the 19th century in America, as a partner to western expansion and the growth of accessibility due to the establishment of extensive railways and highways. During the same period of time, distinctive flavors became added to the circus recipe by master showmen such as genius huckster **P. T. Barnum**. Barnum’s enterprises were marked by an awareness of outrageous promotional strategies that excited the imaginations of audiences. He also broadened audiences’ expectations of what attractions they would witness at his circus, including elaborate historical and scientific hoaxes, as well as integrating the phenomenon of the traveling **freak show** into the standard repertoire. After his death, Barnum’s circus was sold to rival **Ringling Brothers**, who soon expanded it into “The Greatest Show on Earth.”



This era of circus entertainment has captured the imagination of many writers, from Ray Bradbury’s dark fantasy *Something Wicked This Way Comes* (1962) to Daniel Wallace’s 1998 novel *Big Fish*. Both of these books have been turned into haunting films. Along with Tod Browning’s 1932 film *Freaks* and Katherine Dunne’s 1989 novel *Geek Love*, the circus and its side shows have remained an integral part of the national consciousness, even finding a place on cable television’s *American Horror Story* anthology series in 2014.

By the early 20th century, there were over 100 traveling circus companies in the United States, making them the predominant source of family entertainment in the country. After the **Wall Street Crash of 1929**, however, circuses found themselves victims of a failing economy that replaced their antics with the more affordable appeal of radio and film. At this time, the larger corporate circuses began to eclipse the smaller circuses owned and operated by independent families. Even the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus behemoth found itself struggling in the wake of World War II, with the advent of television. In the 1960s, the circus found its way into large coliseums and arenas, rather than the traveling canvas tents of its predecessors, and attempted new performance styles influenced by the growth of rock and roll music and its advances in lighting, sound, and **pyrotechnic** effects.

Even so, several family circuses emerged in the 1970s, such as the Pickle Family Circus, the Big Apple Circus, and St. Louis’s Circus Flora. These new ventures redefined the traditional expectations of circus acts, exerting a political perspective as well, by eliminating big performing animal acts, which they considered to be cruel.



As this movement expanded into the late 20th century and early 21st century, companies like Canada’s innovative **Cirque du Soleil** integrated circus techniques with narrative, music, and theatrical flair. Today, Cirque du Soleil is the largest producer of theatrical entertainments in the world, and the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus will play its final performance in late spring of 2017.

# FUN FACTS & TRIVIA



The word “Godspell” is an archaic spelling of the word “*gospel*,” which means “good news.” The first books of the Bible’s New Testament are gospels written by four of the Twelve Apostles. Author Tebelak originally titled his play *The Godspell*, but the “The” in the title was dropped prior to its Off-Broadway run.

Actor Robin Lamont (famous for singing “Day by Day”) is the only performer to appear in the Off-Broadway and Broadway stage productions and the film version of *Godspell*.

In the film, the “All For the Best” number is performed on top of the North Tower of the **World Trade Center**, while the buildings were still under construction.

In the 2000 film *Meet the Parents*, Ben Stiller’s character Greg Focker recites “Day by Day” when asked to say grace before dinner table at his girlfriend’s parents’ house.

The character of Ford Prefect in Douglas Adams’ sci-fi comedy novel *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* keeps a copy of the script of *Godspell* in his satchel because he is pretending to be an Earthling actor, not an alien field guide researcher from a small planet in the vicinity of Betelgeuse (Alpha Orionis, a red supergiant star in the constellation of Orion).

The “Prologue/Tower of Babble” was left off the **original cast recording** of the show because the creators wanted the album to have pop crossover appeal.

The original 1971 cast recording won the Grammy for Best Musical Show Album.

“Day by Day” was a Billboard Top 40 pop hit in 1972, reaching #13 on the charts.

According to Playbill.Com, the 1971 Off-Broadway album is the 29th best-selling musical cast recording of all time.

Sonia Manzano, who is famous for playing “Maria” on Sesame Street from 1971-2015, was in the original Off-Broadway cast of *Godspell*.

In the 1973 film of *Godspell*, co-creator John-Michael Tebelak voices the “Pharisee Monster” in the scene prior to “Alas for You.” In the opening, Stephen Schwartz has a cameo in a coffee shop.

At the end of the “Opening” in the 2001 National Tour, as the music transitions into “Tower of Babble,” the Microsoft Windows startup sound is heard.

In most productions of *Godspell*, Jesus wears a shirt with the Superman logo on it. Original costume designer Susan Tsu recounts that it was an idea that she and John-Michael Tebelak thought was clever, but it never had much more meaning than that. Stephen Schwartz thinks the idea’s success (and longevity) is due to its “slightly comic self-awareness.”

The 1994 London cast features John Barrowman (*Doctor Who* and *Torchwood*’s “Captain Jack Harkness”), who sings “We Beseech Thee.”

# ACTIVITIES



1. Choose a series of **fables** from **Aesop**. Divide into groups, assigning each group a different fable. Each group must come up with an inventive, contemporary way of telling the story so that an audience of their fellow students would understand it better in the context of 2017. Have each group present its story to the class. Encourage students to use pop culture references, music, and media to incorporate into their presentations. What common threads of storytelling styles and techniques do you notice present among different groups?
2. Using popular songs from the last ten years, tell the story of a famous historical figure (e.g., Abraham Lincoln, Rosa Parks, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Princess Diana, etc.). Create an outline for this “**jukebox musical**,” explaining who the characters are in the play as well as what plot/emotional moments the songs are intended to convey. “Pitch” your musical, with sound clips, to the class.
3. Create your own **parable**. First, choose the lesson/moral you would like to teach. Next, find an **analogy** or **metaphor** that you feel supports this lesson. Finally, write a story in which a character learns the lesson by way of the analogy/metaphor. Share your parable with the class.  
Study a parable used in *Godspell* as a model:
  - i. The Parable of the Sower
  - ii. The Parable of the Prodigal Son
  - iii. The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man
  - iv. The Parable of the Widow
  - v. The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant
  - vi. The Parable of the Good Samaritan
4. Break into groups. Have each group choose an original parable written by a classmate from Activity 3 above. (*Note: the author of the chosen parable cannot be in the group.*) Each group must find a way of telling the parable in a humorous way (a la a game show, a sitcom, a reality show, a dance performance) and present it to the class. Be careful to honor the parable and not make fun of its message in the mode of performance/presentation you choose.
5. Watch the film versions of *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* and debate the strengths and weaknesses of each portrayal of the New Testament story of Jesus Christ.



# QUESTIONS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

1. What is a **parable**? Do you think parables are an effective way of teaching a lesson? Why or why not?
2. Is *Godspell* a comedy or tragedy? Why or why not?
3. What is the value of storytelling in 2017? What are the most important stories of today that need to be passed on to the next generation(s)? Do you think there is a specific way these stories need to be conveyed?
4. What creates a community? What is the value of belonging to a community? What are the disadvantages of being an outcast? What communities do you consider yourself to be a part of?
5. Identify a leader of a religious movement from another nation or culture and research his/her story. What are the most important events that you feel would need to be included in a *Godspell*-like musical of that leader's life?
  - a. Who are that religion's **disciples**? What message do they strive to convey to the rest of the world as the heart of their spiritual beliefs?
  - b. Identify the leader of a political movement from another nation or culture and perform the same inquiry as above.
6. After watching *Godspell* at The Rep, discuss whether you feel the musical's Christian narrative and message are accessible to non-Christian audience members. Take into account the opinions of students from all cultural and religious backgrounds in your class.



# VOCABULARY



The following terms are used throughout this Study Guide; most are indicated in bold type for easy reference. This list is designed to be a central resource for educators to incorporate expanded vocabulary into your lessons related to the Arkansas Repertory Theatre production of *Godspell*.

adultery  
allegory  
Amaterasu  
analogy  
Beatitudes  
blasphemy  
Broadway  
Buster Keaton  
cast recording  
Catholic Church  
Catholic Mass  
Charlie Chaplin  
Christianity  
circus  
Cirque du Soleil  
*commedia dell'arte*  
common tongue  
concept album  
Crucifixion  
disciple  
Eugène Ionesco  
existentialism  
Feast of Fools  
Flood  
flower child  
Flower Power  
freak show  
Genesis  
Gethsemane  
gospel  
Grammy Award  
Harlequin  
High Latin  
hymnal  
hymns  
improvisation  
Jean Genet  
Jerusalem  
Jesus Christ  
John the Baptist  
Joseph  
Judas Iscariot

jukebox musical  
Kabuki  
Kennedy Center for the  
Performing Arts  
King David  
Kyogen  
*La vita è bella*  
Last Supper  
Leonard Bernstein  
libretto  
liturgical  
Mae West  
Mary Magdalene  
medieval  
metaphor  
Middle Ages  
Molière  
Moses  
music hall  
mystery play  
New Testament  
Noah  
Noh  
*Notre-Dame de Paris*  
Off-Broadway  
Off-Off-Broadway  
Old Testament  
Osiris  
P. T. Barnum  
pageant wagon  
parable  
Passion  
Passion Play  
Passover  
Pharisees  
Philip Astley  
Pierrot  
producer  
Punch and Judy  
pyrotechnic  
Quasimodo  
Resurrection

Ringling Brothers  
rock opera  
Samuel Beckett  
score  
sin  
slapstick  
soft-shoe  
stock characters  
*The Second Shepherd's Play*  
theatre games  
Theatre of the Absurd  
Tony Award  
trade guild  
Twelve Apostles  
utilitarian  
vaudeville  
Victor Hugo  
Vulgate  
*Waiting for Godot*  
Wall Street Crash of 1929



# Our Story

Founded in 1976, Arkansas Repertory Theatre is the state's largest not-for-profit professional resident theatre company. A member of the League of Resident Theatres, The Rep has produced more than 350 productions including 45 world premieres in its 377-seat venue located in the historic Galloway building in downtown Little Rock. The Rep relies on income from season subscriptions, special events, foundation support, corporate and individual donations, and national grants, including, The Shubert Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

# Our Mission

The mission of The Rep's Education Department is to engage Arkansas students of all ages, encouraging expression, collaboration, creative problem-solving, reflection, and a deeper community connection through involvement in theatre arts. Our mission is realized through student matinees, year-round classes and camps led by our professional faculty, master classes and workshops with guest artists, outreach education, scholarship opportunities and more.

# Contact Information

For questions or comments concerning this production of *Godspell* or Arkansas Repertory Theatre, contact our offices at (501) 378-0445.  
Additional information may also be found at [TheRep.org](http://TheRep.org).  
The Box Office may be reached at (501) 378-0405.

# Education Sponsors

Bank of America Foundation • Central Arkansas Planning and Development District  
Chenal Family Therapy • The Philip R. Jonsson Foundation • Chip and Cindy Murphy  
Rebsamen Fund • Stella Boyle Smith Trust • Windgate Charitable Foundation • Windstream





## ARKANSAS FINE ARTS CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK 2014

Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.TH.I.1-5, R.7.TH.II.1-5, R.7.TH.III.1-5:  
Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.TH.I.1-2, R.8.TH.II.1-2,  
R.8.TH.III.1-2

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.TH.I.1-2, R.9.TH.II.1-2, R.9.TH.III.1-2  
Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.TA.1-4

Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.TA.1-2

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.TA.1-2

Students will relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to  
deepen understanding. CN.11.TA.2-9

Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.SCI.1-2, R.7.SC.II.1-2, R.7.SC.III.1-2

Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.SCI.1, R.8.SC.II.1, R.8.SC.III.1

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.SCI.1-2, R.9.SC.II.1-2, R.9.SC.III.1-2

Students will relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to  
deepen understanding. CN.11.SCI.1-9, CN.11.SC.II.1-9, CN.11.SC.III.1-9

Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.2.1, R.7.3.1, R.7.4.1

Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.2.1-3, R.8.3.1-3, R.8.4.1-3

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.2.1, R.9.1.1, R.9.2.1-3, R.9.3.1-3,  
R.9.4.1-3

Students will perceive and analyze artistic work. R.7.5.1, R.7.6.1, R.7.7.1, R.7.8.1

Students will interpret intent and meaning in artistic work. R.8.5.1-3, R.8.6.1-3, R.8.7.1-3,  
R.8.8.1-3

Students will apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. R.9.5.1-3, R.9.6.1-3, R.9.7.1-3, R.9.8.1-3

Students will synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

CN.10.5.1, CN.10.6.1, CN.10.7.1, CN.10.8.1

Students will relate artistic ideas and works to societal, cultural and historical context to deep-  
en understanding. CN.11.5.2-3, CN.11.6.2-3, CN.11.7.2-3, CN.11.7.2-3, CN.10.8.2-3

## ARKANSAS DRAMATIC LITERATURE CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK 2012

Students will demonstrate understanding of the elements of drama through the study of a va-  
riety of dramatic texts. DE.1.DL.1-11