

# MTG's *Godspell* resembles professional production

By Kathy Hardis

The talented and highly spirited cast of the MIT Musical Theatre Guild's *Godspell* is very well directed and choreographed in a performance comparable to that of any professional production. The show is funny, original, moving, and deserving of the highest possible praise.

Written by John Michael-Tebalack as his master's thesis, the musical found its way to an off-Broadway theatre in 1971 and was subsequently sent to Broadway, where it became one of the most highly acclaimed musicals of the early seventies.

*Godspell*, based on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, transforms religious material into a lively pastiche of slapstick, vaudeville, song, and dance. The cast uses almost every trick of the theatrical trade to act out various precepts and parables.

The show demonstrates that piety can exist without solemnity. Alan Scott as Jesus presides over this lively group, benevolently guiding his followers and preaching his wisdom with jubilant hokum. His characterization is gentle, sincere, humorous, and very touching.

Yet the show does not emphasize the teaching of Christian doctrine; instead, it creates a spontaneous and festive love-thy-neighbor mood and offers endless possibilities for improvisational theatrics.

The most cleverly presented parable is that of "The Good Samaritan" in which the cast members transform themselves into puppets for a humorously narrated puppet show, complete with an appropriate old-time movie piano accompaniment.

At the end of the play, the characters



Janice Avery Ould struts in the aisle of Kresge during her rendition of *Turn Back O Man*

wash off their make-up to perform the tragic scenes of Judas' betrayal and the crucifixion. Their transition between joy and sadness is flawlessly smooth.

The members of the cast all deserve praise. Lanier Leonard '80 sings, dances, and moves around with joyous abandon. The audience even clapped and stamped their feet to his lively rendition of *We Beseech Thee*. Constance Herron '80 sings the popular *Day by Day* with power and stage presence.

Mitchel Weitz '78 romps and clowns on stage in a wonderful manner, providing most of the narration for the parables. Rosalie Gerut emanates the most warmth and friendliness in the cast; her singing and guitar playing in *By My Side* is beautiful.

Janice Avery Ould aptly proclaims "Eat your heart out, Farrah Fawcett!" as she vamps the audience in *Turn Back, O Man*.



Constance Herron '80 and Alan Scott (Jesus)

K.C. Conlan, Bob Cramer, and Gerri Patterson all show animation and consistency.

But the strength of *Godspell*, the driving force which makes it work so well, lies in the excellent direction of Paul Gonyea and in the choreography of Sharon Glazer. The script of the show encompasses only about one fifth of the final production; the remaining four fifths of the ideas and effects are Gonyea's and Glazer's.

Their production also benefits from the fact that neither of them have ever seen a staged production of the musical before. All their ideas are fresh and original.

In directing the play, Gonyea spent the first several rehearsals just playing improvisational theatre games with the cast. As a result, the actors interact extremely well on stage, and the audience can sense a closeness between the cast members.

Much of the production is spontaneous improvisation within pre-described rules set forth by the director. According to Gonyea, each performance is slightly different and manages to retain its sense of newness and originality.

The choreography is simple and straightforward, never placing impossible demands



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on the cast. The resulting dances are creative and well-coordinated, especially *O Bless the Lord My Soul*.

The cast has a relatively small number of MIT students which is unfortunate in a school which stresses the importance of student involvement. According to the director, several students auditioned whose dancing and acting abilities were adequate but were unable to handle the demanding singing roles.

Steven Schwartz's music and lyrics, adapted from an old Episcopalian hymnal, create a balance between liveliness and reverence. The orchestra, conducted by Eric Ziering '78, does a superb job of playing their music.

One might imagine that the large Kresge Auditorium would not be suitable for such a small production and would not be con-

ducive to audience-cast interactions. Yet this performance overcomes the problem very well as the cast manages to communicate with the audience at every possible moment.

The large stage itself is a challenge to any set designer, especially for a show like *Godspell*. However, the original set by Michael Conner '79, an interesting amalgam of wooden crates and nets representative of a dock, works extremely well. It makes the stage space much smaller and provides many levels for the actors.

The costume designs by Ellen Mason are clever, colorful, and true to the original production. The lighting by John Q. Peers '73 is similarly effective.

"When Sharon (the choreographer) and I first sat down to plan out what we wanted the show to be like," said the director, "we created what we thought would be an ideal production of *Godspell*. When rehearsals first started, we had to sacrifice some of our ideas for the perfect show, but now the production has developed and grown into what we originally wanted it to be."

Their production is excellent. And I strongly recommend it to anyone who could possibly see it, especially because it contains so many wonderful moments of improvisational theatre.



Bob Cramer and Rosalie Gerut imitate lambs in a scene from *Godspell*.

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