

REVIEW: Moving songs, likable Jesus light up stage

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TODD WALLINGER

THE GAZETTE

"Godspell" isn't your typical Bible story.

In this quirky 1971 musical, John doesn't baptize Jesus in the Jordan River. He douses him with a water bottle.

Similarly, Jesus doesn't just talk to the disciples. He leads them in charades, directs them in wacky skits and partners with them in Vaudeville-style soft-shoe numbers.

And while "Godspell" transports the Gospel of Matthew from the first century to the 1970s, Thin Air Theatre Company brings it all the way into the 2000s, adding hip-hop and other modern choreography, as well as some very funny contemporary references (including a running gag about one of the disciples waiting for her "stimulus package").

David Craven makes a very likable Jesus, as warm and fun-loving as you want him to be, but easily frustrated as his disciples fall again and again into their all-too-human ways.

The rest of the cast is just as strong, making wisecracks and goofing around like a bunch of teenagers past their curfew.

Not all of the actors were up to the challenges of Stephen Schwartz's dynamic score.

Some of the voices were a little weak while others strayed out of tune.

But the ensemble numbers were invariably powerful, and a couple of the performers showed off some serious, diva-worthy chops. This includes Casiena Raether in her soulful rendition of "Learn Your Lessons Well" and Cassandra

Marie Nuss in a version of "Turn Back, O Man" that was, well, let's just say it was a whole lot hotter than anything in the Gospels I know.

The second act is a little jarring at first as the story takes on a more somber tone. But here, too, the cast proved its talent, bringing out all the emotion the story deserves.

I literally got goose bumps during the closing number, an incredibly moving counterpoint between the upbeat "Prepare Ye" and the poignant "Long Live God". I only wish Craven had shown more conviction during his heartbreaking final scenes.

Yes, it's a bit of a drive up to Cripple Creek. But Thin Air's exuberant production of "Godspell" is well worth the trip.

DETAILS

"Godspell" by Thin Air Theatre Company

When: through Sept. 26, check web site for show times

Where: The Butte Theater, 139 E. Bennett Ave., Cripple Creek

Tickets: \$15.75; \$13.75 for seniors; \$9.75 for kids; call 689-3247;

butteoperahouse.com.

GRADE: A-