

Jive talkin' Jesus

'Godspell' has message for all

By LIZA HOLTMEIER
Senior Reporter

Concert Preview

Jesus just traded in his sweeping robes for a pair of rainbow suspenders and a Superman T-shirt.

The laid-back '70s garb is more suitable for him in the rock musical "Godspell," which production company KOOR Entertainment debuts this weekend.

The musical, conceived by John-Michael Tebelak and with music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz, tells the Gospel according to Matthew by setting it in modern times. It features such well-known songs as "Day By Day," "All Good Gifts" and "By My Side."

Schwartz received two Grammys for his work on "Godspell" and has since gone on to work on Disney's "Pocahontas" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," as well as the Broadway musical "Pippin."

As an atheist, Schwartz often provides a contemporary, practical view of religion in his biblically-based productions like "Godspell" and the recent "Children of Eden."

Robert Rook, the musical's director, said he wanted to retain this practicality Schwartz had in mind when he produced the work.

"I'm not a huge study of the Bible," Rook said. "I wanted to be able to relate this show to today's audiences."

To accomplish this, Rook included such popular culture references as "The Brady Bunch" and "The People's Court." He also dressed the characters in free, relaxed costumes — jeans and tie-dyed T-shirts.

Rook set the play in an alley, using road barricades, emergency ribbon and orange lights to emphasize the idea that the place is "off-limits."

"We'd like to get the message across without preaching," Rook said. "Whether people believe in Jesus or not, the lesson of being good to one another is important."

Vincent T. Learned, who plays Jesus, agreed that the show's themes were universal and crossed religious boundaries.

"Whether you are a follower of Christ or Buddha, a common thing that most religions have is forgiveness," Learned said. "I hope (the audiences) take away that there is a love for all creatures, young or old or wherever they come from."

Learned added that he personally identified with the aspect of Jesus as a teacher.

"Jesus embodies the importance of being a teacher and the different processes involved with teaching," Learned said. "I teach a music class for dancers at the university and I've really been motivated by examples in the show."

"Godspell" is the second show KOOR Entertainment has produced since it lost its performance space at The Green Room, 245 N. 13th St., in October. The group's last production, "Oddience Participation," was moved to the Futz Theatre, 124 S. Ninth St., during the last week of rehearsals.

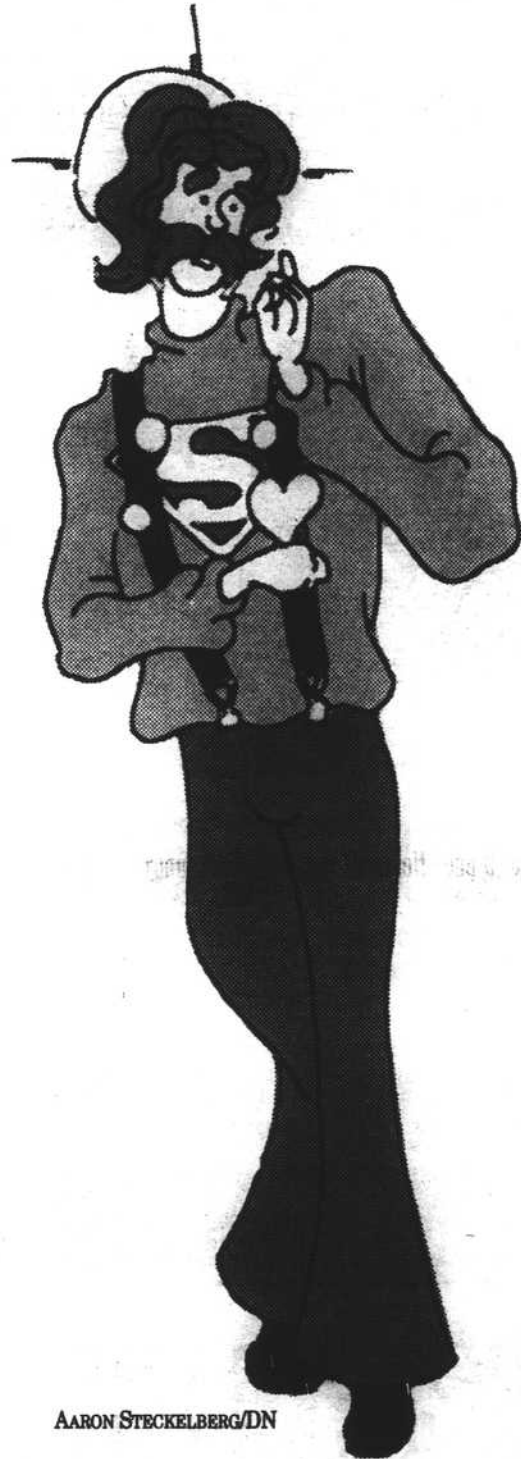
While lack of a permanent home has created its inconveniences, cast members said they enjoyed the opportunity to work in different environments, including the Studio Theatre, where "Godspell" will be staged.

"This will be the first time I've ever done anything in the Studio Theatre," Rook said. "I'm really excited. Not only is it intimate, there's so much you can do since it's not a proscenium stage."

Learned, who has performed in the theater numerous times, also commented on the intimacy of the space.

"It is so personal. The audience is really right there with you," Learned said. "It's also very versatile. The room doesn't have to be set up any one way."

"Godspell" will show in the Temple Building's Studio Theatre Thursday through Saturday and Dec. 18-21 at 7:30 p.m. Also, Sunday will feature a 3 p.m. matinee. Tickets are \$12 for adults and \$10 for students.



AARON STECKELBERG/DN

Author disputes Spielberg's rights to film 'Amistad' steals from 1989 book, writer's lawsuit claims

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The premiere of Steven Spielberg's historical slave ship epic "Amistad" is competing for attention with another drama opening this week: a courtroom confrontation that has turned personal and vitriolic.

The director's new DreamWorks studio is accused of stealing the story for the movie that Spielberg calls "perhaps the most important of my career." In turn, DreamWorks is attacking the integrity of the award-winning novelist who filed the lawsuit, Barbara Chase-Riboud.

A judge is to hear arguments Monday on whether she should block Wednesday's release of the film, which is about slaves who revolted at sea aboard a Cuban ship and won their freedom in pre-

Civil War U.S. courts.

Lawyers on both sides say U.S. District Judge Audrey Collins is unlikely to stop the debut in New York and Los Angeles. A preliminary showing was held Friday in New Haven, Conn., where much of the original story unfolded more than 150 years ago. President Clinton saw "Amistad" Thursday in Washington, and showings are set for Tuesday in Rhode Island, where parts of the movie were filmed.

However, millions of dollars could be at stake.

Studio attorneys say Chase-Riboud is using the movie's imminent opening to pressure DreamWorks into a \$5 million settlement. The fledgling studio says it has invested \$70 million producing and marketing "Amistad."

The movie isn't the only art form bringing the once little-known event to life. An opera titled "Amistad" premiered in late November in Chicago, telling the story from the viewpoint of myth and African religion. And writer David Pesci's novel by the same name was published last spring.

Chase-Riboud claims DreamWorks based much of "Amistad" on her 1989 book "Echo of Lions" without her permission.

"What an irony that the renowned filmmaker who produced and directed 'The Color Purple' would be a party to denying a prominent black American of letters and the arts her rightful recognition for raising public consciousness about slavery," Chase-Riboud's attorneys said in court

papers.

While historical events cannot be copyrighted, Chase-Riboud maintains DreamWorks illegally copied "themes, dialogue, characters, relationships, plots, scenes and fictional inventions" she created in "Echo of Lions."

DreamWorks insists its movie is an original blend of history and the book "Black Mutiny" — first published 36 years before "Echo of Lions" — whose rights are owned by DreamWorks.

"Amistad's" producer, actress-choreographer Debbie Allen, said she began working on the film before "Echo of Lions" was even published, and the film's credited screenwriter, David Franzoni, swears he never read Chase-Riboud's book.

John Shaeffer, a lawyer for

Chase-Riboud, said Franzoni may be lying, that he may have read "Echo of Lions" but not "Black Mutiny."

DreamWorks' lawyers allege that Chase-Riboud herself is a plagiarist, arguing there are at least 88 similarities between her "Echo of Lions" and the earlier "Black Mutiny."

DreamWorks attorneys also are circulating a passage from Chase-Riboud's 1994 book "The President's Daughter" that appears almost verbatim in Nella Larsen's 1929 book "Passing."

Chase-Riboud said she did not plagiarize "Black Mutiny" and that any similarities are merely historical facts. Shaeffer said the allegedly plagiarized "President's Daughter" passage "looks like it came from a historical source."