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Should You Judge a Book by its Cover? The Authentic Relationship Between Religion and the Stage in Fiddler on the Roof, Godspell, and the Book of Mormon

Patricia H. Oliver

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SHOULD YOU JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER?
THE AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION
AND THE STAGE IN FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, GODSPELL,
AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

Patricia H. Oliver

COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

SHOULD YOU JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER?

THE AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND THE STAGE IN

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, GODSPELL, AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE COLLEGE OF ARTS

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF EDUCATION IN THEATRE EDUCATION

BY

PATRICIA H. OLIVER

COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

2018

SHOULD YOU JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER?

THE AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND THE STAGE IN
FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, GENTLEMAN, AND THE SOUND OF MORMON.

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Patricia H. Oliver

Committee Chair:

Professor Brenda May III

Committee Members:

Dr. Lawrence Donley

Professor Krystal Kennel

Signature Page Approved:

Committee Chair

Columbus State University

April 2018

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FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, GODSPELL, AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

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Committee Members:

Dr. Lawrence Dooley

Professor Krystal Kennel

Signature Page Approved:

Committee Chair

Columbus State University

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ABSTRACT

Theatre and religion have often found themselves at opposing spectrums since Thespis stepped out from the chorus. This conflict usually plays out in the audience's response to what is presented on the stage. *Fiddler on the Roof* relies on the tradition and values of the Jewish faith to create an authentic experience for the audience. *Godspell* is based on the parables, mostly from the Gospel of St. Matthew. Some people have an issue with the fact that the musical doesn't have a resurrection, but Tebelak and Schwartz meant the play to reflect joy and community. Experiencing *The Book of Mormon* is less about learning what The Church of Latter Day Saints teaches and is more about how the Church responded to the satirical musical. The LDS used the show as an opportunity to proselytize. The theatrical "covers" of the three books offer audiences an authentic experience for the shows they represent.

INDEX WORDS: Musical Theatre, Religion, *The Book of Mormon*, *Godspell*, *Fiddler on the Roof*

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I would like to dedicate my thesis to my husband, John, and my children, Ashleigh and Matt.

Thank you for your support these last three years while I finished what should have been done so long ago.

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Introduction

As I began research into *Godspell* for a production, I discovered links to a website in which lyricist and composer, Stephen Schwartz, answers questions about his work. As I read about his thoughts behind the musical, specific comments made it clear that the show was perceived to be "too Christian" by some and "not Christian enough" by others (www.stephenschwartz.com). Schwartz continued by saying that he had begun "to wish he'd never written the show at all" (www.stephenschwartz.com). These comments struck me because Stephen Schwartz is a Jewish man who produced a beautiful show based on the book of Saint Matthew in the Bible. *Godspell* is not the first Broadway musical to reflect religious themes, nor will it be the last to cause controversy over its religious content. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, released shortly after *Godspell* and written by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, is one more show which finds itself at the center of debate and the appropriateness and authenticity of Christianity and how it is portrayed. Beyond Christianity, one only needs to look to shows such as *Fiddler on the Roof* to find the rich traditions and faith of the Jewish family to explore a different kind of authentic relationship. Regardless of the authors' intent or spiritual condition, *Godspell*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, and *The Book of Mormon*, each shows an authentic relationship between religion and the stage.

Theatre and religion have had a challenging relationship for many centuries. Since the emergence of Christianity as a recognized religion, people have been persecuted for being Christian. According to *Catholic Online* and Roman Catholic tradition, around 300 A.D., a man named Genisius took advantage of this as a way to further his career as a playwright and began his research into Christianity by becoming a catechumen of the church and learning about Jesus as Savior and the sacrament of baptism. While researching, he found himself drawn to this belief,

that the pouring of water on a person's head washes away the original sin one is born with and allows him to be reborn into Christ's church. In fear, he withdrew from the program. Later, Genisius performed in a play mocking Christianity and hoped to use it as a way to please Emperor Diocletian. In the play, his character was a sick man baptized by another actor, who plays a priest. As the story goes, Genisius was awash with the grace of a real baptism and called out to Diocletian:

I came here today to please an earthly Emperor but what I have done is to please a heavenly King. I came here to give you laughter, but what I have done is to give joy to God and his angels. From this moment on, believe me, I will never mock these great mysteries again. I now know that the Lord Jesus Christ is the true God, the Light, the Truth and the Mercy of all who have received his gift of baptism. O great Emperor, believe in these mysteries! I will teach you, and you will know the Lord Jesus Christ is the true God. (www.catholiconline.com)

Diocletian promptly ordered Genisius to renounce his newly found faith, and when he refused, Diocletian had him tortured and beheaded. For this reason, today in the Catholic Church, Genisius is considered to be the Patron Saint of Actors.

In 1999, St. (Pope) John Paul II wrote a letter addressed to artists in which he affirmed that artists are "the image of God the creator." Pope John Paul II also wrote,

It is in living and acting that man establishes his relationship with being, with the truth and with the good. The artist has a special connection to beauty. It can be

said that beauty is the vocation bestowed on him by the Creator in the gift of

'artistic talent.' And, indeed, this too is a talent which ought to be made to bear

fruit, in keeping with the sense of the Gospel parable of the talents (*Matthew* 25:14-30). He goes on to precisely define the artist as "poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor," all of which are creators in the world of musical theatre (Pope John Paul II). Furthermore, the artists are charged "to put it at the service of their neighbor and of humanity as a whole" (Pope John Paul II). John Paul II points out that both the Old and the New Testament have been inspirations for artists (including playwrights). "On countless occasions the biblical word has become image, music, and poetry, evoking the mystery of 'the Word made flesh' in the language of art" (Pope John Paul II). In addition, he goes on to speak to the fruit of the relationship between art and the Gospel, saying, "The knowledge conferred by faith is of a different kind: it presupposes a personal encounter with God in Jesus Christ. Yet this knowledge too can be enriched by artistic intuition," meaning that those who are believers would find the revelation of God in artistic beauty and be enriched by the experience (Pope John Paul II). So why wouldn't the relationship between what artists bring to the stage and the Word/word be a natural relationship, and why wouldn't the audience have something to gain from it? Would it be necessary for the desire of the playwright and director to authentically bring to fruition the beauty of the Word/word for work to have an impact on the audience? I use both "Word," capitalized as God's sacred Word, and "word" here to represent the word of stories passed down through generations, such as in family tradition; both of which are important in defining this authentic relationship.

Henry Bial brings up interesting questions in his book *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage*. One of the many questions posed asks about the source of dramatic text. In a Christian-influenced play or musical, one wonders if the dialogue has been taken "directly from the Bible, and if so, which version?" (Bial 17). As I discovered with the introduction of a

proposal for *Godspell* as a school's production, one article found on the Internet blasting the Schwartz-Tebelak creation as blasphemy can support Bial's belief that for "believers, the text is sacred, and any adaptation, therefore, runs the risk of blasphemy...The adapter, therefore, is always already suspect," even though there may be thousand-and-one websites that claim *Godspell* can bring people to Christ (Godspell: the Ultimate Blasphemy and Bial 24). Furthermore, this raises the question as to whether or not religious affiliations or canon influence a playwright's choices - either in constraining or inspiring? Yes, the answers will be as varied as the productions themselves. In the case of *Godspell*, a Jewish musician with little exposure to Christianity, Stephen Schwartz, and a playwright who considered becoming an Episcopal priest, John-Michael Tebelak, indeed came at producing *Godspell* from very different approaches (United Press International).

For productions dealing with religion, Henry Bial offers four 'performance strategies' that can be applied to achieve a better understanding of how to "overcome the crisis of representation and help performers and spectators achieve moments of transcendence: spectacle, sincerity, authenticity, and irony" (Bial 27). I intend to focus on the authenticity from multiple definitions. One as in truth of text and tradition and the other defined by Bial as "inferred after the fact as a matter of reception: if the performance *feels* right, if the experience *moves* the spectators then the performance is deemed sufficiently authentic" (Bial 28). Three Broadway shows and the relationship with their relative testaments in order of Old, New, and newer, will be explored, starting with Broadway favorite, *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Chapter One- *Fiddler on the Roof* and the Old Testament

While developing *Fiddler on the Roof*, the primary goal was to make the production as authentic to the stories that Yiddish writer Sholem-Aleichem shared through his series, the *Tevye Stories*. Sholem-Aleichem badly wanted his stories to be dramatized on the New York stage, even dreaming of Yiddish theatre actor Jacob Adler to play the title role (Solomon 35). With Adler in the role, he hoped "Tevye" could be played both larger than life and with sincere humility and draw "equal measures of tear (but not too sentimental) and laughter (but without ridicule)" (Solomon 35). Ultimately, Adler did not play the role, but the work did find success on the stage by way of actor and director Maurice Schwartz; unfortunately, it was after Sholem-Aleichem's death. Interestingly enough, Jacob Adler's grandson took over the role from Zero Mostel in the original run on Broadway (Solomon 36).

In 1919, *Tevye der milkhiker* took to the Yiddish Art Theatre stage in New York and ran, sold-out, for sixteen weeks. Maurice Schwartz's production was not without criticism, but most of it dealt with the staging for which Schwartz used real chickens and farm animals. However, Schwartz found praise for the realism portrayed through the stage production of "Tevye" (Solomon 41). About the time Schwartz's *Tevye* was preparing for the big screen, the Nazis invaded Poland, and the man and his story took on "an almost sacred temper" (Solomon 47). The Chicago Daily Tribune verbalized this realism in a review, saying, "There sits upon Tevya's shoulders the great resignation which is the birthright of his people" (Solomon 47).

The first volume of Sholem-Aleichem stories was released in English in 1946 as twenty-seven stories, translated by Frances and Julius Butwin. (Solomon 56) Ben Hecht, a theatre artist himself, wrote a review in the *New York Times* on the volume of stories. "It is the epitaph of a vanished world and an almost vanished people. [. . .] All the souls and sayings, whose bizarre

and tender antics Sholem- Aleichem immortalized in the richest Yiddish prose ever written- were massacred, six million strong by the Germans.[...] In [his] books you can see all the ghosts...not merely the report of a people." The image of Chagall's violinist accompanied the review (Solomon 57). This will be important later.

Crown, the publisher, desired to get this series, specifically the stories of *Tevye's Daughters*, onto a Broadway stage. It would be 1957 with a writer named Arnold Perl, who had already brought works inspired by Sholem- Aleichem to the stage, most recently the story of Tevye's eldest daughter, Tsaytl, who married the tailor instead of the butcher (in an arranged marriage). This version, *Tevye, and His Daughters* combined a few more of the Tevye stories into one production and made history when the show broke off-Broadway records for advanced ticket sales (Solomon 73).

In the early 1960's, the duo of Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock were looking for new material to produce. They looked into the Sholem- Aleichem books, as suggested by librettist Joseph Stein. The men struggled to find a copy, however, as Butwin's version had been out of print for a decade. Stein finally located a copy of *Tevye's Daughters* at an old second-hand bookstore, and the men met officially in March of 1961 and began to work through the stories (Solomon 103). They wanted to bring to life through music this time, the character of "Tevye," a man "of unshakeable faith who constantly questions God" (Solomon 103), as well as the other characters within the stories. Each character was carefully developed through the eyes of Sholem- Aleichem, and the music inspired by Russian Folk tunes and Yiddish songs. It was time to look for the creative team.

This process began with placing directors and others who had a connection and understood, to a degree, how to keep the work from being too over the top, like other "Jewish"

stage flops (Solomon 104). Ironically, this was in a time when New York theatre artists were trying to break away from their Jewish roots to become more "American," by (in part) exchanging their Jewish names for Americanized versions, such as Jerome Robbins, who changed his last name from "Rabinowitz" (Solomon 88). This process brought many of the people involved back around to their roots, appreciating their parents' and grandparent's experiences. Hal Prince was brought on board to the team but with the condition that Jerome "Jerry" Robbins direct. Jerome Robbins knew they had something special and understood that what was produced on the stage needed to embrace Tevye and his family. At the same time, he struggled with the one word that could sum up the whole show. He gathered the creative team and asked them "What is this show about?" needing to hear more than "a dairyman and his marriageable daughters" (Solomon 138). Robbins wanted the production to be more than the radio stories or what had been seen on television, saying, "It's about the dissolution of a way of life. It's tradition!" (Solomon 139).

Robbins had finally narrowed down the theme: Tradition. Now, this unifying idea could be applied throughout the production. The dramatic conflict could be refined in each scene, but further created the key to *Fiddler on the Roof's* success. Solomon explains "by turning *toyre* (Torah) –Jewish law and religious practice-into "tradition," it handed over a legacy that could be fondly claimed without exacting any demands. Through *Fiddler on the Roof*, Zero Mostel and Robbins- and millions of spectators in the decades to come- could cherish, honor, and admire a legacy in the safely secular, make-believe space of a theatre (Solomon 155).

Robbins' sincere discovery allowed this theme to play through all aspects of the show. He included challenges to traditions within the family—"generational conflict that would make this story universal" (Solomon 139). Layered in would be the dissolution of Anatevka due to the

"anti-Semitism of Czarist Russia on account of their Jewishness," both drawing upon the specific stories of Sholem-Aleichem and being universal at the same time (Solomon 139).

The authenticity continued through the people of "Anatevka," who were poor and hard working. This hardship needed to be reflected in the faces of the actors that would characterize them. Casting became critical. To keep the work realistic, top theatre actors who were too pretty were not considered for the roles. Jerome Robbins also made sure that even chorus dancers wrote short biographies for their characters (Solomon 177). Before working with the script, Robbins also worked the actors through improvisations on oppression and racism so they would understand more about the response of being evicted from their homeland and being forced to find a new home (Solomon 174,175). For the people of Anatevka facing eviction, staying meant certain death; even if death was not immediate, the reality was that it would come when the war began.

The pursuit of authenticity included the design aspects of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Research into precisely what Jewish people wore led to natural fibers being used in costuming (Solomon 186). Props on the stage were particular to items owned by the devout Jew. To further the creative process, Jerome Robbins attended real Jewish weddings so he could encounter the joy and boldness that came from the celebration and ensure that the choreography was authentic and drawn from the rich traditions found in these celebrations (Solomon 132). Actors would need to find the strength and boldness that should be reflected in the villagers' need to rise again and again. By the time the show opened, designers had "gotten it so right" that people who had seen the show wrote to share what would make it even MORE authentic (Solomon 223).

As with any show, *Fiddler on the Roof* was subject to many rewrites. Not only was it essential to get all the details of the Jewish life right through costume, props, dance, and set, it

was also important to authentically get the story right through the music and the lyrics to the songs. Today, we know *Fiddler on the Roof* begins with the song that sets the tone for the whole show. This wasn't always the case and, in fact, "Tradition" was one of the last songs written for the show (www.jewishbookcouncil.org). This nearly seven-minute song sets the stage for the show, explaining the definition of the "fiddler on a roof" in context to the humble story about to unfold, the roles of each of the members of the Jewish family, and the purpose of the clothing. "Everyone here knows who he is and what God expects him to do," explains Tevye. Not only is it established that whatever Papa says goes, but that usually children were in arranged marriages or matched by a shadchan, a traditional Jewish "matchmaker." This segues nicely into "Matchmaker" in which Tevye's daughters sing about what they wish to have in a future husband and hoping Yenta, the local matchmaker, finds them each a match. By the end of the song, the eldest sister, Tzeitel, after taunting their sisters with the risk of trusting Yenta, has reminded them that maybe they aren't in such a rush to marry after all.

While "We've Never Missed a Sabbath Yet" was the original opening song and eventually cut, "Sabbath Prayer" stayed. It is a song that stands on authenticity in that Jewish parents pray for their children at the beginning of the Sabbath. However, Bock and Harnick took the liberty of changing the traditional choice of Biblical women recalled during the prayer. Usually, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah are called to mind because they are the matriarchs of the Old Testament. In "Sabbath Prayer," the lyrics were changed to "May you be like Ruth and like Esther." Ruth and Esther were strong women of the Bible, the only two to have Hebrew books named after them (Judith was a third added to the Catholic and Orthodox Old Testament). They made their paths and were independent and smart. They were models for Jewish women and the perfect choice to foreshadow the roles Chava and Hodel take after meeting the men they

ultimately marry (www.throughjewisheyes.com). "May God bless you and protect you" for "Sabbath Prayer," came from Jewish liturgy, building the authenticity of the song (Solomon 169).

"Miracles of Miracles" is sung by Motel, a poor tailor who wishes to break away from the tradition of using a matchmaker as he and Tzeitel have pledged their love for each other unbeknownst to their parents. Tevye has given his permission for them to marry and Motel has deemed this the Miracle of Miracles, recalling some of the most significant miracles in the old testament.

- Daniel and the Lion's Den- Daniel 6
- The Battle of Jericho- Joshua 5:13-6:27
- Moses Parts the Red Sea- Exodus 14
- Creation of Man from Clay- Genesis 2:7
- David Beats Goliath- 1 Samuel 17
- God Gave Manna in the Wilderness- Exodus 16

When Tzeitel and Motel marry, this sets up for Tzeitel's sisters to break from tradition as well. The elopement between Tevye and Golda's third daughter, Chava, and a Russian Christian villager, Fyedka, is too much for Tevya and he considers Chava to be dead to the family.

One of the most centrally thematic and beautiful moments in *Fiddler on the Roof* is played out in the wedding of Tzeitel and Motel. The wedding ceremony was historically accurate regarding the official Jewish service- from the canopy to the stomping of the glass. The lyrics, however, were nearly universal. The audience members understood the wistful feeling of watching children grow up and the passage of time. While Tevye and Golde sang 'Sunrise,

Sunset", it genuinely tugged at the heartstrings of Broadway audiences. It was not necessary to add in staging and movement beyond the wedding. It was enough (Solomon 208).

Choosing a name to fit such a show where the producers and directors worked hard to find the precarious balance between making a show that was universal in theme, yet celebrated a particular culture, religion, and persona, took just as much research and thought. Marc Chagall, a French artist, had initially been asked to design the set, but he declined as he was swamped (Solomon 121). Ultimately, it was decided that his design work may have been too abstract and not quite the realism needed to complement the other design aspects of the show (Solomon 46). Chagall had created the set for the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre's evening of one-act plays, and the work had been deemed "emphatically anti-realistic" (Solomon 46). To erase "the boundary between audience and stage," Chagall had decorated the entire theatre with murals painted with folkloric motifs and emerald cows (Solomon 46). However, Robbins was still drawn to Chagall's work, especially since Chagall was Jewish. Robbins was specifically drawn to his "Green Violinist (1923-24)" and other paintings in the series (Solomon 119, 120). The violinist in the painting was an extension of the rooftops of the houses of the Russian countryside of Chagall's youth, "poised in a rhythmic stance" (Solomon 46). It also stemmed from the "belief among the Chabad Hasidim (Jewish movement) in Vitebsk that music and dance represented a communion with God" (www.theartstory.com). Thus, *Fiddler on the Roof* became the title for this new Broadway show.

'Fiddler was a glory for my father, a celebration of and for him.' At the end of the opening night performance, Harry came backstage and found the director in the dimly lit wings. 'How did you know all that?' he asked. He threw his arms around his son and wept. (Solomon 222-23)



Figure 1. The Fiddler, 1913 - Marc Chagall. www.wikiart.org

Fiddler on the Roof was well received by audiences, bringing joy through the celebration of life, weddings, and affirmation that what appeared on stage was truth. "The play was the life of my grandparents, may their souls rest in peace," one person wrote (Solomon 223). Another wrote that "Anatevka" was very much like where she had been born in Poland and how dancing with a boy at a wedding had brought shock to her grandparents (Solomon 223). But the audience was not alone in being touched by the *Fiddler on the Roof* experience:

Robbins reclaimed that discarded part of himself and in so doing, returned it, in a glittering package, to those audience members who also had left it behind.

'*Fiddler* was a glory for my father, a celebration of and for him.' At the end of the opening night performance, Harry came backstage and found the director in the dimly lit wings. 'How did you know all that?' he asked. He threw his arms around his son and wept. (Solomon 222-23)

In keeping with Sholem- Aleichem's reflection of the Jewish Tradition, faith, and family life, the creative artists of *Fiddler on the Roof* aimed to keep the show authentic to the author's writings. In a show where Jewish life could have and had been "overdone" on the stage, writers Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock along with director and choreographer, Jerome Robbins, strived to maintain the authenticity which ultimately pulled at the heartstring's of the viewer. Attention to detail, consideration of use of actors, and choreography that reflected the authentic life of a simple man in "Anatevka" and made *Fiddler on the Roof* the beloved, timeless musical it is today.

In his excitement, Tebelak called several of his friends together at the theatre where they began to put the first act together by using improvisation to act out real and parables from the Gospels starting with the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist. The actors' work was influenced by such theatre groups as Second City and Peter Brook's Living Theatre (Ball 157). Though abbreviated, the second act was a reenactment of the Passion and included the Last Supper, the betrayal by Judas, and finally the crucifixion (Ball 157). The low-budget production took to the stage in December of 1970 and was well received, so much so, a once unsupportive professor who was so impressed, he had an agnostic look into a new venue in New York (de Caeste 46).

Little did Tebelak know that *The Gospell*, as it was initially named, would go on to be something incredibly special and more significant than the CMU stage. *Gospell* now had the opportunity to run off-off Broadway at the La Mama Theatre. Much like Jesus, Tebelak cast his net and took on twelve who believed in this new opportunity: his ten actors, stage manager and costume designer. He cast five men and five women as the followers, many dropping current

Chapter Two- *Godspell* and the New Testament

Godspell began as a college Master's thesis project for John-Michael Tebelak at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in the fall of 1970 (de Giere 37). Tebelak had been to a snow-covered Easter service earlier that year and felt that the service lacked the joy and inspiration that the day required as a celebration of the Risen Christ (de Giere 37). What Tebelak encountered was a joy-less priest mumbling into a microphone and equally joy-less response from the congregation, and he felt shafted, especially when being frisked after the service by a police officer who mistook him for a thug merely dodging the spring snow (de Giere 37). Tebelak went home and re-read the Gospels for himself and found the joy he was looking for as well as the inspiration for his thesis project (de Giere 37).

In his excitement, Tebelak called several of his friends together at the theatre where they began to put the first act together by using improvisation to act out text and parables from the Gospels starting with the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist. The actors' work was influenced by such theatre groups as Second City and Peter Brooke's Living Theatre (Bial 157). Though abbreviated, the second act was a reenactment of the Passion and included the Last Supper, the betrayal by Judas, and finally the crucifixion (Bail 157). The low-budget production took to the stage in December of 1970 and was well received, so much so, a once unsupportive professor who was so impressed, he had an associate look into a new venue in New York (de Giere 46).

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work to join the cast, before recruiting Nina Faso as stage manager (de Giere 54). Unfortunately, all the costumes had been struck after the CMU show and returned to storage, so Susan Tsu, his choice for costume designer, grabbed a few of the costume pieces still available and headed for New York to join the group (de Giere 57). Again the actors came together to improvise the parables, but the show was only slightly more polished. While successful, the music needed rewriting, and fellow CMU graduate, Stephen Schwartz, was brought on to make the show even better as it made a move to the Off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theatre (de Giere 72). Being Jewish, Schwartz was unfamiliar with the Episcopal hymns and New Testament and approached the work from a fresh perspective. He was exposed to many genres of music growing up and drew from everything from The Supremes to James Taylor to help create the "eclectic" music needed for the new score (de Giere 78).

With the changes in place, *Godspell* was finally a moving and even life-changing musical. The play presented parables told in a way that made them accessible interspersed with a score that allowed the actors to shine with the joy and emotion Tebelak envisioned in the beginning. While the musical's subtitle is "A Musical Based on the Gospel According to St. Matthew," many of the parables and stories were taken from the other Gospels, as the following list reveals:

Luke 18:1-8 -The Persistent Widow

Luke 18: 10-14 - The Tax Collector and the Pharisee

Matthew 18: 21-35 - The Unforgiving Servant

Luke 10: 25- 37 - The Good Samaritan

Luke 12: 16-20- The Rich Fool

Luke 15: 11-32 - The Prodigal Son

Luke 16: 19-31 - The Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Matthew 13: 1-23 - The Sower of the Good Seed

John 8: 3-11 - The Story of the Woman Protected from a Stoning

Matthew 25: 31-46 - The Sheep and the Goats

Also included in the libretto from the Gospel of Matthew is text from the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes (de Giere 99, 100).

Godspell begins with the "Prologue: Tower of Babble", which is a mashup of speeches by many philosophers and teachers such as Socrates and Thomas Aquinas, but all discussing God and man. This mash-up turns into a "cacophony" of voices which ends when John the Baptist calls out "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord." Schwartz used this one line from Matthew 3:3, worked his magic to make it musical, and created an impactful and dramatic shift from the babble of the "Prologue" to John the Baptist's first statement, calling to all to prepare! This musical piece was left off the Off-Off-Broadway Cast Recording because Schwartz wanted the album as a whole to do well on the pop charts. The "Prologue" is also absent from the Motion Picture Soundtrack and the New Broadway Cast Recording. The album ranked as high as #34 on the Billboard chart for 1972. (www.billboard.com)

"Save the People" was taken from hymn 496 from the 1940 Episcopal hymnal, noting the lyrics of God saving "Not thrones and crowns, but men!" This well suited Jesus in this modern-day story (de Giere 184). During the song "Save the People," the cast is baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus is also baptized, beginning the song in "gentle and folk-music like." (de Giere 183) Soon, Jesus takes up the tempo as a means to show the more charismatic side of his humanity. In theatre, it is the actor's job to ask "What does my character want?" This questioning is explicitly done by both Jesus and the cast singing "God Save the People" to the audience. The audience is

just as much a part of this production as the cast. Here begins the development of the relationships with the audience as much as the Jesus' relationship with his followers.

The next song was 'Day by Day,' which ended up being a pop hit, spending 13 weeks on the chart and topping out at #8 (www.billboard.com). Most of the lyrics were taken from a prayer originally written in Latin by Saint Richard of Chichester, a Bishop in the United Kingdom in the 13th century and was published as hymn 429 in the same Episcopal hymnal (de Giere 188). Schwartz removed the "of thee" from the line "Dear Lord, of thee three things I pray" to simplify it (de Giere 189). As simple as it was with its repetition, it became a hit on not only the charts but with congregations in churches who sang it as well.

The song "Learn Your Lessons Well" was placed in the show, appropriately, after the lesson of Lazurus and the rich man. It was an original song written by Schwartz and not based on any hymn. He had noticed there was a need for a little more music to balance out the parables in the first act, so he wrote: "Learn Your Lessons Well" (de Giere 193). Originally, the song's two verses were broken up by a spoken section based on Matthew 6:22-23. In the revival, it was re-written with "the lamp of the body" as a bridge, finishing with a rocking re-sing of "Learn Your Lessons" first verse (de Giere 197).

I can see a swath of sinners sittin' yonder

And they're actin' like a pack of fools

Gazin' into space they let their minds wander

'Stead of studyin' the good Lord's rules

You better pay attention *filled with light*

Build your comprehension *filled with light*

There's gonna be a quiz at your ascention

Not to mention any threat of hell

But if you're smart you'll learn your lessons well!

And they're acting like a pack of hells

Every bright description of the promised land ment

You can reach it if you keep alert *and watch*

Learnin' every line and every last commandment

May not help you but it couldn't hurt

First ya gotta read 'em then ya gotta heed 'em

You never know when you're gonna need 'em

Just as old Elijah said to Jezebel

You better start to learn your lessons well!

Just as old Elijah said to Jezebel

[JESUS] (based on Matthew 6:22-23) *well!*

The lamp of the body is the eye

If your eye is bad *well!*

Your whole body will be darkness *as well!*

And if darkness is all around

Your soul will will be double unbright

But if your eye is sound *demanded songs of Godspell, "Bless the Lord" comes next to*

the the Your whole body will be filled with light *lyrics of the hymn were written in 1819 by*

James Your whole body will be filled with light *They served as a perfect follow-up to the*

parable Your whole body will be filled with light *parable and sang with the line "Therefore I bid*

I can see a swath of sinners settin' yonder

And they're acting like a pack of fools

Oooh

Gazing into space they let their minds wander

Stead of studying the good Lord's rules

You better pay attention

Build your comprehension

There's gonna be a quiz at your ascension

Not to mention any threat of hell

Not to mention any threat of hell

Just as old Elijah said to Jezebel

You better start to learn your lessons well!

Yeah!

Yeah yeah yeah yeah!

You better start to learn your lessons well!

Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!

One of the most vocally demanding songs of *Godspell*, "Bless the Lord" comes next in the show after a parable from Luke 12:16-20. The lyrics of the hymn were written in 1819 by James Montgomery, a British poet (de Giere 203). They served as a perfect follow-up to the parable of the foolish rich man. Jesus follows the parable and song with the line "Therefore I bid

you: Put away anxious thoughts of food and clothes to cover your body," and thus ends the lesson (de Giere 203):

O bless the Lord, my Soul
 His grace to thee proclaim
 And all that is within me join
 To bless his holy name
 O, yeah

Tebelak's emphasis on authenticity continued. Since Jesus was often referred to as "teacher," it was also important for Tebelak that this student-teacher relationship developed on the stage. This relationship, in combination with subtext, helps each character develop through both inner growth and the building of the community (de Giere 133). Schwartz is emphatic about the building of the community as a focus of *Godspell*. It is important for the individuals that come together slowly to not only follow Jesus but also to build a community around him. They must then continue as that community when he leaves. Schwartz commented, "If this basic dramatic arc is not achieved, *Godspell* does not exist; no matter how amusing and tuneful individual moments may be, the production has failed" (de Giere 123).

For authenticity, the Jesus/Judas friendship arc was necessary, as well, as shown in "All for the Best." Schwartz writes, "Since the central personal relationship was for Jesus and Judas[...] if Judas is going to betray Jesus in the second act, you have to see that they're friends and allies in the first act, so they need to do a musical number together." Tebelak agreed with Schwartz's analysis. Consider the context of the song; Jesus has shared the Beatitudes through his Sermon on the Mount with its "uplifting spiritual message" (de Giere 100). The following foreshadowing spoken by Judas is seen Matthew 5:11: "Blessed are you, when all men shall

revile you and persecute you" (Bible, English Standard Version). This darkening of the mood and nod to what is to come is quickly lifted again when Jesus rebuts with Matthew 5:12: "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, because great is your reward in the kingdom of heaven," and slips into a song and dance in which this banter continues (de Giere 208). Stephen Schwartz reveals his genius, explaining "by having Jesus and Judas be at odds with one another philosophically in the song's lyrics, and yet performing and dancing together as a team, it helps to illustrate the paradox in their relationship in a way dialogue never could" (de Giere 209). The meaning of "all for the best" differed for the two characters. Jesus' examples reflect how the tough stuff in life was all for the best in contrast to Judas' definition meaning all the good stuff in life is ALL for the best (people) and entirely unfair for those who don't share in the good life (de Giere 209).

Jesus:

When you feel sad, or under a curse

Your life is bad, your prospects are worse

Your wife is sighing, crying,

And your olive tree is dying,

Temples are graying, and teeth are decaying

And creditors weighing your purse...

Your mood and your robe

Are both a deep blue

You'd bet that Job

Had nothing on you...

Don't forget that when you get to

Heaven you'll be blessed..

Yes, it's all for the best...

Judas:

Some men are born to live at ease, doing what they please,

Richer than the bees are in honey

Never growing old, never feeling cold

Pulling pots of gold from thin air

The best in every town, best at shaking down

Best at making mountains of money

They can't take it with them, but what do they care?

They get the center of the meat, cushions on the seat

Houses on the street where it's sunny..

Summers at the sea, winters warm and free

All of this and we get the rest...

But who is the land for? the sun and the sand for?

You guessed! It's all for the best...

Jesus/ Judas

Don't forget that when you get to Heaven you'll be blessed!

Yes, it's all for the.....(all your wrongs will be redressed..)

Yes, it's all for the.....(you must never be distressed....)

Yes, it's all for the.....(someone's got to be oppressed!)

Yes, it's all for the best!!!

A perfect pair for the Parable of the Seed is "All Good Gifts" as Lamar begins with "We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand" (de Giere 213). This beautiful ballad is sung by a follower of Jesus who has been slow to catch onto the parables being taught. Jesus continues the lesson in a musical break finishing with the line "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." The whole cast then sings a verse with "humble, thankful hearts" before Jesus joins in and finally the original follower, Lamar, finishes the song of thanks, with a repeated and heartfelt "I really want to thank you, Lord!"

A bright and energetic song, "Light of the World," takes the show into the intermission. It is taken from Matthew 5:13-16. While Tebelak had included it in an early version of the script, Schwartz added the rhymes and transformed it into the style of the gospel call and response. Originally sung with four of the cast members calling, in the revival, the song was given to George Salazar, who points out that so far the audience had been spectators of the teachings of the parables (de Giere 220). It is with this song that the fourth wall comes down, and the audience is invited on the journey through the very direct "YOU are the light of the world." No barriers remain.

Act II opens with "Turn Back, O Man," originally published in 1919 and written by Clifford Bax in response to World War I. The song is fun and campy, but Jesus joins in singing the third verse less playfully and segues into preparing the group for the Passion, but not before he breaks into "Alas for You." Schwartz kept a rhyming dictionary near his piano along with the King James Version of the Bible. He took challenging and non-rhyming verses such as Matthew 23:15, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than

yourselves," and turned them into a musical yet angry rant over the "hypocritical behavior of the leaders of the day," both in Jesus' time and in response to the Vietnam War (de Giere 230).

However, not all the music in the show came from hymns or was written by Schwartz. Before *Godspell* was even a concept, Carnegie Mellon students Peggy Gordon and Jay Hamburger joined forces to write the song for a play called *Marigold and Elkin*. The title of "By My Side" was initially *Marigold's Song*, and within it, Peggy sings, "Where are you going? Can you take me with you?" (de Giere 235). She is asking if she can travel with Jesus, and her mellow song comes from the story of the woman who was brought to Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees because she had been accused of adultery. Jesus told them:

⁵ Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her? ⁶ This they said to test him that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. ⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." (RSV John 8:5-7)

The woman's brave spirit in asking to be able to travel with Jesus shines both in the gospel as well as at this moment in *Godspell*.

The mood changes with the Eleven O'clock number, "We Beseech Thee." Traditionally, an "Eleven O'clock" number was played at that specific time in the show was wrapping up and needed a memorable show-stopping song or a "change-of-heart" kind of song that was more character driven, for example, "Memory" from *Cats*. (Playbill) "We Beseech Thee is a funk/bass driven song that used the lyrics written in 1871 by Thomas Benson Pollock to reveal the last cheerful moment of Act II before the Last Supper and Crucifixion (de Giere 244). The fact that

New York's - and the country's - feeling of rebellion to rebuild. (de Giere 236, 294)

the 2011 revival cast bounced along on trampolines on the stage during this song reflects the upbeat mood and tempo (de Giere 248).

The band instead of the cast traditionally sings the next song, "On the Willows" for reasons that will become clear when reading about the concept for the makeup. Jesus interacts with his followers and prepares for the Last Supper in this ballad based on Psalm 137 "said to describe the sadness of the Israelites who were in exile following the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BCE" (de Giere 249). The word "captor" correlated to what would happen to Jesus right after the supper, chosen "because the psalm has been used as an after Passover hymn" (de Giere 249). Here is where *Godspell* breaks from the song. Jesus performs the breaking of the bread and sharing of the wine and prays the traditional Hebrew prayer over both. The "Finale" begins with the crucifixion, the semiotics of which I address a little later. Symbolism- the removal of the make-up, the use of the color red- woven in with the lyrics creates an appropriate ending to this musical based on the book of Matthew.

"Beautiful City" is a song that is layered in the finale as a bit of a reprise but it stands beautifully alone. It was written after the original Broadway production for the movie. Currently, it is optional for use in the licensed version of *Godspell*. It has been placed as an opener for the second act, right before the Last Supper, or instead of "Long Live God" in the finale. The lyrics suggest "a metaphorical construction, or reconstruction, of community spirit as was the case for the followers of Jesus in *Godspell*." (de Giere 257) The movie was filmed in New York City and served as a perfect background for this song. One of the earlier songs in the movie was even filmed with the cast on top of the World Trade Center unfinished towers. Appropriately enough, "Beautiful City" was used after September 11th in many of the memorial services. It validated New York's -and the country's- feeling of resolution to rebuild. (de Giere 258, 294)



Figure 2. Actors (C Top-Bottom) David Haskell and Stephen Nathan in a scene from the Off-Broadway musical "Godspell." New York Times

Partially due to cost, at the beginning of the run of *Godspell*, the set was minimal, but it worked as a concept and remained through the complete run in New York. The set consisted of a chain link fence on an abandoned playground with trash littering the stage, and it used sawhorses and planks, which was only fitting, as Jesus was a carpenter, after all (de Giere 64). The actors transformed their attire from their street clothes to the clown garb and circus type costumes, and then "Jesus" painted the other actors' faces. "Jesus" himself is painted as the clown, and herein lies the rub and sets up potentially the most controversial aspect of the musical.

Some Christians take the clown makeup at face value, saying that Christ's work has been dismissed as no more than child's play, a circus act. Culturally speaking, *Godspell* came out at a time when "Jesus freaks" were more about the rebellion of establishment instead of true religion,

but this crucial piece of *Godspell* is misunderstood. The costumes and makeup represented going against what society deems as the norm. Bial explains

If the general premise of Jesus in clown face seems blasphemous, the performance of the musical explicitly equates the clown costumes and makeup with sincere faith. At the prologue ("Tower of Babble") that demonstrates the lack of community in contemporary society. The actor representing John the Baptist calls on the company to "Prepare Ye, the Way of the Lord." John baptizes each member of the cast concluding with Jesus. After Jesus has been baptized, he takes a box of greasepaint and paints each actor's face in turn; at the same time the company members are discovering and putting on kaleidoscopic costumes. Thus the clown costumes have become a sign of holiness; those who are so adorned have accepted the call of Jesus. (de Giere 162)

Stephen Nathan was the first actor to play Jesus in *Godspell* and he developed the clown makeup initially used for many of the early productions. The red dot on the nose, red heart on the eye, and black tear-shaped designs under his eyes reflected "Jesus' compassionate nature as well as the emotional range of experience on earth" (de Giere 147). Further, the removal of the makeup just before the Last Supper signals a change. Don Scardino, who directed an off-Broadway production of *Godspell* in New York, says it points to "a time to have no illusions- to be naked in the world again and accept what's about to happen." -To be naked and left with only their humanity (de Giere 148). Actress Peggy Gordon describes the action of removing the makeup for the actors as "sublimely meaningful." (de Giere 149). Her description of removing each others' makeup and

seeing "ourselves" and each other's faces in the mirror, honestly seeing, reflecting that experience could not compare to merely removing an article of clothing or jewelry. If the actors themselves are feeling authentic experience due to being in a production and not just acting and going through the emotions, how much more real then will the experience be for the audience?

All the actors wore clown costumes after they had been "baptized." Consider the emotion felt as a child enters a circus tent, the anticipation, excitement, and joy. Tebelak felt the clown imagery was *necessary* and helped fill in the gaps of all that was missing from the Easter service for those being exposed to the Gospels. As Matthew 18:3 says, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (NIV).

Another common criticism is that there is no blood. The significance of blood is necessary according to Christians because Hebrews 9:22 states "Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." (NRSV) If you were reading a script or listening for only the dialogue, you might presume that this criticism is true, but the clues are there if one looks carefully. In the finale, the crucifixion, Jesus sings, "I'm bleeding/ I'm dying/ I'm dead," over three verses, and his followers are again using a call and response to reply. In the stage directions, it is suggested that a red ribbon is used to tie Jesus to the chain link fence, suggesting the blood. Other opportunities to be creative and suggest the "shedding of blood" are available, representing the Redemption of humanity's sin through Jesus' blood.

Finally, contrary to criticism, there is a Resurrection within *Godspell*. If the lights were merely turned off and the show finished when Jesus said, "I'm dead," people might have reason to criticize. The singing of "Long Live God" begins. As the song continues and "Prepare Ye the

Way of the Lord" is layered in along with "Beautiful City," it is suggested that members of the cast pick up Jesus and carried him through the audience. This raising up of his body over the head symbolizes the resurrection and his extension into heaven. Schwartz further states that there should be a "joyful determination" to carry on Jesus teachings by his followers through what they have learned in the show. Matthew 28:18-20 says "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" (NSRV) The key word being "joyful"; the end of the show should reflect the joy that Tebelak found when reading the Gospels that inspired him to create *Godspell*.

From the moment John-Michael Tebelak was inspired to write *Godspell* to the carrying of Jesus through the audience at the end of the show, there has been a faith driven connection between the stage and Christianity. Tebelak used improvisation games to allow the actors to repay the parables used in the production. The choices of makeup and costuming were very intentional in not recreating what Jesus looked like or wore, but in creating the joy and love reflected in the relationship between Jesus and his followers. Schwartz even used old hymns as the basis of most of the songs. The creative team was very intentional in creating an authentic experience for both the actors and the audience.

Chapter Three- *The Book of Mormon* and the Newest Testament

A discussion of the musical *The Book of Mormon* seemed like an apparent third choice for a chapter since Mormons believe that *The Book of Mormon* (the sacred book) is, as Elder Cunningham jokes in the musical, part of a "trilogy and *The Book of Mormon* is *Return of the Jedi*." *The Book of Mormon* is a satire, though, and pokes deep fun at the wonderful mysteries of the "All-American" religion, yet ironically, most of my research has found a positive response to the Broadway spectacle. Many of the articles and blog posts read like "it sounds awful, had to see it for myself, thought it funny and offensive at the same time. Go see it!" (Premier)

Marc Shaw and Holly Welker put together a book of essays that delve into all aspects of the musical. Aside from being regular patrons of musical theatre, Shaw and Welker are also Mormon and give a closer examination of the relationship between the musical and the religion. "Each contributor to this book adds to the work from their unique point of view," as religious scholars, feminists, sociologists, or otherwise, and "each has a seat in the theatre and shares their point of view from where they are sitting" (Shaw and Welker xii). This is an important context to place on all criticism or praise for any show and reminds that the ability for any show to reveal its authenticity or its truth, depends on the audience themselves allowing it to be revealed or recognizing their foibles reflected on the stage.

Religious plays, including musicals, were produced on an average about one a year since the beginning of Broadway, some years producing more biblical plays than others. (Bial 8) Some shows were definitive flops, and some were very successful. The number of biblical plays on Broadway since 1980 has dropped, with only few original offerings or revivals, including *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Bial 9). Finding the balance between the definition of these kinds of shows being inferred as religious, secular, or theatrical continues and depends on the

audience. How large of an audience could that be considering how long theatre was forbidden by churches for so long? Ultimately the box office determined the answer to that question. To further the discussion, Bial makes the point that "if the theatre is a sector of U.S. culture in which marginalized people- jews, homosexuals, communists- have found themselves welcomed (largely) without hesitation, then the introduction of the Bible into that space may feel like an infringement on their personal liberty (Bial 15). The diligence of Schwartz and Tebelak shone a different kind of light on religion, calling for a renewal of community and joy through *Godspell*. Bock and Harnick focused on "Tradition" in *Fiddler on the Roof*. Audiences responded positively because the shows felt authentic and they trusted their emotional responses to the musicals. Johnson 91). The Salt Lake Theatre was built, and dedicated in 1862 representing the

depth. But what if the musical is actually a "love letter" from its creators, who happen to be atheists (Shaw and Welker xii)? A love letter in which creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone, much like Elder Cunningham, who bends the truth a good bit, also create their own truth to make their story work for artistic benefits or for "economical storytelling." Welker and Shaw argue "the writers found a balance between emotional authenticity and factual accuracy.... They found a relevant, timely topic"(xiv). Should Parker, Stone, and Lopez thank Tebelak, Schwartz, and Harnick for paving a new way for shows with any religious affiliation to succeed in this day and age? More recently, composer C. Michael Perry speaks to the "sanctity of the theatre" saying,

Members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, otherwise known as Mormons, have long had a relationship with musical theatre. Their annual Hill Cumorah Pageant replays Jesus' early visit to the Americas, and Joseph Smith's receiving of the Golden Plates from which *The Book of Mormon* was translated. In the article "Mormons, Musical Theatre, and the Arena of Public Doubt," Jake Johnson notes, "Mormons have found in musical theatre a

remarkable means of self-expression and identity that is probably unique among American faith traditions- " and asks, "Why is this so?" wondering just what it is about musical theatre that appeals so to Mormons, going on to conjecture that is possibly a "natural space in which to explore religious identity" (Johnson 90). The very writers of the musical, Stone and Parker answer this question by describing Mormonism as a sort of Disney-esque with the same feeling of over-the-top happiness you feel being a part of anything Disney—the same feelings are exuded from all things Mormon...or Rodgers and Hammerstein (Johnson 90).

Again, looking back at the unstable history of theatre and religion, Mormons were embracing and making part of their daily lives what other religions had only "recently" returned to accept (Johnson 91). The Salt Lake Theatre was built and dedicated in 1862 representing the depth of respect for the place that theatre held within the life of the Mormon people (Johnson 92). At the dedication, Daniel H. Wells offered a prayer in which he alluded to "the literal dramas to be performed and enjoyed in the theatre" as well as the "figurative association between the theatre and the 'drama of life'" (Johnson 92). This seems to suggest that Mormons understood the depth to which the theatre could change lives, and Johnson notes, "If I were placed on a cannibal island and given the task of civilizing its people, I should straight away build a theatre for the purpose" (Johnson 93).

More recently, composer C. Michael Perry speaks to the "sanctity of the theatre" saying,

The theatre is one of the best missionary tools ever invented. Minds are enriched, hearts touched and spirits enlivened through the power of the spoken work on stage. Seeing- witnessing- the experiences of others on stage brings us closer to understanding empathy, and compassion in a non-threatening atmosphere.....The actors...are imitators of life, not life itself. (Perry)

So, how should one view *The Book of Mormon* with a truthful lens? Matt Stone says, "There is a catharsis in being able to really laugh at some of the goofier ideas of religion, without necessarily laughing at the people practicing them. I think it feels good too in some ways to acknowledge that certain aspects of religion are just silly." (Remember, he's an atheist.) However, he also says, "Whatever anybody's religion is, we should be able to laugh at it and at the same time understand that we should accept people who believe and have faith, without dismissing their lives as unserious."

How far can one push those boundaries before he or she has gone too far? Parker plays with these limits in the song "I Believe":

The humor was not fabricated but comes from Mormon doctrine so unfamiliar as to seem outrageous. Comedic routines are done on a rhythm of one, two three, and three is always the joke. With "I Believe" we just put the weirdest Mormon beliefs in the third slot and they become jokes even though they're just facts.

The humor begins in the apparent play on *Sound of Music*'s "I Have Confidence." Both Maria and Elder Price are contemplating their missions and trying to shake off the doubt.

The following lyrics are from www.allmusicals.com:

Lyrics to "I Believe" from *The Book of Mormon*, sung by Elder Kevin Price

Ever since I was a child

I tried to be the best...

So what happened?

My family and friends all said I was blessed...

so what happened?

It was supposed to be all so exciting.

To be teaching of Christ across the sea.

But I allowed my faith to be shaken-

Oh, what's the matter with me?

I've always longed to help the needy.

To do the things I never dared.

This was the time for me to step up.

So then why was I so scared?

A warlord that shoots people in the face.

What's so scary about that?

I must trust that my Lord is mightier,

And always has my back.

Now I must completely devout

I can't have even one shred of doubt!

Lyrics to "I Have Confidence" from *The Sound of Music*, sung by Maria

What will this day be like?

I wonder.

What will my future be?

I wonder.

It could be so exciting,

To be out in the world,

To be free!

My heart should be wildly rejoicing.

Oh, what's the matter with me?

I've always longed for adventure,

To do the things I've never dared.

Now here I'm pacing adventure

Then why am I so scared?

A captain with seven children...

What's so fearsome about that?

Oh, I must stop these doubts,

All these worries.

If I don't I just know I'll turn back!

Then, there is the belief that there is a planet Kolob near to the throne of God. Jews sailed across the sea to America, and a ban was lifted in 1978 allowing African-Americans to become ordained into the priesthood—all become punch lines. They are exaggeration, more so than fact.

Indeed, while listening to any soundtrack without watching the actual show, one can lose some context, but one cannot ignore one of the significant provocators in the song, "Hasa Diga Eebowai," which is revealed to translate into "F**k you, God." For context, these shiny new missionaries, Elder Cunningham and Elder Price, are bent on saving the world and find themselves not in France, Norway, nor Price's ultimate dream mission- Orlando, but in Uganda.

When they arrive, they join ten or so other missionaries, none of whom have accomplished a single baptism while they have been on a mission. The young men find themselves in the middle of a godforsaken place where 80 percent of the people living have AIDS and battle a warlord,

(1018 capacity) New York Theatre Guide.com.2017) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day

among other issues. They begin to sing "Hasa Diga Eebowai" as the text from the play below shows:

MAFALA: In this part of Africa, we ALL have a saying—whenever something bad happens, we just throw our hands up to the sky and say HASA DIGA

EEBOWAI!

ELDER CUNNINGHAM: Hasa Diga Eebowai?

MAFALA: It's the only way to get through all these troubled times. There's war, poverty, famine... but having a saying makes it all seem better!

Elder Cunningham likens it to *The Lion King*'s "Hakuna Matata," but the less naive Elder Price is appalled. On the one hand, what the listener does not hear in the recording is the expression of dismay on the Elder's face. On the other, what the listener cannot see is the tribe is dancing and flipping their middle fingers to the sky. If more evidence is needed, visit *The Book of Mormon* Broadway store where one can buy T-shirts and phone cases with "Hasa Diga Eebowai." All this despite the fact that at the end of the show, the people are singing "Thank you, God," as Elder Cunningham has given them a new tune to sing, but does that forgive the over-the-top previous song? "Hasa Diga Eebowai," thankfully, is not a real Ugandan phrase. In fact, little realism or research was given to any aspect of the Ugandan side of the show; surprising given that the creators admit that there was a tremendous amount of research into the Mormon faith. (Cima 130)

Maybe the authenticity to be discussed is not in how authentic the script is but in how both the audiences and the Church of Latter-Day Saints responded, and they responded very vocally! The *Book of Mormon* continues to show to standing-room-only houses every show (101% capacity)(NewYorkTheatreGuide.com,2017). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day

Saints has also taken out advertising in the Playbills, and many of the audience members have been Mormon and appreciated the good-humored fun (Argetsinger 24). Show after show, Mormon missionaries stand outside the musical, not protesting, but proselytizing, sharing their good book with theatre patrons, answering questions, taking pictures. (Tumminio) Instead of responding to the coarse and offensive language with anger and defensiveness, missionaries are giving the world a good lesson. Turn the other cheek and respond with love and an optimistic attitude.

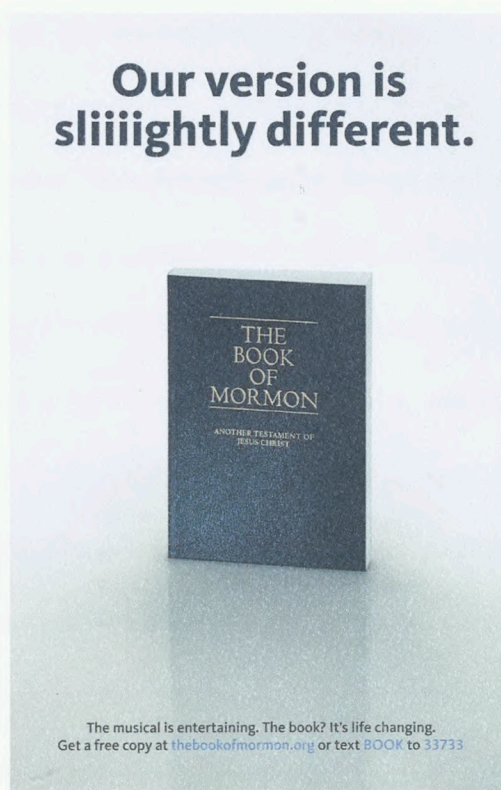


Figure 3. Courtesy *Book of Mormon* playbill ad from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

If art reflects life, and theatre is art, it should serve that while *The Book of Mormon, the Musical* is pure satire, it does reflect a certain kind of authenticity. Tebelak and Schwartz yearned to have *Godspell* reflect the joy of community. The creators of *Fiddler on the Roof*

found themselves cherishing the traditions and joy of being Jewish in a way that they never had before being a part of that show. *The Book of Mormon* reflects the ability to laugh at certain aspects of all faiths, to not take life too seriously, to love each other despite our differences. While the show may be an exaggeration of beliefs of the followers of the Church of Latter-Day Saints, it is possibly an invitation to find the truth in the material and what the church believes, by the way that members of the church use it to proselytize and educate others and spread love and good will.

Fiddler on the Roof and *Godspell* were still alive and available for consideration. Reviews and other criticisms are challenges for any show, not just musicals. Without Tony nominations or awards, most revivals close within one year.

Fiddler on the Roof won nine Tony Awards out of its ten nominations in 1965, including Best Musical and Best Performance by a Leading Actor for Zero Mostel (IBDB.com). The show also won a special Tony Award in 1972 for becoming Broadway's longest-running musical. It has five revivals to its credit running in 1976, 1981, 1990, 2004, and as recently as 2015 (IBDB.com). In 1991, 2004, and 2015, *Fiddler on the Roof* was nominated for Best Revival of a Musical and won in 1991 (IBDB.com). Though every actor playing Tevye in a revival since 1981 has been nominated for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical, Zero Mostel has been the only actor to win for playing the lead role (IBDB.com). At this time, *Fiddler on the Roof* is currently 16th on the list of longest running revivals on Broadway with 1,202 performances. *The Book of Mormon* sits at 20 with 2,801 and is still currently running at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre (Playbill.com). Revivals for *Godspell* ran in in 1988 and 2000 Off-Broadway and in 2011 on Broadway. *Godspell*'s only Tony nomination was for Best Original Score in the original production on Broadway (IBDB.com).

Chapter Four- Revival

The idea of maintaining the authenticity of religion within a musical on stage becomes more difficult with the introduction of revivals. Potential audience members may have the original cast recordings on replay and a protective sense of nostalgia when it comes to their favorite Broadway shows. New directors and creative teams mean choices independent of the people who initially gave birth to these works. In the cases of *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Godspell*, both lyricist Sheldon Harnick (*Fiddler*) and composer Stephen Schwartz (*Godspell*) were still alive and available for consultation. Reviews and other criticisms are challenges for any show, not just musicals. Without Tony nominations or awards, most revivals close within one year.

Fiddler on the Roof won nine Tony Awards out of its ten nominations in 1965, including Best Musical and Best Performance by a Leading Actor for Zero Mostel (IBDB.com). The show also won a special Tony Award in 1972 for becoming Broadway's longest-running musical. It has five revivals to its credit running in 1976, 1981, 1990, 2004, and as recently as 2015 (IBDB.com). In 1991, 2004, and 2015, *Fiddler on the Roof* was nominated for Best Revival of a Musical and won in 1991 (IBDB). Though every actor playing Tevye in a revival since 1981 has been nominated for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical, Zero Mostel has been the only actor to win for playing the lead role (IBDB). At this time, *Fiddler on the Roof* is currently 16th on the list of longest running musicals on Broadway with 3,242 performances. *The Book of Mormon* sits at 20 with 2,803 and is still currently running at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre (Playbill.com) Revivals for *Godspell* ran in in 1988 and 2000 Off-Broadway and in 2011 on Broadway. *Godspell's* only Tony nomination was for Best Original Score in the original production on Broadway.(IBDB)

When *Fiddler on the Roof* returned to the stage, some changes were introduced that were not well received. One criticism of the 2004 revival was that *Fiddler on the Roof* was not authentic enough—that it was “insufficiently Jewish” (Paulson). Though it was the highest-grossing revival and earned six Tony nominations, the lead role was played by acclaimed actor Alfred Molina, born in *England*. Did it need a Zero Mostel, whose father was a rabbi, to be authentic?



Figure 4. Danny Burstein in the opening moment of “Fiddler on the Roof” at the Broadway Theater, Sara Krulwich

In the most recent revival, there was even debate over one minute of staging, which opens with Tevye, bareheaded, and in a modern red parka on an empty stage. Perhaps he is a descendant of the families of Anatevka returning to find nothing of the town except the sign above an empty stage. After a moment, he removes his coat, puts on his cap, and unfurls his

prayer shawl and “transforms into Tevye.” At the end of the show, the actor joins his family leaving Anatevka, this time with bare head and again wearing the red coat. (Isherwood)

The staging provides “an inescapable visual nod to the current global refugee crisis” (Paulson), which has caused some controversy: “You see him enter the line of refugees, making sure we place ourselves in the line of refugees, as it reflects our past and affects our present” (Paulson). The show’s Tony-winning director, Bartlett Sher, insisted that there be a connection to current events while Sheldon Harnick, the last surviving original member of the creative team at 91, disagreed (Paulson). Harnick at first blocked the changes but relented in reaction to the audience’s feedback. “To my surprise, it had an extraordinary reaction from a significant part of the audience that finds it very moving,” he communicated through letters written to the producer and cast (Paulson). Mr. Sher explained, “I’m not trying to make a statement about it, but art can help us imagine it, and I would love it if families left the theatre debating it” (Paulson).

In 2018, *Fiddler on the Roof* will return to the New York stage. Sheldon Harnick, one of the original creative team members, will serve as a consultant. What makes this revival unique is that the show will be performed in Yiddish— a first for this show on the Broadway stage. The show had been performed in Yiddish in Tel Aviv, but it will be the first time performed in Yiddish in America. The concept is explained as being presented as if Sholem-Achiem were there himself at the conception of the Broadway production (Deb).

Godspell returned to the stage in 2011. *Godspell* found a home at The Circle in the Square Theatre. It was performed theatre in the round with seating for about 700, and it was sharing a building with one of the hottest shows in town, also written by Stephen Schwartz— *Wicked*. Danny Goldstein had been brought in to direct and he took a risk and cast young actors who were not celebrities or big names typically brought in for revivals. He campaigned for new

orchestrations wanting it to be timeless. Stephen Schwartz oversaw the change in style of music for the show by suggesting Michael Holland as the arranger. The show was now a lot less flower child and folk music and more pop and rock. Goldstein wanted a new energy for *Godspell* as well. The same kind of improvisation that created the original *Godspell* allowed actors like Telly Leung to shine with his many impressions “from Katherine Hepburn to Jimmy Stewart.” All the actors bounded on stage; quite literally, on mini trampolines during “We Beseech Thee.” In an effort to reach an audience-driven by texting and instant gratification on their mobile devices, the producers needed a show that was high energy.

The reviews for the revival were mixed. It closed in June of 2012 after only 264 performances and zero Tony nominations; the original ran for over 2,000 performances. Could the quick run have anything to do with the popularity of *Godspell* produced with such frequency in community theatres, churches, and high schools? According to the Educational Theater Association, *Godspell* ranks high in the list of shows most produced annually by high schools across the nation (twenty-first to be exact). To many, the revival was just too fresh, too much. Too many new jokes or references about celebrities including Kim Kardashian, Lindsay Lohan, and Donald Trump, for example. (de Giere 306, 307)

Critics, too, cited the corny-ness of the contemporary jokes. They wanted the simplicity of the original that gave a voice to all those “Jesus freaks” of 40 years ago searching for community, for a universal purpose, for love. Original cast member Peggy Gordon remembers, “John-Michael insisted we have a discernable growth process throughout the parable [of the seed], showing the audience what we learned as a result of the experience; using the parables merely for pop or politically topical one-liner defeats that purpose.” However, if one considers

the other object of Tebelak's version of *Godspell*, which was "joy," did the energy exuded by this youthful group on trampolines reflect it well?

Schwartz thinks it did (de Giere 308). Schwartz had been involved with most of the productions in New York and on tour, tweaking the lyrics or music as needed. "Beautiful City" had been added to the movie and every subsequent show. For the 2011 revival, "Beautiful City" was turned into a slow ballad and a new section was written for "Learn Your Lesson Well."

Revivals of Broadway musicals may or may not reflect the original author's intent on the stage. The original creative team may not be available for consultation or the director may choose to interpret the work his own way. The revival of *Godspell* while contrasting in style and music, still reflected the authentic relationship with the Word and the joy of community with Jesus and his followers. *Fiddler on the Roof* has varied in how much the show has strayed from the original authors' intent for authenticity. In 2004, despite not being "Jewish enough" and with an English actor as "Tevye", it was the highest grossing revival. As in the 2016 revival, the momentary reference to our world's current refugee crisis, while not specific to Judaism, it is the reflection of humanity. But as *Fiddler on the Roof* returns to the stage this year, it will possibly reflect the most authentic *Fiddler on the Roof* of all with its use of the Yiddish language.

Conclusion

The beginnings of this paper began with the debate over a production of *Godspell* and other productions being "too religious" or "not religious enough." The purpose of this paper was not to debate First Amendment rights and the ability to perform these shows, but to give cause for why, private school or public, small stage or large, community theatre or Broadway, should perform religious-based shows. Glazner and Ware said it clearly when they wrote

Certainly, the presentation of a play with religious themes is not equivalent to the practicing of a religion. It is the practicing of art. (Glazner and Ware 570) "One purpose of theatre is to reflect life, *all* life, the religious and the secular. It is a purpose protected by the First Amendment. It is a purpose with a powerful effect, because Konstantin Stanislavski insists, "If this were not so the public would not make the effort of coming to the theatre." (Glazner and Ware 581)

Godspell and *Fiddler on the Roof* use tradition and the word to provide a theatrical experience that feels authentic and allows the audience to experience the Christian and Jewish faiths without being a Christian or Jew necessarily, yet were authentic enough to move those who were.

Sitting in church recently on a summer Sunday, listening to the liturgical parts of the Mass being sung, I had an epiphany. The late afternoon sun shone through the stained glass rose window, and the sights and sounds of that very moment took me back to a production of *Come From Away*, which I saw in previews at the Schoenfeld Theatre in New York just before its official Broadway opening. *Come From Away* was nominated for Best Musical and won the Drama Desk Awards for Best Musical in 2017 and tells the tale of not only the people on the planes that were grounded due to the events of September 11, 2001, but also of the generous people of Gander, Newfoundland and other towns in Canada that took in the "plane people". The

set is simple, with *real* trees on the side of the stage and two tables and enough chairs for each member of the cast. Within the musical, the plane people are given shelter, and food and relationships begin to build. About halfway through the show, the plane people are invited to worship, and at that time, the chairs are shifted into rows as one would see in a church. One of the characters begins to talk about how he has a song in his head that won't stop playing. He begins singing the old Catholic hymn, "Make me a channel of your peace."

There is just enough fog floating in and stage light streaming through the trees to suggest light streaming through a church window. Two women on their knees join the song in harmony. At the end of the verse, another man enters and confesses that he's never told anyone he is Jewish, as per his parent's instruction when he was sent to America as a child. He laments that after the events of 9/11, so many people's stories were gone and he felt he needed to share his. He finds a rabbi from the plane, and they sit and speak while Hebrew hymns begin to be layered on top of the Catholic hymn. Next, a Muslim man explains how the others are eyeing him warily, and he is thankful to find a place to pray alone where he unfolds his mat and begins his prayer. Soon, all three are worshipping through their own music but are together, singing in beautiful harmony.

How much more of an authentic experience can one have than sitting in a theatre in New York, less than five miles from Ground Zero, listening to these actors sing of the selflessness and the humanity of a genuine part of our history, through a song of prayer? The lyrics spoke loudly: "Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring your love." (www.allmusicals.com) While this scene is only five minutes of *Come From Away*, the whole show, really, while not religious, is undeniably sacred in its way.

Lance Gharavi is quoted in Wilker and Show's book that he believes "scholars are increasingly coming to the opinion that neither the public nor the private sphere can be understood without adequately accounting for the role religious beliefs and practices play in



Figure 5. Tony-nominated American Theater actor sings, “Make me a Channel of Your Peace,” playing the character Kevin T, inspired by Kevin Tuerff’s 9/11 experience, in the hit Broadway musical “Come From Away” Berne, Kevin.

The audience was incredibly moved by this transcendent and powerful moment of the show. How much more of an authentic experience can one have than sitting in a theatre in New York, less than five miles from Ground Zero, listening to these actors sing of the selflessness and the humanity of a genuine part of our history, through a song of prayer? The lyrics spoke loudly: “Make me a channel of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring your love.”(www.allmusicals.com) While this scene is only five minutes of *Come From Away*, the whole show, really, while not religious, is undoubtedly sacred in its way.

Lance Gharavi is quoted in Wilker and Shaw’s book that he believes ‘scholars are increasingly coming to the opinion that neither the public nor the private sphere can be understood without adequately accounting for the role religious beliefs and practices play in

shaping subjects and cultures (Wilker & Shaw xiv). While considering the consequences of historical, ethnic, textual authenticity, the audience's response is just as important. However, criticism can often cause one to focus a lens of negativity on a production, where maybe there needn't be. Whether the musical is an original Broadway production or one produced on the stage of a small school, certainly the director and actors should use kid gloves with any work in relation to religion or sacred subject matter. One never knows who will be touched by the experience. Consider Jerome Robbins' father on opening night of *Fiddler on the Roof* or the experience of George Salazar, on the revival cast of *Godspell*. He states

You can't say these words, you can't sing these songs, and you can't tell these stories and not be affected by them. Through doing *Godspell*, I realized the themes are universal: be respectful to your fellow man, lend a helping hand, be light in the world, be a source of light for other people...My life has been better for it. (de Giere 220)

Clearly, the definition of authentic is up for interpretation. If you take into consideration the authors' intent, the parallel with the faith and traditions reflected in the work, mixed with the audience's response, then you get the sense of the meaning of authentic that I wish to be reflected here. You do not have to be Jewish to understand the respect for love of family and the Traditions that are passed on generation to generation. You do not have to be of any particular denomination to understand and feel the love and joy Tebelak and Schwartz wanted reflected in the work by their actors in *Godspell*. Certainly, whether Mormon or not, the ability to laugh at certain aspects of religion, no matter the denomination, reflects a sense of authenticity, if only authentic to one's sense of self, staying true to who you are...in spirit and faith.

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Brenda Maynard

Brenda Maynard

Kristin Gentry

Dr. Lawrence Dowley, Department of Arts

Date

SHOULD YOU JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER?

THE AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND THE STAGE IN

FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, GODSPELL, AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

A thesis submitted to the College of Arts in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Education in Theatre Education

By

Patricia H. Oliver

2018

Brenda May Ito

Brenda May Ito, Chair

Krystal Kennel

Krystal Kennel

L. A. Dooley

Dr. Lawrence Dooley, Department Chair

5-14-18

Date

