

Actors Alliance puts energy into sporty 'Godspell'



Christien A. Gardner (left), Nicole Hakim and Terry Gerald Hunt appear in the Actors Alliance Theatre's new production of "Godspell" with an athletic motif.

Performances of the Actors Alliance Theatre Company production of the musical "Godspell" continue through Sunday, Dec. 30, at Lycee International, 38800 Evergreen Road, Southfield. For ticket information call 642-1326.

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

The Actors Alliance production of "Godspell" puts athletic muscle into the old story of Christ's ministry. The cast of 13, decked out as athletes of all persuasions, offers a biblical revue, a vigorous musical rendition of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. Players bound energetically up and down a basketball court, baptizing Coach/Christ, acting out the parables and huddling around to listen to his teachings. William P. Ward, the director; Susan Panek, choreographer, and Philip J. Michael, musical director, succeed in staging fine, foot-tapping songs and dances and high-energy entertainment in this updated version of "Godspell."

The sports metaphor, in which all the players are

athletes, is a new presentation for the musical. It sometimes works astonishingly well, as when a rich society lady wearing impeccable tennis whites (Annette DePetrus) takes the role of a Pharisee as the cast acts out one of the parables. At other times when the disciples stretch their hamstrings and shoot baskets for God, the sports metaphor seems merely a sweaty contrivance.

THE METAPHOR may be a gimmick, but the sheer energy of the sporting presentation keeps the action moving well, as each sport in turn has its moment to shine.

The captivating solo by petite gymnast Laura A. Lamin is a graceful highlight. Wit and humor shine when swimmer Irene Schwyer and the whole cast sprawl on the floor to present an Esther Williams-style synchronized swimming routine.

The cast harmonizes beautifully on the songs, and the three musical basketball players, Carol Leimert, Sandi Litt and John Pitonak, deserve special mention. The songs, written by Stephen Schwartz, are full of lively rhythms and lyrical melodics.

There's an ingenuous exuberance to the whole

show in keeping with the quote from the book of Matthew, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The simplicity of the presentation keeps "Godspell" from being too Broadway slick despite sophisticated musical productions and choreography. The story of Christ's ministry is, after all, a simple tale, written to reassure common folks that the poor, the merciful and the pure in heart are blessed in God's eyes. Christ expounded some downright revolutionary ideas, among them the notion that power and wealth are liabilities when it comes time to be admitted into the kingdom of heaven.

"GODSPELL" TELLS the stories with childlike simplicity and doesn't leave out favorites such as the tale of the Good Samaritan, which has topped the biblical bestseller list for centuries. A Sesame-Street-style puppet show retells with warm humor the popular parable of the Prodigal Son. Mark F. MacCagnone has the dubious honor of playing Christ, always a difficult role despite Christ's connections up above. MacCagnone plays a gentle Jesus, an almost-Charlie-Brown type who makes up for his lack of charisma with goodness and wisdom. He's a good sport who does a softshoe routine with Manager Christian A. Gardner. Though they're not the crackerjack dancers that some others in the cast are, their routine using hockey sticks for canes is winning.

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