Sophomore Dezort Stars in Mainstage Godspell

By Elisabeth Clemmer
Staff Writer

Day by day … and all day long, the song lyrics ring through the heads of the directors and cast members of EMU’s fall production Godspell. With rehearsals behind them and microphone logistics ironed out, Godspell prepares to open this weekend.

“I’m ready to perform for an actual audience now,” said cast member Roxy Michael.

According to director Barbra Graber, the musical presents a fresh look at the Jesus of the Gospels. “Much of the Christian church seems to me to have based its theology on the letters of Paul. Godspell presents the teachings of Jesus which are extremely simple … but radical,” said Graber.

Written by Stephen Schwartz in 1971, Godspell is not just stream theology; it’s the social gospel. The musical depicts Jesus as a friend and leader, not a savior who came to die, but one who walked beside and identifies with human suffering.

“I appreciate the simplicity of the life lessons and parables,” said cast member Rodney Umble.

The underlying themes of Godspell could not ring more true for its targeted homecoming audience. “Godspell, I’ve discovered, is a very Anabaptist musical,” said Graber. Rather than dwell on the matter of heaven and hell, Anabaptists have historically focused on the premise of following Jesus in their daily lives. This very same “day by day” message pervades Godspell.

“Jesus didn’t come for the sole purpose of death and resurrection, but rather to show us how to live as a community,” said cast member Mike Dezort, who plays the lead role of Jesus in Godspell.

Graber also noted the message of the “Voice” Jesus encourages each of his followers to find. “He wants to bring you out and use you, turning shy people into people with purpose, voice,” and I believe that’s what he did for me. I’m humbled and grateful for this opportunity to express a vision I have of the show with the help of so many wonderfully dedicated people.”

Despite its origination in the early 1970s, Godspell maintains a timelessess with illustrious pieces of music. Anne Gross, faculty member of the Theatre Department, adds her musical expertise to the production. Audience members will enjoy the songs “Bless the Lord,” “All Good Gifts,” “Light of the World,” and the capstone favorite “Day by Day.”

Godspell’s success in the past has been the masterful integration of Biblical text, song, and dance. “The hardest part is learning the choreography of this year’s performance,” said cast member Tara Kreider.

The script doesn’t give you a lot of stage directions,” added Graber. “It’s up to our imaginations to bring the stories and lessons to life on stage.”

Godspell cast members Roxy Michael, Tara Kreider, David Rohrer, Rachel Swartzendruber, and Elizabeth Risser rehearse as the opening performance on Friday, Oct. 3 at 7:30 p.m. approaches.

Rose Stauffer, a part of EMU’s 1986 production of Godspell, returned to direct the choreography of this year’s performance. “Rose has created a lot of stage directions,” added Graber. “It’s up to our imaginations to bring the stories and lessons to life on stage.”

A Writer With a Mind Like An Irish Island

By Sarah Dick
Style Editor

“I didn’t realize any of this stuff was funny until I started reading it,” David Brendan Hopes commented after members chuckled at his reading Thursday.

Hopes, a professor of literature at the University of North Carolina, brought a unique mix of humor, child psychology, vivid imagery, and poetic story-telling to EMU’s first Writer’s Read of the year last Thursday evening. Originally from Akron, Ohio, Hopes’ work might be influenced by his interest in romantic writers and John Milton. Although he may think of himself as a poet first, Hopes has published plays, fiction, non-fiction (“nature-writing”), and most recently a book of childhood memoirs entitled A Childhood in the Milky Way: Becoming a Poet in Ohio. As his presentation showed, Hopes’ versatility in the arts extends beyond writing.

Along with reading selections from his published works, he told the audience stories of his early interest in writing and his theatrical experience. Hopes announced as director of Urthna Press, the Black Swan Theater Company, and the Downtown School of the Arts.

Convincing Professor of French Carroll Yoder read Hopes’ highly acclaimed nature book A Sense of the Morning. Remembering his positive impression of the work, Yoder sought out Hopes for the Writer’s Read. Attendance was 48, a little under the usual, possibly because Hopes was not a Mennonite writer and relatively unfamiliar to the EMU community. Those who did come seemed to appreciate Hopes’ style. As one woman put simply during the time for questions after the reading, “It’s good.”

The audience’s favorable reception pleased Yoder. “It’s a gamble,” said Yoder. “I really didn’t know the guy.”

After a meal provided by Pioneer Catering Service, Hopes read his new children’s poems, his powerful delivery crediting his years of acting experience. Conveying the mind of a poet to an island off the coast of Ireland, Hopes suggested that although it may look very distant from an outside perspective, it feels like the center of the earth. He offered his work from this center.

The first selection, “The Doe,” centered around his mother’s illness and death. With detailed descriptions the piece displayed the poet’s love of nature and of drawing. The piece culminated in a dream connection that allowed him to come to terms with his mother’s death.

“The Queen of the Cowgirls” described a childhood friendship based on “compatible imaginations,” which gave new meaning to the color blue. Its title refers to a pretend game that encompassed the meaning of freedom and self-determination for Hopes. Exploring stereotypes and social constructions from the perspective of a child, Hopes found that “a child’s mind is allegorical.”

The two poetry selections from the evening, “Inviting Saint Bernard to the Street Fair” and “A Passion Play,” used a lot of spiritual imagery and what Yoder described as “a kind of Catholic sensibility.” Audience members may also remember Hopes’ personal story-telling and the way he associated names like “Darlene” with blue plastic.

While at EMU, Hopes also visited Yoder’s College Writing class to share more of his work. “I think he wowed my class,” said Yoder. Yoder would like to get more students involved in the Writer’s Reads, since he thinks they really enjoy the relaxing atmosphere when they go.

Those who did not attend the Writer’s Read had the opportunity to hear Hope speak at Chapel on Friday where he read some poetry and another prose selection describing his first connection with God. Several of his selections repeated the line, “They say you never recover from your first love; if your first love is God...”