

A modern-day version of Passion Play, 'Corpus Christi' opens at Acrosstown

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Matt Stamey/Staff photographer

"Corpus Christi," with, from left, Bernie Pellet as John, Loic Robertson as Joshua, Charles Ely as Mary, and Eric Hill as Andrew, opens Friday at the Acrosstown Repertory Theatre.

Somewhere in the coastal town of Corpus Christi, Texas, Joshua is witnessing Mary holding baby Jesus.

Meanwhile, three room-service people enter the scene singing "We Three Kings" with gifts like cigars, a flexible flyer and a Maxwell coffee can.

"He witnesses his birth," said Loic Robertson, who plays Joshua, a modern-day version of Jesus, in the play "Corpus Christi," opening Friday at the Acrosstown Repertory Theatre. "(Corpus Christi) is not your typical mystery play. It's an old story done in a different way." Performances begin at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and 2 p.m. Sundays through March 30.

Robertson's character Joshua represents a modern Jesus who performs miracles and brings a radical message of love to Corpus Christi.

Director Steve Bates said “Corpus Christi,” written by playwright Terrence McNally (“Kiss of the Spider Woman”), is a modern-day version of the Passion Play.

The play spans the course of Joshua’s life beginning with his birth in the 1950s in Corpus Christi, Texas, to his death by crucifixion.

“In the description of the play he is a gay man, but it is never explicitly said that he is gay,” Robertson said. “He is such a loving person ... the character is written to be on a higher level of consciousness than Jesus.”

Each actor plays four to five people with the entire cast onstage at all times, Bates said. The audience should expect to see actors throw on wigs but no costume changes.

All of the actors are dressed in khaki pants and white shirts, said Bates. “They have to build their identity through what they say to let people know who they are,” he said.

Bates said “Corpus Christi” opens with John the Baptist reading a monologue. The actors are brought one by one onstage as he says their real name and baptizes them into their character names.

The play is a drama as well as a comedy, Bates added. “His mom is trying to make a dancer out of him,” he said. “He even has a make-out scene with a girl.”

Satan, played by James Dean, challenges Joshua along his journey, Bates said. “He says the city below him will be all his if he denies the son of God,” he added.

“Corpus Christi” follows a great deal of stories from the Bible with a twist, said Bates. During his journey to inclusion and self-divinity, Joshua attracts 12 followers including a lawyer, hustler, actor, singer, architect and hairdresser along with familiar disciples like Peter, James, John and Andrew.

“(The followers) tell Joshua to stay away from the hustler. ‘Peter says ‘stay away from him, he is not one of us.’ And Joshua says ‘He is all of us’,” Bates said.

“No matter what they have done he brings them into their lives. It doesn’t matter who or what we are God loves us,” he added.

This is not the only biblical twist surrounding Joshua’s character.

Joshua performs a gay marriage for James and Bartholomew despite backlash from priests. He also heals a blind man and cures Philip, who is a hustler and HIV positive, Bates said.

Joshua believes in the inclusion of everyone whether they are a beggar or a fisher, Bates said.

“Judas and Joshua bond as lovers,” Bates said. “He never admits that he is gay, but he roundabout says it. Because he is not saying he is gay, he is saying that he is all-inclusive with everybody no matter their lifestyle. Once he goes on his journey and meets (Satan) he goes through his temptation.”

Robertson, 26, said different people will have varied perspectives of Joshua.

“I think that different people will see something different in him. The play itself has cuss words, it has reference to gay sex, but it is reverent. In a Christian way, it’s kind of funny,” Robertson said. “(The play) has a sincere reverent message: Love everybody no matter what. Love is the most important thing we have in this world.”

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