

The Godspell Experience

Sample Chapter Chapter 8: An Off-Broadway Collaboration

The sample chapter that follows is from *The Godspell Experience: Inside a Transformative Musical* by Carol de Giere, with a Foreword by Stephen Schwartz.

Context

Chapter 8 is from Part I: “The Making of *Godspell*.” Chapters 1 to 6 take readers into *Godspell*’s origins at college as well as the first New York City production off-off Broadway at Café La MaMa. Chapter 7 introduces Stephen Schwartz and the off-Broadway producers as they became involved with the musical for the Cherry Lane Theatre production.

Read the Whole Book

The Godspell Experience includes 36 chapters, a Foreword, and an Epilogue.

Part II Understanding *Godspell*: Concepts and Colorful Details

Part III *Godspell*’s Score – Song by Song

Part IV A *Godspell* Grab Bag (This section includes chapters on international productions, the movie version, and the recent Broadway revival).

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CHAPTER 8

An Off-Broadway Collaboration

At the center of *Godspell*'s next phase of development was a pair of young men in their early twenties who were now under contract as the official authors of the new musical. As a team they were a study in contrasts. The older of the two, by a year and a half, was the assertive, trim Stephen Schwartz, 5' 8", usually wearing a brightly colored shirt and sporting a haircut that made him look a bit like one of the Beach Boys. The more laid back and pensive one was John-Michael Tebelak, habitually dressed in oversized blue denim overalls over a casual shirt. His long bushy hair accentuated his height of 6' 1". Whatever their physical and personality differences, they worked together smoothly and symbiotically, as Schwartz recalls.

"John-Michael was somewhat shy, but he could also be gregarious and occasionally even grand. Like any genius, he had his own particular and peculiar way of looking at things. He was quite a large man physically and so he could be somewhat overwhelming, but his basic soul was very gentle."

—Stephen Schwartz

Right after the show closed at Café La MaMa, the two started meeting at Stephen and Carole Schwartz's 81st Street apartment. Tebelak provided a mimeographed script that included psalms, hymns, sayings, and parables. Schwartz recalls about the script: "It was basically just passages from the Bible edited together. And then, out of that, this amazing theatrical piece got created."

Later in his career, Stephen Schwartz might spend a few weeks on one song, and several years to complete a musical. Using his imagination, he'd step into a character and try to feel what that character might feel in a particular situation in order to write emotionally appropriate music and lyrics. He'd consider the whole emotional arc of the characters and what the song needed to convey.

For *Godspell*, Schwartz recalls, "It was only five weeks between the time I saw the show at La MaMa and the time the show went into rehearsal, when there had to be a score. So there was really no time to think about anything except trying to get it done, and responding to the lyrics, finding the places that I wanted to musicalize, and, obviously, consulting with John-Michael about all these decisions—playing the stuff for John-Michael and getting feedback from him, and so on. It was very, very tight."

Schwartz decided to keep "By My Side," a song he'd heard at Café La MaMa. In his meetings with John-Michael he said, "I could try to write a new song for this spot, and maybe I would write a song as good as this, but why bother if we have this wonderful song?" All the other music needed to come from him.

Neither Schwartz nor his casually Jewish parents saw a problem with him working on *Godspell*. He rather hoped that being unschooled in Christian tenets would prove an advantage in terms of a novel perception. "I don't come from a Christian upbringing and therefore I really didn't know the New Testament," he once explained. "I was reading some of these parables for the first time, and the hymns that I set with new music for the show are from the Episcopal Hymnal. I basically was responding to the material fresh."

It helped that he could write music and new lyrics after witnessing a version of the show in action. "I had seen the show

itself at La MaMa, so I already knew what the tone was, the theatrical journey, and the specific characters the cast members had created. None of it had to be imagined from scratch.”

Schwartz and Tebelak evaluated the “event” of each song, so that the actors wouldn’t just be stopping the story to sing. In most instances, songs suggested characters’ moments of revelation or conversion or commitment. “They are pledging their loyalty, their belief, their faith to become a member of this community that’s being formed,” Schwartz explains. Accordingly, he wrote specific songs for a featured cast member to lead.

For example, he decided that Robin Lamont, instead of singing “Turn Back, O Man,” as she had sung in the previous two versions of the show, instead would sing “Day by Day.” The Robin clown became the first character to sign on to a community that explored the parables as lessons. Her character’s breakthrough occurs after she listens to a parable about a man who doesn’t forgive his brother’s debts and is condemned. Jesus then explains the parable’s meaning in terms of the importance of forgiveness, inspiring the Robin clown’s epiphany and motivating her to sing from her heart.

Joanne Jonas remembers that Tebelak and Schwartz based the song spot for “Bless the Lord” on a moment during the rehearsal when she personally experienced a revelation. “One day, while we were rehearsing the ‘rich man’ parable, I had a revelation about the power of love that was coming through Jesus. A light bulb went off inside me, the actress, and I said, ‘Oh, I get it!’ out loud. John-Michael and Stephen said, ‘Right there—that’s when you should sing ‘Bless the Lord.’”

Schwartz also reviewed the spoken material to consider whether any might work better as song, especially the show’s opening scene with the monologues. “It was reeaally long! That thing went on forever.” He began paging through the philoso-

phers' quotations in the script and extracting the kernel of what each said. He then generated a multi-part fugue-like piece that became an exciting opening ("Prologue"). "I kind of shaped it so it had a build as a musical number, instead of just being an amorphous thing where everybody came out and made speeches and then threw things at one another."

He also decided to write an original duet he'd call "All for the Best" for Jesus and Judas, and to musicalize the lengthy speech in Act II about lawyers and Pharisees, turning it into the song, "Alas for You."

He did a little editing on the "Finale." The lyrics at the time included "Oh God, I'm busted." Schwartz thought the "busted" line was over the top and trivialized the Crucifixion. "I just said to John-Michael, 'You can't. That's a really bad idea.' And he got it right away."

See Part III of this book for more details about the songs.

Music director Reinhardt was one of the first people (after Tebelak) to hear all the new *Godspell* songs. He remembers, "They were really wonderful, very clever and very heartfelt."

He needed to quickly learn the pieces in order to play piano for rehearsals and performances. In those days, Schwartz trusted his memory for retaining everything he composed, so except for some hand written lead sheets, there was no printed score. Reinhardt brought along a small cassette recorder as he listened to Schwartz play the pieces in his apartment, and then went home to practice with the recordings and lead sheets. "I wouldn't play it note for note; I would basically interpolate what he was doing and get it as close as possible to how he played it."

First Presentation of the New Score

Once Tebelak and the producers heard and approved the music, it was time for an in-house debut. The cast assembled at the apartment of one of the producers on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Stephen Schwartz, Steve Reinhardt, Joanne Jonas, and Lamar Alford performed the songs.

Until that moment, the show had been freewheeling and eccentrically nontraditional. The actors had memorized the previous versions of songs and were not prepared for hearing polished musical theater tunes. Schwartz accompanied at the piano, with Joanne debuting "Day by Day" and belting "Bless the Lord;" Lamar sang "All Good Gifts" and Schwartz and Reinhardt performed the other pieces.

When they finished, the room settled into a fidgety silence. There was no warm applause or supportive praise. Peggy Gordon recalls, "We were stunned when we first heard this music. It was not only different, but there was so much more of it. We were protective of the old and a little reserved toward the new." Without saying anything, two cast members pulled out their guitars and others joined them in singing the familiar old songs.

"We were all very anti-showbiz at the time, and Stephen wanted to turn 'Godspell' into a musical comedy. He managed to do it successfully, but it took a little while to get into the spirit of what he wrote."

—Nina Faso

Edgar Lansbury believed Schwartz was on the right track, even if the cast "balked a little bit" when asked to let go of their previous songs. "Actors are like that. They become very possessive of the way things are done."

Although they were not initially swept away by Schwartz's work, it wasn't long before the cast appreciated the more theatrically ideal music. Stephen Nathan had already been convinced of the new score's merits. "John-Michael had me over to his loft and said, 'I want you to listen to the score and tell me what you think.' I remember listening and going, 'Oh my God, these songs are phenomenal.' It was exactly what the show needed. ...*Godspell* could so easily have turned into a bunch of self-indulgent young people acting for themselves. The beauty of the score for me was that it became a performance piece. It became accessible to a wide audience [and] commercial in the best sense of the word. It elevated, for lack of a better word, the vibe of the cast. Our vibe was a bit different. The parables also became a bit more accessible."

Rehearsing at the Cherry Lane Theatre

The theater on Commerce Street where *Godspell* finished its birthing process was in Greenwich Village, where a walk down Bleeker, Commerce, or other side streets can evoke the mood of a European village. There are no skyscrapers; trees grow along the sidewalks, and in summer some of the apartment dwellers fill window boxes with fresh flowers. In years past, legendary writers and musicians frequented the cafés and clubs in the area. The Cherry Lane Theatre had contributed to the Village culture by presenting the works of pioneering playwrights like Albee, Beckett, Ionesco, and others. *Godspell* would soon add to the legacy of innovation in its own warm-hearted way.

In mid April 1971, an ambitious troupe of young actors and their also-young leaders entered the Cherry Lane Theatre through the front door under the theater's red awning (since there was no stage door or even any backstage space). The building had started as a brewery in 1836 before becoming a

warehouse, box factory, and then a theater. The overall tone of the seating area and brick wall that formed the stage backdrop was a muted red. There was only one aisle between the seats, down the center, a little space for a rehearsal piano in front of the first row of seats, and a small wood stage where they could work.

Unlike their part-time labors for La MaMa, the actors had now been hired for a commercial Off-Broadway run, so they could revamp *Godspell* all day. The band, once hired, rehearsed in the same space at night.

One of the immediate goals for Tebelak and the actors was to integrate the two new cast members, as well as return to the spirit of the show after their break. The foundation for this next incarnation of the musical was primarily in the memories of the eight actors who would be continuing. (A 32-page typed script found amongst Tebelak's papers appears to be one developed early at La MaMa, but it was never completed. The sayings and teachings of "First clown" — a.k.a. Jesus — were all marked, and clowns two through ten had some of the Bible quotations from parables assigned to them.)

According to Peggy Gordon, most of the structure remained the same, although many of the spoken bits changed during rehearsals when actors further divided up the material and added their own playfulness. "We started from scratch, from the vantage point of letting Joanne and Lamar create their characters," remembers Gordon. "Once this was achieved, we began the necessary reshaping of the show through judicious cutting, and continued that process all through previews."

It didn't take long for Joanne to find her clown. She took cues from her experiences as a dancer: "I fashioned myself as a marionette. Being double-jointed and very flexible, I would contort into some wild shapes kind of like a marionette pup-

pet could do." As she flexed physically, her vocal performance also morphed into different impressions to suit the moment. She remembers: "Ed Wynn, Mae West, high funny voices, low voices—many different voices."

Gordon especially remembers one of Jonas' voices. "Joanne does the best Ed Wynn impression in the entire world. Think of Ed Wynn in the *Mary Poppins* movie during that wonderful song where he's laughing and flying up in the chair—that was Joanne's character."

Lamar's clown character evolved gradually during rehearsals.

Towards a Stable, Artistically Structured Show

In April and May, the actors finalized their formerly improvised parts and practiced performances together. Stephen Schwartz brought the new songs to the cast, and together they shaped the musical with input from Tebelak, who usually sat in the theater seats and watched most of the rehearsals.

Music director Reinhardt remembers the first day that the cast rehearsed the "Prologue" song. Schwartz brought index cards with the music solos written out for each cast member. He'd play a part on the piano for one actor and then send him or her outside to the quiet Greenwich Village street to rehearse the song a cappella with Stephen Reinhardt.

Fortunately, by then the actors were sold on Schwartz's new tunes. "It was heaven," says Gordon, "pure, blissful, joyful, exuberant heaven to learn these songs; to learn our individual harmony parts and then sing them in the context of the show."

Not only were they learning songs, but they were practicing a variety of other talents. Gordon recalls, "Stephen Nathan played the ukulele; Jeffrey played the concertina, recorder and guitar; Gilmer and I played guitar; and David played the shofar as his particular rite. Edgar Lansbury said to us, 'You are the

most unbelievably multi-talented group of people I have ever seen. You are dancers, you are singers, some of you are acrobats, and some of you play instruments. We want you guys to do everything you do in this show.”

Comedic Movement and Casual Dance

While much of the play’s blocking was collaborative, the overall theme for the actors’ movements on stage came from Tebelak. Gordon remembers, “It was a fascinating challenge to create what John-Michael wanted.... goofy rather than slick and polished! His mantra was ‘keep it childlike.’”

Jeffrey Mylett instigated a lot of the physical movement for the scenes, says Robin Lamont. “He had the most energy of anybody in the show. It was really hard to keep up with him. He’d say, ‘Let’s just jump up and land on our knees here.’ Sure Jeffrey.”

No official choreographer was ever assigned to *Godspell* at the Cherry Lane Theatre. Tebelak had little experience with staging musical numbers and yielded to Schwartz and the cast. As director, Tebelak would say things like, “I don’t know how to make it feel like this, but here’s the way I want it to feel,” and his cohorts took it from there.

For “Bless the Lord” and other songs, Schwartz sent groups of two or three off to different parts of the rehearsal space or the dressing rooms, saying, “See what you can come up with for this verse.” The whole group process delighted the actors and helped them bond with each other emotionally.

“Everybody really pitched in with everything they had.”

—Stephen Reinhardt

When specific dance moves were needed, trained dancers Joanne Jonas and Stephen Reinhardt recommended steps. For the “All for the Best” duet, Reinhardt worked out a soft-shoe dance with Stephen Nathan that would be entertaining and do-able while singing.

Carole Schwartz was watching a rehearsal one day and had the idea for a particular cake walk strut they could perform during “Turn Back, O Man.” That worked because it was simple enough that it could almost have been invented on the spot.

Gordon recalls Tebelak’s interest in “comedic choreography that even adolescent children could dance.” Gordon also says that it was Sonia Manzano’s idea to have the backup dancers for “All for the Best” do a faux tap dance. “Sonia talked about what children look like when they’re learning to tap but haven’t mastered the steps yet. It was a very funny illustration and perfect clown behavior!”



Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village.

Let Songs Be Heard with a Band

With opening night quickly approaching, Schwartz set out to find musicians who could handle the new material and agree to work almost every night in an Off-Broadway show. The Quinn brothers were not available at that time. Schwartz asked several other musicians who declined because they didn't think the show would fly.

Joanne Jonas remembered a band from high school on Long Island, and Schwartz telephoned the drummer, Rick Shutter (then called "Ricky"). Shutter was 19 years old at the time, and living with his parents in the suburbs, but already a professional performer. He was part of a rock band called the Young Executives that played regular gigs and backed up acts like Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, and the Shirelles.

The composer took a train out to Shutter's house to audition him. With Schwartz at the family piano, Shutter set up his drums and played along for a few songs. Schwartz said, "I think you're perfect for the show, but I want to try 'Alas for You.' This song is trouble. It's got a lot of time changes."

Shutter decided to play by ear rather than read lead sheets. He recalls, "I started drawing on Elton John's style of music, Procol Harem's B.J. Wilson, and Ringo Starr of the Beatles. I started to play, drawing from that musically, and Steve loved it."

"That's what I'm looking for," Schwartz affirmed.

Next, Shutter telephoned his and Jonas's guitar player friend, Jesse Cutler, who lived down the block, insisting that he come over right away with his guitar. Cutler was also 19 and had also been a professional musician throughout his teen years, performing as part of the Young Executives with Shutter.

Whatever Cutler played pleased Schwartz. The two recruits were then invited to a backers meeting the following week.

Soon they and Richard La Bonte (a bass player who was also a friend of Joanne Jonas) joined Stephen Reinhardt as the official band for the show and the original cast recording.

Pay Caesar What is Caesar's

It was up to Edgar Lansbury, Joseph Beruh, and their "silent partner," Stuart Duncan, to raise the capital to bring this musical to the public. Duncan, a Princeton, New Jersey-based businessman, had joined Lansbury and Beruh the previous January to produce *Waiting for Godot* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and he had previously co-produced several others with Lansbury. Duncan was "silent" with respect to not being involved in day-to-day artistic decision-making. Rather, he focused on raising funds for the show while maintaining his position as vice-president of Lea and Perrins, a company that made Worcestershire and other sauces.

The producers held several gatherings to find investors for the show. One of the important backers auditions was held at Stuart Duncan's home in Princeton. "We had invited a lot of investors," Lansbury recalls. "The whole company and John-Michael and Stephen went out there and did the whole show. The people all loved it, and in very short order we had raised what we needed."

The producing team felt that they could launch *Godspell* as a low-budget piece. Lansbury explains that their plan was to capitalize the show at \$40,000, although, according to several sources, they raised only about half of that before the opening. It would all work out if they could pay the actors about \$50 a week and they didn't have to pay too much for marketing. As with all new stage musicals, it was a gamble with a high potential for failure. But it could also succeed.

See "*The Godspell Commune Company*" chapter in Part IV for more details about financing and payment.