

VINOD MEHTA: **Moving Times**

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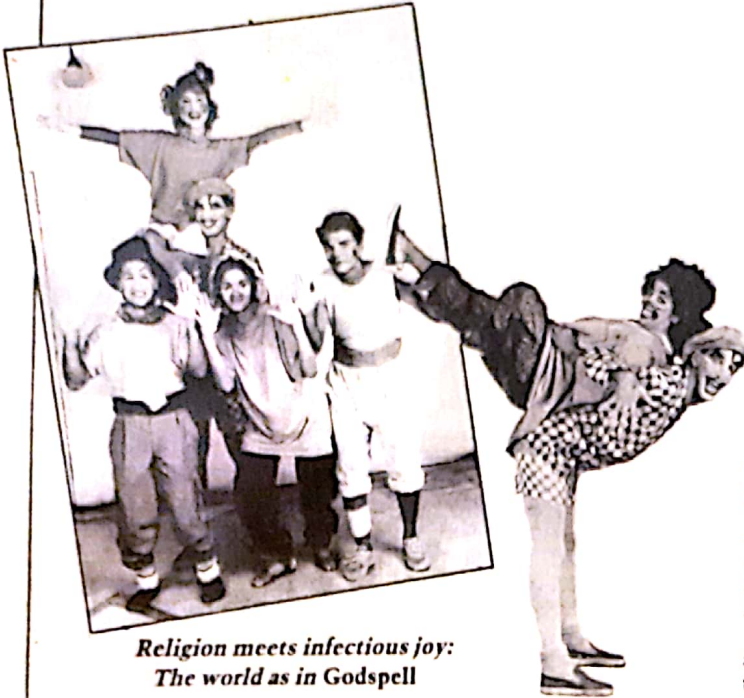
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The Magic Returns

As Pearl Padamsee does her third version of *Godspell* she infuses the entire young cast with all her enthusiasm and joy.



Religion meets infectious joy:
The world as in *Godspell*

GODSPELL

WHY GODSPELL! It's the obvious question. Why do something you've already done before? "I love the play" replies Pearl Padamsee. The obvious answer. She also says that the earlier version (in 1973 and '75) shouldn't be compared with this one. "Comparisons are odious." Besides the new *Godspell* is quite different. The text is the same, but the music, the choreography, the sets, the cast are different. Sabira Merchant who had acted in the earlier *Godspell* says, "Ours was a quieter version". In fact, it wouldn't be off the mark to say that this is the new generation *Godspell*. Jazzier, colourful, youthful.

Padamsee chose the talented and attractive young cast after careful auditions and as a result *Godspell* will

give exposure to some excellent new artistes. What had attracted Padamsee to Jean-Michel Tebelak's work in the first place was its "humanity, simplicity and mirth". And it was very well received by Bombay audiences. The new *Godspell* retains these qualities and at the same time is "refreshingly new".

You would expect a play about Jesus Christ to be solemn and low-key. This one has a bizarre and fancy circus set. Most of the characters wear clown costumes and make-up, and even Christ is portrayed as a benevolent clown. The mood is boisterous to put it mildly. And the best part is that if you don't want to see a 'gospel play' you can see it as just a good musical.

The play has everything you learnt in catechism and moral science class. And yes, Christ even comes to preach "love thy neighbour" and all

that, but it isn't boring. It's all done with a great deal of humour and song and dance. Besides, Bugs Bhargava makes a very unlikely Jesus. A plump jolly Jesus rather than the lean, bearded, hollow-cheeked one we see in pictures. His disciples are also a motley bunch, uninhibited and energetic. So it makes for a fun morality play.

The play begins with philosophers and thinkers from Socrates to Sartre arguing about God and religion, their voices reaching a crescendo when the calm and comforting voices of John and then Jesus silence them. Jesus has a breezy way of preaching. The disciples gather round for a game of dumb charades and Jesus acts out "if a man sues you for your shirt, give him your coat as well."

"Jesus do you want to see a show?" asks one of them. "At these prices!" replies Jesus and you watch, amused, the enactment of the story of the wounded man and the Samaritan. The story of the rich man and Lazarus is also given a funny look. Money as the root of all evil is illustrated by the disciples buying and selling stocks and shares — Bombay Dyeing, Reliance. A contemporary touch is put in without disturbing the tenor of the play.

All the familiar biblical stories — the prodigal son, the adulteress who is saved from stoning when Jesus says that only he who is without fault should cast the first stone, the sermons and teachings are all interspersed with lively songs and dances (by Karla Singh who is also part of the cast and does a tap dance) and plenty of clowning. Most of the numbers are done with vigour and are a delight to watch.

The play takes on a slightly serious turn when it comes to the Last Supper, Judas's act of betrayal and the cru-

CRITIC'S CHOICE

ASHADH KA EK DIN

It's always a pleasure watching this play — the language is exquisite and the story of the delicate and tragic relationship between Kalidas and his childhood sweetheart Mallika is beautiful. A completely inept group may try hard to mess this play up, but they wouldn't succeed. The new group, Sanskriti attempts this play which in itself is a brave thing since the days of classical plays are gone — it is the age of the farce. The group of amateurs under director Sahajanand Karna, who also plays Kalidas, makes an effort to perform a play which is really difficult. The trouble is that they can't even pronounce the Sanskritised Hindi words properly, and also tend to overact in scenes that need to be underplayed. They should have watched *Discovery of India* and Shyam Benegal's version of the play if no other source of inspiration was available. The actors need to tone down a bit, improve their diction, with Kalidas played more like a misled man than a wimp. But after all these years the magic of the play is still intact. Nobody can take that away from the viewer.

cifixion, but ends again on a merry note with a resurrected Jesus dancing with the disciples to a cheerful song.

There's a lot of prancing around on stage and all the artistes get a even chance to perform with the important scenes equally distributed — Nirmala Mathan, Shweta Shetty, Jasmine Bharucha, Lorella Jacinto, Megan Silva Pinto, Zenia Tata, Farhad Engineer, Fareedon Bhujwala, Paurus Irani, Cyrus Bharucha, Vivin Matthews, Francois Castellino — it's difficult to single any one out.

In a couple of places the play can be faulted for being too childish and silly, but on the whole it is enjoyable and the spirit is infectious. And then so much hard work and love has gone into it. As Padamsee says, "We all like to go back to our memories, *Godspell* is a memorable thing for me."

DEEPA GAHIOT