



“ There is that smaller world which is the stage,
and that larger stage which is the world. ”

— Isaac Goldberg

(Journalist, Author, Critic, Translator, and Lecturer)

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Socially distanced cast performing in Berkshire Theatre Group's *Godspell*

GODSPELL

Takes the ~~Stage~~ (Tent)

In Pittsfield, MA from August 7th through September 20th Berkshire Theatre Group presented an outdoor production of Stephen Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelak's musical *Godspell*. Not an unusual selection for the well-regarded regional theater company, except it was anything but production as usual during the ongoing global pandemic. It was in fact a carefully negotiated, planned, and executed experiment in many ways of bringing live musical theater back. Staged in a tent in Pittsfield, MA, *Godspell* was the first Actors' Equity Association approved musical during the pandemic.

The strictly limited (75 tickets per performance, way down from the 780-seat Colonial Theatre space) and socially-distanced seated audience were required to wear masks and follow the procedures and protocols per BTG. Among other precautions there were temperature scans, no-contact scanning stations for tickets, and free-standing hand sanitizer stations. Only digital programs and the first row was 25-feet from the stage. Tickets were \$100 each and the show sold-out, extended, and sold-out again. Audiences, actors, crew, and the creative team all embraced the challenges and found joy in the shared live theatrical experience.

Stage Directions caught up with the design team and stage manager during the run and this month share our conversation with the costume designer Hunter Kaczorowski and Production Stage Manager Jason Weixelman.



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– Hunter Kaczorowski

A Q&A with Costume Designer Hunter Kaczorowski

Describe your costume design, how it supported the narrative of the show, and dealt with the COVID challenges?

HK: As it always does, it starts with what the director is looking for, what Alan’s [director Alan Filderman] vision was. We started by looking at what we knew what we didn’t want to do. We didn’t want it to be a clown show. We didn’t want it to be gritty urban landscape as we have seen before. We knew we didn’t want that. Alan was coming from a place of wanting to feel earthy and of the Berkshires. So with that, I took the world of the show, which is pretty open to interpretation, and since I knew it was going to be set in contemporary clothes with purchased garments, I wanted to find a through-line with them. A way for them all to look like they were in the same world, even if they were very specific to each of the actors because we wanted the actors to be playing some version of themselves, a character that is informed by who they are. So, a lot of the costume design came out of exploring who the actors are, what they bring to the table and building a look around that.

For that through-line with everyone, I landed on the idea of denim, that way no matter what people wore, shape-wise, style-wise, it would all feel like it was part of the same vision. My assistant was Elivia Bovenzi Blitz, she and I worked together to add textures to the purchased clothes. We took the idea of Sashiko, that is a Japanese folk garment tradition, we took that idea and exploded it into patchwork and hand stitching. We wanted it to feel homespun and textured, but not gritty, not urban.

Normally at Berkshire, there are interns and stitchers and drapers, all of those people, but because they had cancelled the season they went away. When they then decided to produce *Godspell*, the design, of course, altered a bit as I knew that it was just going to be myself and my assistant in charge of handling everything. We went in knowing that we were going to rely on purchased garments as much as possible and add texture to those clothes.

I was fortunate that I had designed the show earlier than I normally would have done if it had been a standard non-COVID show. I started a month or so earlier, so I had a sense of who these actors were and what we wanted to do with them. I was able to place a lot of online orders before I got there, based on sizing that I got from the actors. Because of course, with the six-foot regulations, we weren’t actually able to measure any of the actors ourselves. So, it was all based on sizing that I got from contacting the actors.

There was some shopping that had to be done in-person when we got to the theater. All with masks at all times and limiting contact with the people in store. Then once the fittings began, we had very strict regulations in place for how they were conducted. As the costume designer, I was responsible for maintaining all of the regulations for the shop and for the fittings. And then stage management, was in charge of maintaining dressing room policies. We had four dressing rooms for the 12 actors, and they were all very spaced out in the rooms. We did not have a hair person and we did not have a wardrobe person dressing anyone. They all dressed themselves. In fact, since there was no dresser, when I put one of the actors in a dress that had a center back zipper I had to move it to a side zipper, so that she could do it herself. Because actors couldn’t even help each other get dressed since they had



to maintain distancing. We had doubles of all the costumes, so on two-show days they didn’t need laundry between shows. After each evening performance the laundry was part of post-show.

How did you handle fittings?

HK: We had a costume shop which was a conference room in the theater. It was indoors and my assistant and I were the only ones that were able to enter that space. No actors entered the costume shop. For fitting, we set up in the largest fitting room at the Colonial, it’s an old vaudeville house, so they have one room that is giant. We put all of the clothes on a rack on one side of the room. And myself and Elivia worked on the other side of the room. I organized all the clothes by name of actor, in my order of preference. This way when they came in for a fitting, they were able to actually dress themselves from the racks in order of what we wanted to see. We also bought a range of sizes so we could say, ‘those pants are too big, take the next one off the rack that’s a size smaller.’

We wore a mask the entire fitting and the actors wore a mask the entire fitting. If we did need to come into closer contact, within six-feet, if we needed to put a pin in something, for example, or mark something, we would put on a face shield over our masks. We also wore gloves the entire time and changed gloves between each fitting. It was certainly different to fittings I usually do. As a designer, I tend to do a lot of period work so I’m used to being much more hands-on with fittings, for things that are built, with undergarments and corsets and all the things that go into period production. I am usually pinning hems on the floor so this was a very different type of fitting, but we made it work.

Using denim as the through-line of the design, tell me about your color palette?

HK: The colors for the clothes I based on blue and white variations on blue denim. Jesus has an element of that blue denim to him, but he’s in all-white otherwise. Everything is in this cool, cool palette, so that when the crucifixion happens, and he has rose petals that come out of his costume and drop on stage it’s the only red that we see. *Godspell* is a very eclectic show, music spanning different genres, there’s high comedy, there’s slapstick, there’s vaudeville and I think costumes can go in that direction as well. It can become

cacophonous, that it can feel very busy. I was trying to take some of that impulse and put that into texture as opposed to into the colors. There's a lot of distressing and threads hanging and raw edges. Also, we did a lot of contrast hand-stitching and all of that, but in a very restricted palette, so it doesn't feel quite so wacky.

Working with the other designers, I made sure everyone knew everything in terms of the costumes were going to be blue for the most part. Randall [Parsons, set designer] said, "Okay. If everything you're doing is cool, I will go warmer." And so, he ended up with that sort of creamy, like ochre and green set palette. For lighting, [Matthew Adelson, lighting designer] I think the costumes were pretty straightforward. If everything is blue, it makes it easier to know where to go with that, as opposed to if the costume color palette was constantly shifting.

What's a key piece of advice for doing theater in a tent, regardless of COVID?

HK: Looking back on it, I think I probably would have made things a little more robust. Actors can be tough on clothes and normally I'm very used to that, but it was much harder with the elements and getting to the tent. You have to think about the elements when going from the dressing rooms in the theater to the stage in the tent. You need to ask, 'whose responsibility is it to get and have umbrellas or galoshes as needed?' Easily handled but it needs to be part of the plan.

How did you feel designing for the first union sanctioned musical in the country during COVID-19?

HK: It was fascinating because we designed the show when it seemed that COVID was beginning. At the time I was assisting on Broadway and I had several shows lined up for the summer. I was going through them one by one, and with *Godspell*, as I said earlier, we discussed what we wanted and settled on the look of the show already. So, the idea of doing the show with all the COVID guidelines, it really was more about switching to thinking about the labor and logistics; asking how does this show happen?

I said, as far as design goes, it wants to be as simple and as easy and as painless as possible, just knowing how many hurdles we'd have to jump over to make it happen. And it was also easy because it's not a show about clothes. There's no major costume tech element. So, I knew for costumes it was possible to make it as easy as possible to do. The design really worked out well for our needs on this since it was all basically treatments to existing clothes.



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- Hunter Kaczorowski

And that was just me and Elivia, doing our own sewing, making those things happen, crafting on our own time.

That was a change because I do so much period work and then I work with wig designers and I work with milliners and I work with dyers and painters. I’m used to having a lot of people involved. But as a designer you know that you do the show that is required of you, and you design the show that’s in front of you. This *Godspell* didn’t need any of that. If I had gone off and done *Sense and Sensibility* at the Alley, we would want a milliner and a wig maker. And we were going to be custom printing fabrics and all of that, which involves a much wider set of people, and certainly much more human to

human contact. So that wasn’t a show we would have been doing now. That is the sort of work that I enjoy doing and tend to gravitate towards and right now I’m not sure what the future of that kind of show is because it does require so much contact. I don’t do a lot of shows where you just go to the store and buy the clothes but right now, certainly it seems, with all of the Zoom theater, I have people saying, “Okay, we’re going to be doing this thing remotely, buy this or that on Amazon, and have it shipped to me.” That isn’t something I’m drawn to as a designer, so we’ll have to see how it works out, what happens next. Doing this show though in person, working even distanced apart but together, that was wonderful right now. **SD**

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