

PRODUCTION NOTES

A.D.

A Musical for Easter and Beyond

by Deborah Craig-Claar

Performance Approach

The musical *A.D.* is a unique combination of narrative story-telling and dramatic scenes. It is not a full-scale dramatic musical because a narrator, speaking in past tense, links the events and provides the forward momentum. Nor is it a simple stand-up narrated musical since multiple present-tense dramatic scenes exist with characters and crowds. This special “blended” performance style is technically known as **chamber theatre**. Chamber theatre was developed at Northwestern University in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s in the School of Theatre and Performance Studies. (I was completing my graduate work in theatre at Northwestern during this time and so was able to experience chamber theatre first-hand, both as a participant and as an audience member.) The concept behind chamber theatre is simple: Bring classic prose stories to life on stage. But what makes a chamber theatre interpretation of a story unique from a straight dramatization is the retention of the narrative voice. A significant amount of the style and character of prose is found in the author’s third-person voice; chamber theatre seeks to harness the power of the storyteller as well as the story itself.

Chamber theatre is the brainchild of Dr. Frank Galati, a long-time professor of theatre and performance studies at Northwestern. Among his hundreds of productions, Dr. Galati is the script-adaptor and director of the Broadway productions of *The Grapes of Wrath* (for which he won a Tony), the stunning musical *Ragtime*, and last season’s enchanting *Seussical*, a composite musical based on over a dozen Dr. Seuss stories. Each of these productions – as is true of all Galati endeavors – is based on a well-known book. In each case, an ensemble of characters from the story was created. This ensemble handled all parts, all the crowds, and all the singing. The ensemble also shared the narrator role. At various times, different characters, in costume, would simply turn front and start speaking in third-person as the story-teller. (In most cases, this narration comes directly from the text of the novel.) The narration retains all of its novel-esque style, including “He said...” and “She said...” The dramatic scenes are continually enacted in present tense, with the dialogue occurring naturally amidst the narration. When a particular narration is complete, the momentary-narrator turns right back into the action of the scene. This creates a highly dynamic performance style with vibrant pace and extraordinary story-telling capability. Time can be compressed, locales can be merged. Dialogue is actually more realistic since so much can be shared in the narration. The technical side of chamber theatre is simplified and “stripped-down”; a few props or a single set piece suggest a locale; staging is more abstract and symbolic. Many of the most difficult challenges of straight drama are solved. It is, quite simply, possibly the most effective method of staging prose.

And was there ever a prose story more extraordinary (and also filled with all of the challenges of dramatic staging) than *The Bible*? The incredible narratives from the inspired pages of our Holy Scripture and chamber theatre seem tailor-made for each other. That is why I elected to script the

events from the books of Luke and Acts found in *A.D.* in the style of chamber theatre. Although *A.D.* was meant to be performed as chamber theatre, the musical is also flexible enough to be performed in the more modified styles of **choral drama** (a choral presentation with staged, costumed dramatic scenes) or **readers theatre** (a stand-up presentation without sets or costumes in which the musical and dramatic parts are simply presented).

The following production notes will first describe how to present the musical as chamber theatre. After this detailed explanation, shorter summaries covering choral drama and readers theatre will follow. And, of course, your production can be a modification and/or combination of elements from different approaches. Included throughout the notes are various resources that will help you with your production.

Performance Option #1: CHAMBER THEATRE **PERFORMANCE ENSEMBLE**

You should think of your performers as an **ensemble** rather than a cast of drama characters and a choir or chorus. Everyone should be in Biblical costume and everyone should be involved in the scenes. When an individual isn't performing a named part (such as Paul or Peter), they perform as part of the ensemble. Just like the Narrator, they "step out" to perform their roles, then "step back in." This will allow you to use your entire group for every choral number as well.

CAST LIST

- **Narrator:** As previously explained, the narrator should be fully costumed and part of the ensemble. You can cast one narrator or multiple narrators. (Because the dramatic parts are all male, you're encouraged to cast women in the narrator role.) Whenever the Narrator speaks, she should turn front, perhaps even coming down to the edge of the stage. You will need to carefully rehearse all of the narrative segments with the dialogue segments so the flow is continuous and energetic. The Narrator(s) will, in essence, need to memorize the entire script, including the dialogue.
- **Paul:** The apostle Paul carries the last third of the musical. This is the most demanding acting role (as he must undergo the life-altering transformation from Saul to Paul with a modicum of technical support) and also the most demanding vocal solo ("I Will Go"). Paul must possess a combination of sensitivity and brash aggressiveness.
- **Peter:** The disciple Peter is largely the "post-Pentecost" Peter; he has found his voice (or rather, his voice has found him!), and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he preaches with confidence and passion. Although it is not mandatory, it would be very effective if Peter can also sing the solo in "Breathe on Me, Breath of God."
- **Stephen:** This brief but critical part serves to remind the twenty-first century church of the sacrifice and martyrdom of the first century church. Stephen can be fairly young, and if you have a talented high schooler, this would be an effective role for him. Stephen does not have a singing solo.

Other Dramatic Parts

- **Jesus:** Jesus has a number of lines in key scenes that will demand his participation. However, considering that these events are fairly spectacular (the Ascension, the Crucifixion, etc.), you can create a strong effect by having Jesus say his lines offstage into a microphone, and having everyone on stage react. If you elect to stage the events in

a more minimalist, symbolic fashion (see the following section on Set), then this voice-only option may prove the best choice.

- **Pilate:** Short speaking section in “The Passion.”
- **High Priest:** Short speaking section in “The Stoning of Stephen.”

Non-Speaking Parts

- **Roman Soldiers**
- **Mary** (the mother of Jesus; at the foot of the Cross)(optional)
- **The Women at the Tomb**
- **Disciples** (including Thomas)(using all of the disciples isn’t necessary; a small group should suffice; also remember that the disciples needn’t remain in these parts the entire production)
- **Ananias**

SET

Chamber theatre can be performed equally effectively on realistic sets depicting actual locales and relatively bare, minimalist sets. You should take inventory of your performing space and decide what approach will serve your purpose best. Here is some basic suggestion for the two different approaches.

Realistic Set

The most important feature in a realistic set will be the garden tomb, especially if you wish Jesus to actually emerge through the door. If the tomb is built up to a height of at least five feet, it can also serve as Calvary and the Mount of Olives if you will construct a “flat slab” door that will not be visible when in place. (Foliage can also be moved into place to help obscure the entry.) The tomb/Calvary mound should either be placed up center or up right – the two strongest stage areas to anchor the upstage area. The other important area will be a series of steps or raised areas, covered in stone or other natural terrain. The addition of a few stone columns will suggest an open public square (for the Pentecost sequence) and the exterior of a temple (for Stephen’s defense and Paul’s first sermon). This stone step area can be placed either down right or left.

Minimalist Set

The various areas in *A.D.* can also be suggested in a more abstract or symbolic manner. Simply create several areas that are raised and accessed by either steps or ramps. One area might feature a large wooden cross. This area will accommodate the Passion sequence, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. Another area can feature banners that represent ideas and symbols from the New Testament (a descending dove, grapes and branches, etc.) This division of areas will also help suggest the “B.C./A.D.” division within the script.

Whether you elect to construct a more realistic or minimalist set, you should consider using a stretched canvas backdrop behind your set known as a **cyc**. Not only will this drop help hide competing visual distractions, it can also “double” as a screen if you plan to use projections and do not have a permanent screen in your sanctuary. Backdrops are most frequently made of canvas (unbleached theatrical muslin is best) or shark tooth’s scrim. The material can be stretched over a large, open rectangular frame or hung from a self-supporting pipe. Canvas can be painted and will also take colored light well. The use of scrim will allow you to make figures appear and disappear with light. If you have never used a cyc or scrim before and are considering

investing in one, you're strongly urged to contact a local theatre supply company or college theatre department to aid you in the construction.

LIGHTS

The use of theatrical lighting can greatly enhance your production of *A.D.* Although you can certainly do an effective performance with your general sanctuary lighting, the use of theatrical lighting will help alter moods for the various dramatic sequences and help focus the audience's attention. However, recognizing that many of you will be performing *A.D.* during a morning service (with the strong possibility of sunlight streaming through windows), the use of theatrical lighting may not be necessary at all. (One of the terrific qualities of chamber theatre is that it is often performed with no theatrical technical support whatsoever.) If you do elect to use lighting, however, you will obviously need to darken your sanctuary as much as possible.

In addition to a wide variety of colors, you may also elect to project patterns and pictures of light with gobos. A gobo is a small, metal cutout template that is placed in the gate of an ellipsoidal reflector spotlight to project an image or pattern of light. There are a wide variety of commercially made gobos that are reasonably priced and easily ordered through theatre supply houses. The gobos you might consider for *A.D.* are a descending dove, a cross, storm clouds, and a rising sun.

A good resource to aid you in the design of workable Biblical sets, the construction and use of backdrops and scrim, and the use of lights is *The Complete Guide to Church Play Production* by John Lewis, Laura Andrews, and Flip Robler.

COSTUMES

In keeping with the ensemble character of the production, every cast member, including the narrator(s), should be costumed in Biblical dress. Some good principles to consider when creating a stage full of Biblical costumes are:

- Fabrics should have appropriate weight and texture. Old bed spreads, drapery, and tablecloths from thrift stores work especially well.
- Each costume should feature at least one layering effect. Try draping cloth on the diagonal across the upper torso; create mantles or sleeveless coats. The layer should be of a contrasting color and texture. The layering should also include the belt.
- Restrict the color palate to slightly muted earth tones, but don't render everything taupe and beige. Stripes work especially well.
- Keep the head cloths (male and female) away from the face as much as possible. Wrap the women's heads tightly then drape fabric near the crown of the head so it will fall behind the shoulders. Men with featured parts should not wear head cloths, as it obscures too much of the eyes and mouth.

A good resource for creating believable Biblical costumes on a budget is Sheila Staeheli's *Costuming the Christmas and Easter Play*.

SOUND

Although wireless microphones are always preferable, much of a chamber theatre production of *A.D.* can be performed with stand microphones strategically placed in various places on the

stage. Because the Narrator(s) usually come to the front of the stage, stand microphones may work fairly easily for these sequences.

MEDIA

The use of media in your production of *A.D.* is a personal choice. The mixing of live performance and media projections can be very powerful, but it must also be carefully coordinated. Most media seems to visually “overwhelm” live performers, and you don’t want to set up a sense of “competition” between your mediums. However, you might find that several sequences are better conveyed with the fluidity and speed of rapidly changing scenes. The entire sequence of “The Passion” can be shown with pictures of the events and sound effects; you would not introduce live performers until the very end of the sequence on Calvary. The song “Stand Strong” is another opportunity to use media. A montage of portraits of Christian forefathers and martyrs, starting with Jesus and leading right up through the twentieth century (perhaps ending with members of your own congregation) would help convey the message of ministry legacy that is the heart of this song. Media would also make a wonderful contribution to the Finale as you show images of the progression of the church from earliest times to today.

SONG-BY-SONG STAGING SUGGESTIONS (Chamber Theatre Style)

The Passion (includes O Sacred Head, Now Wounded and Let It Rain)

The nearly 7-minute sequence that opens the musical is a dramatic-musical montage of the last week of Christ’s life. It was fashioned to create a strong emotional response in the audience through the use of aural and visual images that flow together, rushing toward the cross that awaits Jesus on Calvary. The effect should be similar to that of a movie trailer; the goal is sensory response, not detailed story telling. There are several ways in which you can stage this sequence.

First, you can convey the entire sequence through media. There are many commercial companies that can supply you with slides and/or video depicting the scenes detailed in “The Passion”. The music, dialogue, and sound effects should be performed live. (The whip, nails, and storm are included as individual SFX cues at the conclusion of the accompaniment tracks for *A.D.*) (Because you will inevitably darken your sanctuary for the use of media, you can elect to perform the music/dialogue/sound effects from the platform area rather than offstage.) The sequence will build until the end the final thunder (measure 116) at which point the stage should be lit for the first time. You can either reveal Jesus on the Cross, the lifeless form of Jesus laying in his mother’s arms at the foot of the Cross, or the Cross can be empty.

If you would prefer to stage “The Passion” using actors, you will need to employ the highly “theatrical” approach mentioned in the previous overview of the chamber theatre style. Because so many scenes are described in such quick succession, you will need to convey the “essence” of the sequence and not try and actually recreate these very brief moments. First of all, to retain choral strength and continuity, you should probably have a large segment of your choir positioned around the performing area at the start of the sequence. They should stand in formation, heads raised. The narrator emerges from their midst for the opening narration. The lighting should be cool and shadowy.

At the downbeat of the Triumphal Entry sequence (measure 30), the stage should be flooded with light. The choir now breaks into becoming a realistic crowd, shouting and heralding the approaching Christ. Jesus should slowly make his way down the center auditorium aisle, accompanied by a second, smaller group of believers; this group should have the palm branches. They make their way to the stage by measure 47. Have Jesus stand center, seemingly apart from the surrounding noise. The full choir should now back away from Jesus, making a large semi-circle around him. During the “angry crowd” montage (3 scenes from the final week which involved belligerent groups of people denigrating our Lord), have Jesus stand alone center stage and the large semicircle yell around him. (Carefully control the sound for this sequence; a group can show energy without rising to high volume.) Facing forward, Jesus delivers His lines as if the scenes were occurring in front of him. It is probably wisest to have Pilate’s lines spoken offstage (or by someone obscured by the crowd) rather than have a costumed figure appear. If you’d like to have Pilate appear, have him walk down the aisle during this crowd sequence and address Jesus either from the floor, standing in front of him, or to the side. After his lines are complete, he turns abruptly and strides out.

During “O Sacred Head, Now Wounded,” Roman soldiers can enter and ready Christ for the Cross. They tear his robes (precut and Velcro the material, allowing for this activity) and place a crown of thorns on his head. The soldiers exit, allowing Jesus to say “It is finished...” alone on stage. He can raise and extend his arms, as if on a cross. The cross can be suggested with lights and media. If you have an actual wooden cross, Jesus can stand in front of it with his arms raised. If you have the capability to actually put Jesus on the Cross, he can be put on the cross during the choral singing and raised up in time for “It is finished...” During “Let It Rain,” the choir can move back into the proximity of the Cross and respond naturally. If Jesus is standing by himself, he can mime dying. At the end of “Let It Rain,” he can either be carried out or placed in the arms of a woman playing Mary his mother. As the storm subsides, the lights shift back to a more contemplative mood.

On My Cross

After the intensity of “The Passion,” “On My Cross” provides a time of reflection on the personal meaning of the Crucifixion. The soloist should simply emerge from the crowd and stand near the cross or the form of Jesus. Many in the choir should slowly take kneeling or sitting positions for this number. It should be very still and haunting.

Narration (He Is Risen Underscore)

The Narrator stands and moves forward to deliver the next narration. (“The Cross stands as eternity’s touchstone...”) While she does, the choir should stand and slowly reposition themselves. If you have an actual tomb, they should not be in close proximity to the opening. If possible, position them on multiple levels.

He Is Risen

This exciting number not only recounts the discovery of the empty tomb, but describes the scene in the upper room as well. The song can simply be sung and the story can be communicated through the lyrics. This number would also be a good opportunity to use movement teams and banners. (A good resource for making banners is *Quick and Easy Banner Designs* by Carol Jean Harms, Concordia Publishing.) If you chose to act out the two key events described in “He Is

Risen”, have costumed characters follow the actions in the verse lyrics. At each chorus, the characters should turn front and sing the “He Is Risen!” chorus with the rest of the choir. The resurrected Jesus should move down center or to an elevated area at the conclusion of the song.

The Ascension (includes Around You Such Beauty [I Bow Down] and Behold the Lamb)

At the beginning of this number, the men portraying the disciples should gather around Jesus at his feet. (If you have a raised tomb or hill area, this can also serve as the Mount of Olives.) The vocal arrangement suggests that the disciples are singing the first verse of “Around You Such Beauty” with the rest of the choir joining in at measure 24. The scene should be one of spontaneous worship. At measure 49, the music changes and the Narrator steps forward to begin her narration (“And as they watched...”) If you have executed successful ascensions before, you may certainly actually raise Jesus up at this point in the song. But a strong effect can still be achieved without any actual lifting. Mount a powerful lighting instrument (an ellipsoidal reflector spotlight with a 750-1,000 watt lamp) in as close proximity to where Jesus will be standing as possible. At measure 49, the disciples and the rest of the crowd should slowly back away from Jesus, as if in awe. Jesus will slowly lift his arms skyward, and the light directly over his head should begin to glow brighter and brighter. (If you will take care that Jesus is the only one wearing white on stage and that the fabric of his robe and/or mantle has fine silver threads running through it, he should glow that much more brightly.) If you have an elevated baptismery or other heightened area, you can also use the final song “Behold the Lamb” to establish a heaven scene. When the scene is complete, Jesus should serenely walk down the center aisle of the church during the following narration.

Narration (Day of Pentecost Underscore)

As the Narrator steps out to speak, the choir should begin to mingle about in a confused and anxious state; they frequently glance and gesture skyward. This activity should segue naturally into the following song.

Day of Pentecost (includes Pour Out Your Spirit, Let It Rain [Reprise] and Breathe on Me, Breath of God)

The Pentecost sequence should flow seamlessly from one song to the next. There must be an escalating energy throughout, climaxing with the return of “Let It Rain”. It must not appear choreographed, but must appear highly realistic. The Narrator(s) is a natural participant in the crowd, stepping out to speak, yet immediately rejoining the action. The character of Peter will be very much in control of this sequence. During “Pour Out Your Spirit,” he should be moving among the people. At measure 16, when the Narrator describes the wind and tongues of fire, the people should react accordingly. (Unless you have the ability to create fairly dramatic lighting effects, it is best to leave this to the imaginations of the audience.) When Peter begins to speak, he should leap onto a raised level so that he is higher than the crowd. They must respond to him vocally, helping to build the scene until measure 38. When “Let It Rain” bursts forth, encourage your crowd to genuinely “let go” with genuine praise and worship. At measure 50, after the sudden dynamic shift and the chorus becomes more meditative, have Peter slowly walk to the down center area of the stage. The crowd should slowly gather around him, some kneeling, some standing, all praising God. The solo on “Breathe on Me, Breath of God” is meant to be sung by Peter. However, it can also be effectively performed by a member of the crowd (male or female).

Peter will simply begin worshipping with the crowd and the soloist will emerge and stand to the side to sing. The scene should end in a tableau of meaningful worship.

Narration (The Stoning of Stephen Underscore)

As the Narrator begins speaking, the worship tableau should slowly disperse. Everyone should stand and slowly backup until they have formed the large semi-circle they formed during “The Passion.” Either from the back of the auditorium or from the crowd, the High Priest (and possibly several other priests) should emerge. (Designate the High Priest with a tall, bloused hat, a breast plate with jewels, and a long apron over a robe. Drawings of the High Priest’s dress are found in most historical costume books.) The High Priest must simply look angry and aggressive. When the Narrator mentions Stephen for the first time (about measure 8), Stephen must appear. He can either emerge from the crowd or also walk down the center aisle of the auditorium. He should walk to stand directly before the High Priest. As their exchange begins, the choir should take on the character of Stephen’s accusers, reacting in anger and astonishment. When the Narrator describes how the priests dragged Stephen out of the city to be stoned, see if you can “slow down” the action of the scene, in an almost cinematic way, to help heighten the theatricality of the effect. As the crowd’s noise begins to build, the priests should go to Stephen, grab him roughly, and throw him to the ground. (Keep the entire scene in one spot – down center stage.) The priests now also back up, joining the semi-circle. In one slow-motion action, they all raise their arms as if they have a rock in the hand. At the peak of the noise, Stephen cries out “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit...”(Measure 27-30)

Everyone should then “throw” their rocks – again in slow-motion – and the scene should freeze at measure 30, with a strong shift of light, perhaps flooding the stage red. With the rest of the narration (“Persecution and martyrdom...”), individuals from the crowd should come and gently carry Stephen’s body offstage. The rest of the crowd will slowly move into a more formal formation for the next song and the lights will slowly cross fade to a warmer color.

Stand Strong

This anthem of hope and aspiration should be sung simply and directly to the audience. An excellent visual enhancement of this number would be the use of media, showing portraits of Christian forefathers and martyrs, starting in the first century and progressing up until modern day. You might show members of your own congregation during the final chorus, suggesting the strong link between the first century church and our contemporary church.

The Road to Damascus (Underscore)

As the Narrator introduces Saul (about measure 3-4), he should appear in the center aisle of the auditorium, perhaps being lit by a follow spot. As he slowly advances toward the stage, the choir on stage can turn and run in fright to an upstage area of the stage. This should happen in small groups (3-4 people per group); in this way you can indicate the great terror and havoc inflicted on the church by Saul. By the time Saul reaches the stage, the entire choir should be huddled in a large semi-circle, facing upstage. (If you’d like, you can use the same actor who just finished portraying the role of the High Priest to meet Saul on the side of the stage and offer him a scroll [the “letters to the synagogues”]). At measure 20, when the “journey” begins, have Saul stand down center and face front. Find a means to mount an intensely bright spotlight over the place Saul will stand. As the light hits him, he should fall to the ground. The voice of Jesus should be done live on an offstage microphone. Once the encounter concludes, an actor portraying Ananias

should emerge from the crowd, help Saul to his feet, and lead him to another area of the stage, where Saul's sight is restored. Ananias retreats back into the crowd, who should all be kneeling and facing upstage. Lights shift to a darker blue and to highlight Saul.

I Will Go

Paul should sing this dynamic solo directly to the audience. The choir can provide back ground vocals from the darkened upstage area.

Finale (includes Stand Strong and The Church's One Foundation)

After the conclusion of "I Will Go" and the two chimes, Paul "addresses" the crowd behind him. (He does not need to actually turn upstage, but simply gestures to the sides.) They start to stand and talk amongst themselves, astonished. As the Narrator steps forward and says "His sight restored...", Paul should move among the crowd and ascend steps to a higher area. At measure 9 ("Wait, wait...") he addresses the crowd, as if preaching from the steps of a temple. He continues to do so throughout the next sequence; the crowd should respond accordingly. At measure 34, as he begins the final affirmation, he might slowly move down center. One by one, those from the crowd join Paul, vocally and physically, until the entire cast faces the audience in a strong, formal triangular formation. If you'd like the congregation to join the final speaking sequence, you can print the scripture in the program or project the words on the cyc or screen. The final two songs ("Stand Strong" and "The Church's One Foundation") should be sung with power and conviction. If you have used movement teams or banners, this would be an ideal place to bring them back. Media might also depict images from the 2,000 year history of the Christian church, concluding with images of your home church.

If the pastor wishes to deliver an invitation or message, it should happen at the conclusion of the musical. There is not a natural place to insert such a message once the musical has begun.

OTHER PRODUCTION APPROACHES

Performance Option #2: CHORAL DRAMA

If you would prefer to not have the choir in Biblical costume and involved in the activity of the musical, you can let them sing the choral sections of the musical from the choir loft. Have the choir dress uniformly, whether it be black and white formal dress or robes. You will want to modify your set so that the center area of the stage is open; the choir must become a prominent visual component of the stage picture. Under this configuration, the raised area should be on one side of the stage and the area with steps should occupy the opposite area. The dramatic scenes can be staged in a manner similar to what has been previously described; you should use a small (8-10) dramatic ensemble to enact the various crowd scenes. The resource book to help you stage the musical in this manner is *What To Do With the Second Shepherd on the Left: Staging the Seasonal Musical* by Deborah Craig-Claar (Kansas City: Lillenas, 1991).

Performance Option #3: READERS THEATRE

A.D. can also be performed as a stand-up choral musical with the drama performed in a readers theatre style. Readers theatre uses no set or costumes and the actors interpret their characters either holding their scripts or placing their scripts on music stands. The actors should wear basic black formal attire. The actors' focus is always audience-directed. Media is often an effective

addition to a readers theatre performance. In this performance approach, the choir will always portray the role of the crowd and will provide appropriate crowd noise. A good resource to help you in preparing to direct a readers theatre production is *Readers Theatre Handbook* by Leslie Cogner and Melvin White (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1982).

Production Consultation for A.D.

If you would like to discuss your own individual production questions and ideas, you are welcome to e-mail me directly and I would be happy to respond. Nothing is more exciting to me than working with individual churches on their seasonal productions and therefore getting to share in some of the terrific energy, creativity, and ministry that is always being created. I generally devote Fridays to such activity, so it may be a few days until you hear from me; but please don't hesitate to write. And may the Lord guide, direct, and bless every aspect of your work for Him this Easter season.

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