



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

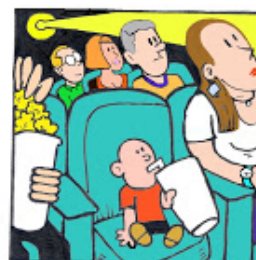
THEATER: THE GOOD NEWS, OR AT LEAST ONE FOURTH OF IT

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN ** 1/2 out of ****
THE SHEEN CENTER

Have you heard the good news? Anyone tired of *A Christmas Carol* on stage or *A Christmas Story* marathon on TV has a new option. Actor Ken Jennings is at the intimate black box space at The Sheen Center to share the Gospel of John. He offers up the entire gospel in a casual, confiding tone and it doesn't get more Christmas-y than that. Unless of course you want to hear the Nativity Story, in which case you probably want the Gospel of Luke (or Matthew).

For many years, actor Alec McCowen performed the Gospel of Luke as a one-man show. He brought it thoroughly to life, painting various apostles as specific, unique people; drawing out the humor and compassion of Jesus and building to the awful and bloody climax. Like John Gielgud with his *Ages Of Man* tribute to Shakespeare or Patrick Stewart with the Dickens' Carol, St. Mark's Gospel was McCowen's annuity, a show he performed and returned to again and again. When a member of the audience once asked McCowen where she could get a copy of the script, he said, "Any hotel room." It's a good joke but not an honest answer. McCowen was faithful to the text but he shaped it into drama in ways large and small.

Ken Jennings does none of that. This evening is described as "conceived and performed" by him, but I prefer to say he's sharing it. It's not quite a recitation, but he certainly doesn't shape the gospel into drama. Jennings most assuredly does not bring to life a host of characters. He stands on a lovely wooden stage, whose edge has a wavy curve to it. That platform stands a little off the ground. Towards the back, stage right, is a small wooden bench he moves here and there. A simple, rough-hewn cloth curtain hangs at the back, stretching down but never touching the stage. (The scenic design is by Charlie Corcoran.) That's it. Jennings stands in front of the stage, makes the



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sign of the cross, quietly collects his thoughts and then he begins.

By deciding not to create a galaxy of characters, by not dramatizing the gospel, Jennings subtly places the emphasis not on the stories within but the message. He memorized the Gospel of John during tough times and used it as a prayer. That's precisely what his recitation feels like here, a straightforward, sincere act of communion both with the gospel and with the audience.



That's not to say Jennings is a mere reader. His *Gospel of John* is surely theatrical, complete with lighting and sound effects. I wish his performance had been just as committed to using every tool at his disposal. Almost everyone but Jesus blurs into one another and usually they sound like angry, kvetchy characters. Each outburst -- whether a pharisee or a woman at a well or an apostle that doubts Jesus has risen from the dead -- dims the impact of the one that follows. That creates a wearying sameness to the many other voices found in the Gospel of John.

Worse, every once in a while Jennings will be speaking as Jesus when the sound design of M. Florian Staab gives his voice an echo-y, God-like sound, just in case we don't quite grasp the fact that this Jesus of Nazareth isn't just merely the latest in a line of prophets. For a while, I thought this effect was going to be used to underline the moments when Jesus declares "I Am...", a key motif of John that links back to the voice of God that spoke to Moses from the burning bush.

I don't think that was done, but whatever the motivation for this hokey effect's appearance, the show would be better without it. Staab's other, more subtle touches (the sound of water, of crowds and the like) are far more beneficial. Ditto the nice lighting of Abigail Hoke-Brady, which suggests water lapping against the stage at certain points, paints the backdrop with vivid color, closes in as night falls and so on. Hoke-Brady also aids Jennings mightily at the finale with an excellent fade-out.

Presumably director John Pietrowski wasn't going to convince Jennings to change his approach to the text. But since Jennings was

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happy to make use of lighting and sound, why not use all his skills as an actor to more fully dramatize the Gospel of John? We'll have to agree to disagree on that, as well as who wrote the Gospel in the first place. Because of his choice, the inherent drama is lessened and the show blurs a bit when the stories drop away and all we have are passages of sermonizing.

Scholar Karen Armstrong makes clear in her new book *The Lost Art Of Scripture* that for most of human history, religious texts and tales didn't come alive until they were performed. So Jennings is following in a grand tradition. One can easily sit alone and read any one of the four gospels in half an hour. But it's far more true to the spirit of tradition (and perhaps to the Spirit) to do precisely what he's doing: to share it in public with others.

THEATER OF 2019

Frankenstein: Under The Radar Fest at the Public ** 1/2
 Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public ***
 Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public ** 1/2
 Choir Boy ** 1/2
 White Noise ** 1/2
 Kiss Me, Kate ***
 Ain't No Mo' *** 1/2
 Ain't Too Proud **
 The Cradle Will Rock * 1/2
 Mrs. Murray's Menagerie *** 1/2
 Oklahoma! (on Broadway) ** 1/2
 Socrates **
 The Pain Of My Belligerence *
 Burn This **
 Hadestown *** 1/2
 All My Sons * 1/2
 Tootsie ** 1/2
 Ink ***
 Beetlejuice **
 Estado Vegetal ***
 Hans Christian Andersen * 1/2
 Cirque du Soleil: Luzia ***
 BLKS ** 1/2
 Moulin Rouge ** 1/2
 Bat Out Of Hell **
 Unchilding **
 Sea Wall/ A Life ** 1/2
 Harry Potter and the Cursed Child ***
 Betrayal *** 1/2
 Fifty Million Frenchmen ** 1/2
 Freestyle Love Supreme ** 1/2
 Derren Brown: Secret ***
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 The Great Society **

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[Heroes Of The Fourth Turning](#) ** 1/2
[Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz](#) ***
[The Glass Menagerie](#) (dir Austin Pendleton & Peter Bloch) **
[Terra Firma](#) (debut of The Coop theater company) **
[Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation](#) ***
[Dublin Carol](#) ** 1/2
[Soft Power](#) **
[The Decline and Fall of The Entire World As Seen Through The Eyes Of Cole Porter](#) ***
[For Colored Girls](#) ** 1/2
[Scotland, PA](#) **
[The Sound Inside](#) *** (great cast, clumsy ending)
[User Not Found](#) **
[Enchanted April](#) **
[DruidShakespeare: Richard III](#) * 1/2
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[A Christmas Carol](#) (Bway w Campbell Scott) **
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[Anything Can Happen In The Theater: The Musical World of Maury Yeston](#) ** 1/2
[The Gospel Of John](#) ** 1/2

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