

Local Gospel Rock Opera Spreads 'The Word'

By CHRISTIE L. CHICOINE

Imagine John the Baptizer baptizing a tie-dye-clad Jesus to a reggae beat. Or a hoe-down that heralds a final judgment warning.

That's what happened in "The Word," a Gospel rock opera produced and directed by Bill Monaghan, 24, a freelance musician who played Jesus in the production June 28 at Father Judge High School for Boys.

"The show touches on many human needs and emotions — forgiveness, laughter, sadness, hunger, confusion, repentance and readiness to do God's will," said Monaghan, a member of St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Richboro. His production traveled through the Old and New Testaments and re-enacted Jesus' passion, death and resurrection.

The Gospel rock opera at Judge was an encore performance for Monaghan and a cast of more than 20 area high school and college students. They first performed "The Word" in May at Our Lady of Good Counsel School in Southampton.

Monaghan, who teaches and performs music at Theatre & Kids, a theater company for children in Lansdale, was commissioned last fall by Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish to produce a spring musical. The previous spring he was asked by the parish to develop music for teen Masses there during the 1994-95 school year, which he did.

"I wanted to be able to do something that had the effects of 'Godspell,'" Monaghan said of his goal to stir his audience spiritually through the Gospel rock opera. "I hope they will feel a new energy —

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maybe even a new interest for the Word, their faith, their relationship with God."

Monaghan, a 1988 graduate of Archbishop Wood High School in Warminster, remembers how as a small boy he was "really bored, trying to get into it," and wishing he could "change the words," he said.

Through the years, his creative mind matured and he channeled his energy to music, directing an array of productions, one of which he co-authored. Monaghan graduated from the University of Scranton in 1992 with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in music.

Producing "The Word" and getting involved in Good Counsel's teen Masses have "made me become closer to God and helped me understand the structure of the Mass more," Monaghan said. "Now I know why they wouldn't change the words."

He lives out his faith "by building up a sense of community within the immediate cast" of the play. He also learns about his faith by watching others in their relationship with God. "A lot of it has to do with seeing God in other people," said Monaghan.

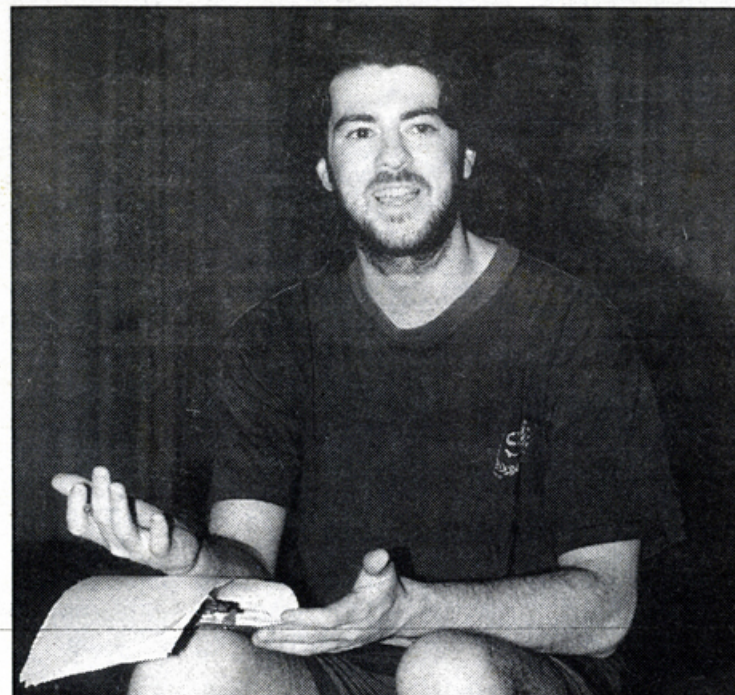
His goal these days is to help others heighten their faith by using music as the vehicle.

"Music comes naturally to me — I play a lot by ear," Monaghan said of his talents in voice and on piano, guitar, bass and harmonica. "I often try to harness whatever it is I'm thinking about into some kind of musical form."

Even while he was creating the rock opera, Monaghan was moved by God's presence. "Some of the (segments) in the show came out of nowhere.... The whole show just lifts," he said, explaining it features only a select few melodies. When inspiration came, Monaghan never missed a beat to bow a special, "Thanks (God), that'll help!"

The production closed with an African-rhythm-based resurrection scene and "a sending forth," Monaghan said. "The Apostles now understand and are ready to do what they're called to do."

As for Monaghan, he feels called to continue to live his faith through music. "I think God is... calling me to go outside to the people who are listening." In this way, he added, "everybody feels something."



(Colleen Boyle Sharp)

"THE WORD" — Archbishop Wood High School alumnus Bill Monaghan produces and directs the religious musical show.