

*A bearded Bill Monaghan plays Jesus in his musical.*

## Playwright spreads 'The Word' with modern rhythms

By Steve Ritea  
INQUIRER CORRESPONDENT

UPPER SOUTHAMPTON — The son of a Philadelphia carpenter, Bill Monaghan, a kind, gentle 25-year-old with long, brown hair and a beard, is spreading *The Word* at area churches and schools.

"He looks kind of like Jerry Garcia on a bad day," said one of his friends, Tom Feledick.

On Thursday, Monaghan will bring *The Word*, a musical he wrote, directed and produced, to Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Southampton. Starring as Christ, he and about 25 teenage cast members sing and perform the stories of the Gospel with some contemporary rhythms.

In Monaghan's world, sinners are berated to the blues, Christ is baptized to a reggae refrain, and the Final Judgment becomes a country-western hoedown.

"Jesus spoke against adhering blindly to tradition and not considering the needs of the present," he said. "I think you could do anything [with the Bible] — so long as it's in good taste."

"Tradition can get boring," said Lee Ann Coakley, 19, an actress in the play. "This gives it a new twist. It makes it more interesting."

Perched atop a rainbow-striped

box during a recent Tuesday-night rehearsal, cast members clothed head to toe in orange, hot pink or mint gathered around Monaghan in preparation for Christ's baptism by John the Baptist. As a three-piece band broke into a Bob Marley riff on the floor of the church's school gymnasium, hands on the stage began to sway back and forth in jubilation as Monaghan lifted his head and burst into song.

Even though the music is his, Monaghan said he didn't play with any of the words in the Bible — those belong to God.

Linking popular culture with the sacred isn't always smiled upon in some of the more orthodox circles within organized religion. Although Monaghan says no one has ever attacked his approach to the Gospel, "I'm waiting," he said.

His current project, Monaghan said, is a version of the Catholic Mass using modern rock melodies borrowed from bands such as Pearl Jam and Nirvana.

"That's going to be a little harder to get performed," he said.

Monaghan wrote *The Word* over eight months starting in 1994, partly inspired by the religious musical *Godspell*. A former English major at the University of Scranton, Monaghan wrote his



For The Inquirer / JOHN SLAVIN

Cast members rehearse 'The Word' at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Southampton. At center stage is Lee Ann Coakley.

first play, *Brunswick 2057*, about a haunted New York City theater, while he was still a student.

Raised Catholic, Monaghan said he avoided college keg parties and has always tried to follow Christ's teachings — even in theater.

"He makes you direct in a Christian way," said his friend Feledick, who has directed several plays, including previous productions of *The Word*. Where directors have the tendency to

blow up in front of the cast when they become frustrated during rehearsals, he said, Monaghan always remains calm and patient, leading everyone in prayer before each performance.

Monaghan also teaches music and theater to students at Our Lady of Good Counsel school. He and the cast also recorded a soundtrack of *The Word* in the basement of his mother's Ivyland home, where Monaghan also lives, putting socks over cheap

microphones to filter out noise. Tapes are available at each performance.

"People always ask me what it's like to play Jesus," Monaghan said, adding he's quite comfortable in the role, considering that he's played Christ in a half-dozen productions.

Stroking the long beard he grows before each performance, Monaghan said he enjoyed going back to being just Bill after the cast finishes a production.

"I like to shave it off afterwards," he said, "just to remember what I look like."

### If You Go

**Where:** Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, 611 Knowles Ave., Upper Southampton.  
**When:** 8 p.m. May 9-11.  
**Cost:** \$5 adults, \$3 seniors, children and students.  
**Phone:** 215-357-1300, Ext. 132 or 134.