



EIU's *Godspell*: fine songs sandwiched by tedium.

The Music's Nice, But...

By DAN HAGEN

The songs in Eastern Illinois University's production of the musical *Godspell* are fine.

But when the music stops, the trouble begins. The periods between songs are an almost unrelieved tedium. The problem isn't the performers. It's the play itself, which stinks.

If I were religious, I'd be insulted by this trivialization of my beliefs. This musical gives the New Testament all the depth and style of a McDonald's commercial. But I'm not religious, so I can simply dismiss all this as insipid propagandizing.

The Greatest Story Ever Told becomes an extremely dull tale this time out. Unlike *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, this play refuses even to approach the Bible's excellent possibilities for dramatic conflict. Jesus is an evangelical Mr. Rogers. There are no people on stage here at all, just puppets acting out parables. And the parables carry all the moral authority of television's *Batman*, *Holy Crucifixion*, *Robin!*

When the narrator explains that a character "fell in among robbers," the actor does a pratfall. And when another "feels the pinch," the rest of the cast pinches him. How clever.

And through all the stories of anger, guilt, love and death, the characters are required

A Review

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to wear vapid smiles and speak in bright, childish tones. Presumably this is supposed to give the New Testament an 'upbeat' feel, but it only succeeds in undercutting whatever dramatic power there is in the

parables.

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On the good side (yes, there is one), we have the music: fine, rousing songs that are well-performed. Disappointed as I was in the play, I still left the theater humming *Day by Day*. Having cast members sing from the back of the theater gives the music an interesting stereophonic effect.

Bill Nicholls has a good, strong voice, but his characterization of Jesus seems to hit one mildly pleasant note and stay there. Not that there much room in this play for characterization, anyway.

The angular Bill Simmons, in fine voice and obviously at ease on stage, manages to be entertaining. John Tilford has comic talents which are largely hidden by this material. Anne Schluter gives a deft Mae West twist to the song *Turn Back, O Man*. And Sarah Hardaway belts out a vibrant version of *Bless the Lord*.

The cast is an enthusiastic lot. They get a real workout doing the show, and deserve a more appropriate vehicle.

Better luck next time, guys.