

THEATER REVIEW | 'CORPUS CHRISTI'

A Modern, Gay You-Know-Who Superstar

By JASON ZINOMAN Published: October 22, 2008

Not one angry protester showed up at the first performance of the New York revival of Terrence McNally's notorious "Corpus Christi." There was no talk in the aisles of free speech or the First Amendment. I didn't even walk through a metal detector. Times have certainly changed.



Wes Tabooyong

James Brandon and Sheilagh Brooks in the Terrence McNally play "Corpus Christi," at the Rattlestick Playwrights Theater.

Only a decade ago this fragile, heartfelt play, which portrays Jesus as a young gay man, sparked hysterical protests from religious groups, leading to bomb threats at the Manhattan Theater Club, which canceled the show. Outrage ensued, and before you knew it, a culture war had erupted, before anyone had seen one scene. When the production finally opened, it turned out that it was an earnest and reverent spin on the Jesus story, with some soft-spoken, gay-friendly politics thrown in. Critics were underwhelmed.

Typically producers should wait more than 10 years before reviving a show, but the second coming of "Corpus Christi" seems justified. Without the noise of controversy, the play can finally be heard. Staged with admirable delicacy by Nic Arnzen and the Los Angeles troupe 108 Productions, the work seems more personal than political, a coming-of-age story wrapped in religious sentiment. At the start, one member of the casually dressed cast, which includes a handful of female apostles (in the original, it was all-male), sets the straightforward tone, saying this is an "old and familiar story," adding, "There are no tricks up our sleeve."

This play faithfully (in two senses) follows Jesus' life from birth to the Last Supper to the Crucifixion. But here Jesus is called Joshua, and he's a musical-theater-loving outsider struggling in the confines of present-day Corpus Christi, Tex. (Mr. McNally's hometown). His followers include an architect, a lawyer and the least disreputable hustler you'll ever meet.

Played by the blond, angelic James Brandon, Joshua has an awkward, bony frame, and the early part of the show reveals him ill at ease, suffering from growing pains in a small town. Matthew Shepard was killed in Laramie, Wyo., the day before "Corpus Christi" opened, and Mr. Brandon seems to invite comparisons, at first, until Joshua leaves home and heads to the wilderness. Mr. Brandon's body then straightens into a more classical pose.

One wishes the playwright had delved deeper into the love story between Joshua and Judas (Steve Callahan), who is the most interesting of the apostles here. A soulless yuppie, he's starved for Joshua's attention and love, and bitter when unable to get them.

At one point, two men ask Joshua to marry them. When he agrees, they want him to be sure, bringing

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about turning the other cheek. "Do not take everything I say so seriously," Joshua replies, revealing a wit rarely seen in the Bible.

Such moments are a bit too infrequent in "Christi," and its glee club charm may not appeal to everyone. It's one of Mr. McNally's minor works, but as in his best plays, there are moments of hard-won sentiment that will win over the biggest skeptic.

"*Corpus Christi*" runs through Sunday at the Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, 224 Waverly Place, Greenwich Village; (212) 868-4444.

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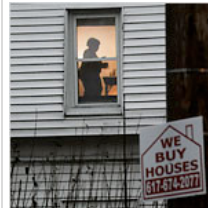
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