

Story of Jesus is a must see

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=1869#more-1869>

I returned from Florida about two weeks ago after seeing the Story of Jesus passion play.

Except for the year Hurricane Charlie wiped out the town of Wauchula, The Story of Jesus has been an annual event there for over 20 years.

It began as a high school skit that my cousin, Mike Graham, wrote for his youth group when he was a youth minister. It has grown every year since then, and has touched over a quarter of a million people with a portrayal of Jesus, not as the robotic, stoic figure of traditional passion plays, but of a Jesus who loved playing with children, was both passionate and compassionate, and was a human who felt joy, purpose, anger and pain.

Graham and about 300 volunteers perform the play twice each weekend for five weeks around Easter time.

For children who are too young to absorb the total meaning of the play or who have short attention spans, there are animals to entertain them. The animal cast includes sheep, chickens, ducks, camels, donkeys, horses, cattle and oxen and Roman soldiers on horseback demonstrate superb riding skills throughout the play.

The set is huge. 250 feet wide, two-story props portray the city of Jerusalem and stretch across the entire width of the rodeo arena where the play is performed. Across one end, the Jordan River serves as the scene of the baptism of Jesus, and is used for baptisms after the altar call at the end of the play.

The set for this play takes weeks to build, and must be torn down within 48 hours after the last performance. All of the props are stored in several semi-truck trailers for use the next year. It is a very strenuous task that is done by entirely by volunteers.

All of the people who act in this play wear colorful, historically accurate costumes, and endure a grueling makeup session. So that everyone looks middle-eastern, arms, legs, and faces are spray painted with a dark flesh tone. Everyone's hair must be dark, and men must grow or wear beards.

The play follows the scriptural story of Jesus beginning with His birth, and ending with the second coming. Many of the scenes are done with special effects, including fog, a demonic voice portrayal of Satan, lighting and pyrotechnics.

All of the actors with speaking parts wear microphones, and all of the dialogue is live. The only pre-recorded sound is the music that accompanies the scenes and a few special effects audios.

The play is nearly three hours long, including a 20-minute intermission. There are scant seconds between scenes, and the story glides quickly from one scene to the next.

The brutality of the scourging and crucifixion scenes can be overwhelming for some. It is so brutal that they recommend taking children out of the theater when it is performed. The scourging is done with real rods and whips, so the actor who portrays Jesus must wear a thick leather pad on his back to protect him from serious injury.

This is also a very touching play, one in which many finally understand who Jesus really was, what he went through, and how much He loves us. The miracle scenes and the Garden of Gethesemane scenes can make the hardest man cry.

There is an altar call after each performance, and those who chose to are baptized in the River Jordan on the set. Last year, 90 people were baptized.

Power and Light Productions, the non-profit company that was formed to own and operate the play, has received a donation of 40 acres of land near Wauchula for the construction of a 2,000-seat theater. I acquired my Florida architectural license last year, and have already begun designing it.

Besides a much-improved seating and set area, the new theater will include a dressing and makeup area for the cast, storage for costumes and props, concession areas, a small museum, classrooms, and office areas. It will also include facilities to keep and care for the many animals that are used in the play.

The cost for constructing the facility will be approximately \$12 million, all of which must come from private donations. At this time, the play is supported entirely by ticket sales, offerings received at the performances, and private donations.

This is truly a life-changing event to see, and is a must-see if you are in Florida during the play season. You can see some clips of the play at www.storyofjesus.com, but they don't do the real thing justice. It must be seen to be appreciated.

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