

The Story of Jesus in Florida is a must-see production

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by [Randy Bright](#)



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This week, Power and Light Productions in Wauchula, Florida, will open another run of The Story of Jesus, a passion play that began nearly a quarter of a century ago.

Last year, Director Mike Graham introduced The Story of Noah for the first time and he plans to do that play again next year. When the play gets its own theater, Mike hopes to do both plays each year, and hopes to add other plays.

I know Mike well because we are cousins and grew up together in our hometown of Flora, Illinois. After he graduated from Lincoln Christian College in the early 70s, he went on to serve in a church in Illinois for a few years, but soon after moved to Florida. As a result, we saw each other only a few times until, in September of 2006, he contacted me to say that he was flying in to Tulsa to see The Passion Play in Eureka Springs, Arkansas.

For years relatives had encouraged me to go see the Story of Jesus, but not understanding what it really was, I never seemed to find the time to do so. Knowing Mike was a youth minister, I just thought it was probably a very good high school play, and didn't warrant a special trip to Florida to see it.

Mike's reason to see The Passion Play in Eureka Springs was not to see the play so much as it was to see the theater where it played. He and several of the Power and Light Productions board members came with him to see it and several other theaters in other states that they would see the following day.

When Mike called to let me know that he was coming through Tulsa, I took the day off and drove them to Eureka Springs.

When the play was over, I asked him what he thought of it, and he replied that he would never want to take anything away from their play, but that it was nothing like what The Story of Jesus was. When he left, he gave me a promotional video that condensed the three-hour play down to

18 minutes. When I watched it, I was absolutely stunned. From that moment on, I became very dedicated to do what I could to support the play.

In April of 2007, my wife and I saw the play for the first time, and now make it an annual event. It was a life-changing experience because it portrays Jesus in his sinless humanity, not the stoic icon that we are accustomed to seeing in movies, art, or stained glass.

Others see the value of the play as well. One family has donated 40 acres of land for a new theater, which is desperately needed.

Each year, the cast begins rehearsals months in advance using a local school, and each year we hear of more examples of churches being denied use of school facilities citing separation of church and state. Though the local school has been gracious, there is no guarantee that that place will always be available.

Each year, the set must be constructed and deconstructed in the only venue available in their area, a rodeo arena. The set, which includes buildings representing Jerusalem and small body of water representing the Jordan River, is 250 feet wide and about 60-feet deep. A semi-trailer is parked in the middle of the set and is covered with dirt to lift the set up and for use in special effects. Dozens of animals, including sheep, oxen, camels, horses and chickens are kept at the arena, some of them for the duration of the five weeks of the play. It is a monumental task to build the set, which takes many weeks, only to take it all down in time for the next event coming to the arena. Sometimes they have only a few days to complete that task.

All of the set materials, including props, lighting, a sound system, and tons of wiring, must be removed and securely stored for use the following year. Many of the materials are damaged in the process. Hundreds of costumes must be cleaned, repaired and stored. Each year, hundreds of volunteers must be found to do the work and to act in the play. For Graham, it is nearly a full time job each year, and more than a full time job during the play season, to coordinate the play.

The arena in which the play is done has problems as well. Intended more for livestock shows, it has bleachers that become uncomfortable for a three-hour play. Columns that support the roof are spaced at about 25 feet between the audience and the set obscures view. There are few restrooms or food facilities.

Yet each year, despite the obstacles, the play goes on to entertain and to enrich about 14,000 people each year. Many people return each year to see the play, and some of the cast and crew have been with it since it began.

This play is Broadway quality, and is worthy of a trip to Florida to see. This year performances run from March 22 through April 20. Tickets are available and donations to the play may be made at their website, storyofjesus.com.

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