

# The Story of Jesus's final season marks the end of an era

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It was with mixed feelings last month that I attended the last season of the *Story of Jesus* passion play in Wauchula Florida

I have been attending and supporting this play for the last 11 years for a number of reasons. One of them – full disclosure here – is because it is produced by my cousin, Mike Graham, which is how I became aware of this production.

For years I heard from other family members that I needed to go and see the play, and when I finally did, I was completely surprised. This was not a high school skit or even a small community play; it was a full-blown, Broadway quality performance that in its earlier days attracted as many as 20,000 people in its ten performances each year during the Easter season.

The other reason (the more important one) I have supported this play is because it is a ministry, one that tells the Biblical account of the life, death, resurrection, ascension and return of Jesus Christ, all within a 3-hour performance. In a very real way, this is not only a transformational experience, but an educational one as well, one that is not (sic now) no longer being taught in many of our churches. It portrays a humanness of Jesus that is antithetical to the stereotypical medieval images we all grew up with. This play has affected tens of thousands of lives over the years, and, finally understanding who Jesus was and what he did for us, has led several thousand to give their lives to him.

The play has attracted national attention. In April of 2011, *New York Times* reporter Dan Barry wrote a positive article about Graham and the play entitled, “A Passion Play Endures as a Seasonal Miracle.” His article described many of the hardships and difficulties he has encountered and endured over the years in order to make the play a reality. Though it was Barry who sought out Graham for the article, it was hoped that the publicity would generate more support for the play and the ministry, but in the end it had little impact. The demand for a gritty play in an unconditioned converted rodeo arena on uncomfortable seats has diminished over time as other venues provide more comfortable settings.

This year the printed program for the play included this message from Mike Graham: I want to extend a very heartfelt thanks to all the wonderful people who have faithfully supported our ministry over the years. We have strived for the last 31 years to bring the Bible to life in our productions and fulfill our goal of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a dedication to authenticity and excellence. It is with great regret, however, that I must inform you that we are unable to continue *THE STORY OF JESUS, THE STORY OF NOAH, AND THE STORY OF MOSES* in our present situation. Although the reasons are too numerous to mention, the short answer is that we simply no longer have the ‘army’ of volunteers needed to construct and break down such a massive set year after year. But like many of you, we believe that when God closes one door he will open another.”

His message then goes on to explain that Power and Light Productions (Graham's nonprofit organization that produces the play) is not quitting, but adapting to a new market. "Plans are underway to script and develop two new plays – *THE COST OF FREEDOM* (the moving and dramatic story that resulted in the writing of our National Anthem – The Star Spangled Banner), and *THE BIBLE* – an epic production that takes the viewer on an amazing trip beginning with creation, moving through the major events of the Bible that unfold God's wonderful plan of redemption and ending with the second coming of Christ."

How these plays will be produced is taking a new turn as well, using "the latest trend – IMMERSIVE - SIGHT SPECIFIC THEATER." "These plays allow a small audience to follow the cast throughout a location finding themselves literally in the middle of the action. These experiences are extremely exciting and effective in creating a life-like feel that is not easily forgotten..." He has already successfully produced one such performance at a megachurch in Bradenton, Florida.

Mike Graham is now seeking out other churches that want to provide these events at their facilities, as well as offering consulting from his more than 40 years of experience in theater to those who want to use theater as a medium.

So while it is disappointing that I will never see the play again in the way that I have seen it these last eleven years, I am looking forward to seeing what God will give to this talented individual in the near future. As they say in the theater world, the show will go on.



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