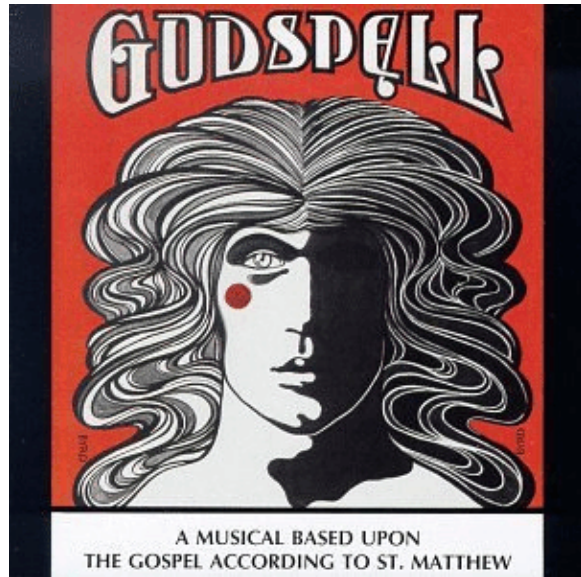


# John-Michael Tebelak

## Stephen Schwartz



## A Playgoer's Guide

“The characters in GODSPELL were never supposed to be hippies. They were supposed to be putting on "clown" garb to follow the example of the Jesus character as was conceived by GODSPELL's originator, John-Michael Tebelak, according to the "Christ as clown" theory propounded by Harvey Cox of the Harvard Divinity School (among others). . . . Because the show was originally produced in the hippie era, and because the director of the GODSPELL movie somewhat misinterpreted the characters as hippie-esque, that misunderstanding has come to haunt the show a bit.” – Stephen Schwartz

## The Author

John-Michael Tebelak (November 1, 1949–April 2, 1985) was a playwright and director, most famous for creating *Godspell*. He graduated from Berea High School in Ohio in 1966. Tebelak originally produced *Godspell* at age 22 as his Master's thesis project, under the tutelage of Lawrence Carra, at Carnegie Mellon University in December 1970. He had been studying Greek and Roman mythology, with the deadline for his thesis two weeks away, but became fascinated by the joy he found in the Gospels. He attended an Easter Vigil service in 1970 at Pittsburgh's St. Paul's Cathedral, wearing his usual overalls and T-shirt. A police officer frisked him for drugs after the service. He wrote of this experience, "I left with the feeling that, rather than rolling the rock away from the Tomb, they were piling more on. I went home, took out my manuscript, and worked it to completion in a non-stop frenzy." Though he never completed his course work at the university, Carnegie Mellon nevertheless awarded him the degree.



He was named Theatre Man of the Year by Elliott Norton of the *Boston Record American*, and Most Promising Director of 1971 by the New York Drama Desk. Among many other credits, he co-wrote with David Greene the 1973 film version of *Godspell*. He once said that he "walked into a theatre at the age of nine and stayed there." He was also the dramaturge for the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York and staged liturgical drama there. John Michael Tebelak died of a heart attack in New York City at age 36.

## Synopsis

*Godspell* is an upbeat, modern day retelling of the New Testament parables from The Gospel According to Matthew. The show is at times comedic and at times sentimental. The actors often use their own names as they help explain and perform to the audience the teachings of Jesus Christ through various biblical stories. The plot focuses on the relationship between Jesus and his disciples as well as his traitor, Judas, and the journey these characters take together as they learn the word of the Lord.

## The Composer

Stephen Schwartz hails from New York City where he studied piano and composition at the Julliard School of Music while in high school. He graduated from Carnegie Mellon University in 1968 with a B.F.A. in Drama.

After a short time working for RCA Records he began his work in the Broadway theatre. His first major credit was the title song for the play *Butterflies Are Free*. In 1971 he wrote the music and lyrics for *Godspell*, which won him several awards.

In 1978, Schwartz adapted and directed a musical version of Studs Terkel's *Working*, which won him the Drama Desk Award for best director. He also contributed four songs to the score. In 1991, Schwartz composed music and lyrics for the popular *Children of Eden*. He then began working in film; collaborating with composer Alan Menken on the scores for the Disney animated features *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, as well as the Disney television musical, *Geppetto*.

In 2003, Schwartz wrote the music and lyrics for *Wicked*, a musical based on Gregory Maguire's novel *Wicked: the Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*. After nearly 1400 performances, *Wicked* has made Schwartz one of only four composers to have three shows run that long on Broadway (the other two were *Pippin* and *The Magic Show*). Thus far in his career, Schwartz has won three Oscars, four Grammys, and three Drama Desk awards.

## Origins

John-Michael Tebelak first produced the show in late fall/early winter at Carnegie-Mellon, according to Thomas Peters, who notes that Schwartz had nothing to do with the project. He was already in New York City trying to sell his idea for a musical called *Pippin*. The score was made of an original song by a cast member and old Episcopal Hymns played by a rock band. (The only song to remain from the original production is "By



My Side"). Tebelak left school without graduating and took *Godspell* to New York City where it was produced at Ellen Stewart's experimental Cafe La Mama theatre. A few producers saw the show and said they would produce it if it had a new score. They brought in Stephen Schwartz without knowing that he had been a classmate of Tebelak's. Schwartz wrote a new score in 5 weeks and the show opened May 17, 1971.

Soon after the New York opening, "resident" (non-touring) companies were organized in major cities with the intention of playing extended runs. Among the cities outside of New York that had their "own" *Godspell* productions were Boston, Washington, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Toronto. During most of 1972, these seven companies performed simultaneously. Most played for six to nine months.

“Actually, according to critic Retta Blaney, "*Godspell* has never stopped working. This Energizer Bunny of musical theater is still performed a couple hundred times a year from high school auditoriums to regional theaters, has been translated into a half dozen languages, played before popes, produced a gold record ("Day By Day"), and its music was used in Catholic liturgies into the late 1980s when, as graduate students at New York University, we were still singing "Long Live God" at Masses sponsored by the Newman Center. The power of this musical even reached South Africa where, in 1974, it became the first show to break the color barrier after Schwartz insisted it be performed by an integrated cast before integrated audiences.”

This guide was researched by the *Godspell* Task Force  
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