

Production Notes

by Steve Moore

STYLE

The Borrowed Tomb is a period piece which uses ancient situations to illustrate the current and timeless themes of faith and courage. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, long-time friends, come into conflict through the advent of the Messiah and their obligations to him as Jews, members of the Sanhedrin, Pharisees, but primarily as children of God.

The musical illustrates Christ's call to leave all behind and follow Him, as well as a call to understand the true cost of following the Messiah, past and present.

CASTING CONSIDERATIONS

Four scripted characters and a Storyteller make up the cast of *The Borrowed Tomb*.

Choir: There is considerable flexibility with regard to choir location and scene participation. The choir is the figurative centerpiece of this musical, and can occupy a portion of the stage where its music illustrates the thoughts and motivations of the characters, or it may actually participate (in costume) in the scenes. If as the figurative centerpiece, it is suggested that their costuming be contemporary, yet nondescript, such as basic black.

Nicodemus: Nicodemus (and Joseph of Arimathea) are two of the more enigmatic characters in the Bible. What is certain about them has been included in this piece. Much can be inferred, and some of these characters' motivations are the author's conjecture, so far as they do not conflict with God's Word. Nicodemus is portrayed as a wise, learned and popular member of the Sanhedrin, an exclusive, judiciary council made up of Pharisees. His education, wisdom and charisma have endeared him to the council. He would have been at least 40 to 50 years old to have achieved such status in society.

Nicodemus is now in line for a more significant position on the Sanhedrin.

Significantly, he and his closest friend, Joseph of Arimathea, were successful and devout members of society. Their sincere devotion to God in their earlier years has now been overshadowed by their success. They wonder if they have not lost their way.

Dress in period clothing, with wealthy-looking, formal robes and hats.

Joseph of Arimathea: A wealthy businessman and member of the Sanhedrin. A close friend and admirer of Nicodemus, he is junior to him as a scholar and a member of the Sanhedrin. What he lacks in seniority, he more than compensates for with his sincere and bold stands, which concerns Nicodemus, his more politically astute friend.

Dress in period clothing, with wealthy-looking, formal robes and hats.

Mary Magdalene: Is a young, strong-willed woman not impressed by authority or religious pretense. She is, however, devoted to Christ and His teachings. His forgiveness of her has caused her to change from a dependent, desperate street person to a courageous somewhat noble follower of God. She has little to lose.

Dress in period clothing, with more natural tones. Character must be able to sing.

Jesus: Appears briefly in a few scripted scenes. Dress in period clothing, with more natural tones.

Storyteller: Dress in period costume. Character must be able to sing.

SET AND LIGHTS

Significantly, this piece, as others before it by the same authors, is “scaleable.” It is intentionally designed to excel in either an intimate venue with simple staging, or “scaled-up,” in a large theatre atmosphere with elaborate production resources, and at any level in-between. The musical is designed to make few demands for staging, lighting or props. However, any investment made in more elaborate staging will return dividends in the majesty of the piece. The message of the piece, however, is not dependent upon the scale. It depends upon the way in which it is communicated, and the prayers of the participants.

The musical can live in a single set, on which the entire tableau would play out. However, a second set is preferable and could facilitate scenes such as John baptizing his followers, as well as scenes at the foot of the cross. If two sets are used, they can be alternated in order to minimize the distractions of set changes. Creative lighting can minimize these distractions as well.

Lighting is easily accomplished with a wash for the stage and choir. More elaborate lighting designs will include individual spots for significant performers, as well as the capability for darkening the choir stage during dramatic scenes.

STAGING INSTRUCTIONS

“The Crown of Israel”

(Optional) Production number which lends itself to choir participation in period costume. A large crowd on stage would reinforce the sense of location. During the song, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea have placed themselves in a place of significance and are accepting the acknowledgements of the people with haughty nods.

“The Crown of Israel Underscore”

At the conclusion of “The Crown of Israel,” the underscore begins and Joseph good-naturedly (but pointedly) criticizes Nicodemus’ “nod.” Their continuing conversation belies their own sadness at what they have become.

“Prepare Ye the Way”

(Optional) Again, this is a valuable time to involve members of the choir in costume. Creative staging will allow for baptisms by John. As the baptisms continue, members of the “crowd” and those newly baptized celebrate and bring life to the high-energy song.

Staging for the baptism could involve a simulated embankment between the audience and John, which would hide a simulated river. When baptized, the individual would disappear behind the embankment where a small amount of water in a tub or basin could wet the character’s hair.

Chambers of the Sanhedrin

This is ideally a minimalist set, which suggests location, rather than establishes it in detail. The action of the Sanhedrin changing from street clothing to formal robes will adequately establish the venue.

The scene begins with surreptitious conversation between Nicodemus and Joseph and ends with conflict between Nicodemus and Caiaphas—a conflict which motivates Nicodemus.

“Who Will the Messiah Be?”

(Optional) The people of Jerusalem wonder and wait in anticipation for their deliverer, in contrast to their religious leaders, who fear His return.

There is much latitude in this scene for a mix of period-cast singers and choir.

Jesus’ Camp

As the final notes of “Who Will the Messiah Be?” are sung, Nicodemus arrives after dark, obviously hiding his appearance so he will not be recognized. Jesus and Nicodemus recline and speak. Nearby, several disciples also recline and are near enough to hear Jesus’ words. Mary Magdalene also watches.

“For God So Loved the World *with* The Love of Jesus”

At measure 31 of “For God So Loved the World *with* The Love of Jesus,” Jesus and Nicodemus continue their conversation in Pantomime. Disciples, and Mary slowly walk away, allowing the two to continue their conversation. Jesus and Nicodemus stand up as their conversation concludes. Nicodemus is obviously confused and perplexed by what he has heard. Jesus leaves and Nicodemus stands alone for several seconds before beginning to walk away, again trying to hide his face. It is then that he encounters Mary Magdalene, as she walks the other way from offstage.

Nicodemus begins the conversation reluctantly and condescendingly. He is once again perplexed by the wisdom of Mary’s answers. Significantly, before the conversation ends, Nicodemus, the Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, seeks spiritual wisdom from the former prostitute.

At measure 60 of this piece Mary Magdalene sings a solo. Ideally, a single spot would illuminate Mary during her portion of the song, with a dim wash on the supporting choir. At the conclusion of the song, the Storyteller appears opposite stage.

“Blessed Is the King of Israel”

(Optional) Jesus arrives for the triumphal entry. Choir members in costume enhance the scene. Depending upon the scale of the production, props could range from palm branches to a live donkey (as usual, think long and hard before using live animals in a production).

Nicodemus and Joseph at the Sanhedrin Chambers

Conflict between Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Nicodemus wrestles with what he believes, and what it will cost him.

“O Gethsemane”

Jesus arrives with His disciples. They embrace, and He teaches (in pantomime) for several moments, then walks a short distance to pray for them. As He does, they gradually fall asleep. After His dialogue at measure 42, He returns to them to find them asleep. He returns to his spot to pray. Lights fade to black.

“The Arrest Underscore”

At the end of “O Gethsemane,” Nicodemus, Joseph and the Storyteller arrive onstage and take positions downstage for their pronouncements.

(Optional) Judas arrives with the temple guards to arrest Jesus. As this happens, the disciples run. As Jesus is led away, Nicodemus, Joseph and the Storyteller are downstage from the action at centerstage, left and right for their pronouncements.

“And Can It Be? *with* Grace Flows Down *and* I’m Amazed”

The cross is raised during measure two. In the vicinity of the cross stand several disciples, as well as Mary Magdalene. Joseph of Arimathea stands nearby. Nicodemus stands off to one side.

Near the foot of the cross

Nicodemus encounters Mary Magdalene and admits his own guilt.

“Father, Forgive Them *with* The Love of Jesus”

This scene is played completely in pantomime. Joseph of Arimathea physically claims the body of Christ.

As other members of the Sanhedrin are standing nearby, watching Jesus being taken from the cross, Joseph arrives and shows the guards his paper allowing him possession of the body. The Sanhedrin attempt to stop him from doing so. As they do, they stand between him and the body of Christ. When it seems that they will be able to stop him, Nicodemus arrives and intercedes dramatically. As the Sanhedrin watch, Nicodemus takes off his formal robes and hat so that he can help carry Jesus’ body with Joseph. He throws the robes and hat at the feet of the Sanhedrin. He and Joseph lovingly carry off Jesus’ body.

Lights fade to black.

Storyteller

Location is not critical. No period venue is required. A simple spot on a darkened stage would be ideal.

“Sunrise Underscore”

Early fear gives way to exultation. Significantly, Nicodemus is not in any doubt during this scene as to Jesus’ resurrection. This learned Pharisee believes that Jesus will rise.

“Jesus Christ Is the Risen Son *with* I’m Amazed *and* And Can It Be?”

(Optional) Celebration scene with all disciples, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and the choir.