

Angels Among Us

Cast changes do not alter mystery



family matters

BY EILEEN MARX

At home, we put up a Christmas creche every year. My young daughter Teresa has a habit of rearranging the figures, adding in characters not originally present in the biblical versions of the nativity. Thus carolers, Frosty the Snowman and Santa have all been a part of our home manger scene.

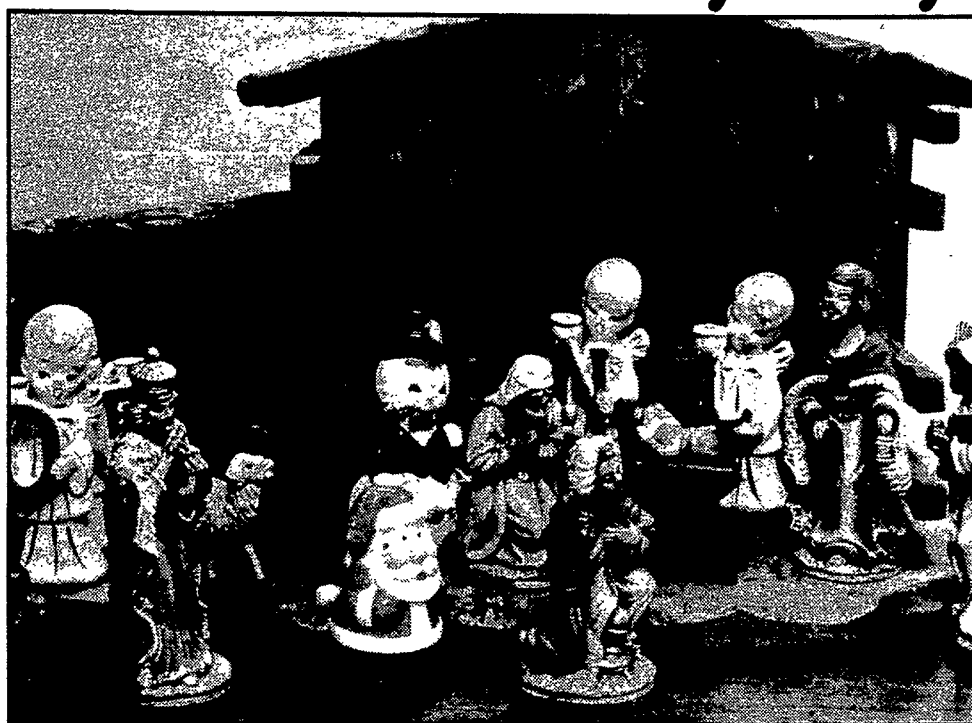
We tend to think primarily of the Holy Family, the shepherds and the Magi as being present at that first Christmas, forgetting about the other people who would have been in Bethlehem at that time.

Recently, though, my husband Joe and I took Teresa and her brother Bobby to a nearby church to visit a re-creation of the village of Bethlehem at the time of Christ's birth. More than 80 volunteers of a local drama ministry volunteered their time and talent to play the parts of the people of Bethlehem — complete with costumes, props, booths and live animals. The Bethlehem village was true to the busy and bustling Bethlehem of 2,000 years ago.

As we approached the village gate, three beggar children pleaded for food. A Roman soldier stood guard as each family was asked to register for the census. We wandered down the crooked streets of Bethlehem and were invited to play the part of visitors to this lively marketplace. We were tired and hungry from our long journey. An innkeeper informed us that there was no room at the inn, but we could purchase a tent for the night.

The people showed us their wares, their food and their crafts. A carpenter worked on a wooden wheel spoke. The proprietor of a fish and cheese shop showed us the catch of the day and gave the children a taste of goat cheese. We listened to the rabbi preach in the synagogue. A scribe gave Bobby a Hebrew letter on a stone. Two women at the well stopped gossiping long enough to offer Teresa a drink of water. As we strolled through the streets of Bethlehem, we were asked by all the people we met, "Did you see the bright star in the sky tonight? Have you heard that a king is to be born?"

We left the bustling village and began our journey home into the silent night.



We had just been given a glimpse, this December evening, of what it might have been like on the night Jesus was born. Suddenly, we came across a simple stable where a woman named Mary, her husband Joseph and a baby Jesus were kept warm by the breath of a donkey and a goat. Standing before this stark manger scene, I couldn't help but think that Jesus' life on earth, especially his birth, was a mystery.

As history hurries along, the story of Christ's birth becomes even more mysterious. We realize how far removed we are from the time and place of the birth of Jesus. Most of us have never met a shepherd. It's often difficult to spot a star — never mind a dazzling one — through the pollution of our city skies. We need to take a weekend ride to the country to see a stable, hay and farm animals. We think of kings as antiquated figures from foreign lands and fairy tales.

Is it harder in our day to accept an immaculate conception, a virgin birth, a king born into poverty or the union of the human and the divine? How do we make the mystery of Christ's birth come alive in 1997?

The shelters and soup kitchens that offer a home and a hot meal to those who all others have turned away to our modern day stables. The inner-city priest or teacher who guides children and parishioners into the light of Christ are today's stars of wonder. All men, women and children who trust in God and spread the Good News with humility and simplicity are the shepherds of our time. A foster fa-

ther who brings children into his home and loves them as his own is a present day St. Joseph. And a young woman who says yes to life, especially in a difficult pregnancy, follows in the footsteps of Mary at the manger. This is the real re-creation of the miracle of Bethlehem.

Perhaps the ultimate mystery is how God could love us so much that he would send his Son to a fallen world to be sacrificed for the forgiveness of our sins. As mysteries go, they don't get any better than this. How could anyone possibly love us this much? How can we possibly learn to love others this much?

Through faith, prayer and loving service to others, we can get closer to uncovering the mystery of God's love and to understanding what a precious Gift we were given on that first Christmas night. It is a gift of indescribable love, hope and redemption.

As we set up the creches in our homes and churches, may the stars, stables and shepherds help us to stand in awe and wonder of the real mystery that began in the blessed village of Bethlehem: "When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another: 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this event which the Lord has made known to us.' They went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger; once they saw, they understood what had been told them concerning this child."

Marx lives in Lawrenceville, N.J., with her husband and two children.

Holiday films offer fine fare

NEW YORK (CNS) — The following are home videocassette reviews from the U.S. Catholic



Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting. Each videocassette is available on VHS format. Theatrical movies on video have a USCC classification and Motion Picture Association of America rating.

The Bishop's Wife

A debonair angel (Cary Grant) uses his powers to help the neglected wife (Loretta Young) of an Episcopal bishop (David Niven) renew her husband's ministry to those in need rather than in raising the money for a new cathedral. Director Henry Koster's Christmas fable has the virtue of a good script, sincere performances and some amusing moments with Grant's angelic powers and Monty Woolley as a softhearted cynic. The USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. Not rated by the MPAA.

The Preacher's Wife

Charming remake of the 1948 fantasy, "The Bishop's Wife," in which an angel (Denzel Washington) is sent to help the discouraged Baptist minister (Courtney B. Vance) of a struggling inner-city church and his neglected wife (Whitney Houston) rediscover romance in their marriage. Director Penny Marshall's sentimental story about the values of faith and hope is enlivened by an engaging cast and vibrant gospel songs. The USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

A Christmas Carol

This 1951 version of the Dickens' classic has worn well over the years principally because of Alistair Sim's zestful performance as Scrooge, whose transformation into a loving human being is a pleasure to behold. Director Brian Desmond Hurst skillfully handles the 19th-century London setting and the ghostly visitations are done simply but with flair. The result is dandy family viewing. The USCC classification is A-I — general patronage. Not rated by the MPAA.

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