

# Books, Music & Video

## Soap vet carries Gospel message

By Mike Latona  
Staff writer

IRONDEQUOIT — Many who flocked to the Church of Christ the King on Oct. 21 may have been anxious to see Frank Runyeon, soap opera star, in the flesh.

The dark, handsome face is still the same. But Runyeon's performing venues have changed: Church and school engagements have replaced national television performances.

This is due in part, he said, to the entertainment industry's shunning him for his outspoken Christian convictions.

"I was blacklisted. *Rolling Stone* wrote a (critical) story on me after I spoke at a pro-life rally in Washington. People would say, 'He's one of those people,'" remarked Runyeon, an Episcopalian.

However, the 45-year-old Runyeon said he's never regretted how his faith has affected his career.

"Anytime you try to embrace a true Christian witness, you're going to encounter hostility. If you really haven't surrendered totally to Christ, you won't be willing to do that," Runyeon stated.

In the past four years, Runyeon — who once appeared opposite Meg Ryan on "As the World Turns" — has devoted most of his career to performances with Christian themes. He was at Christ the King to perform his one-man play, "Afraid! The Gospel of Mark."

The audience of approximately 300 was treated to an explosive performance by Runyeon, who narrated key events in Mark's Gospel and simultaneously acted as the characters. Illuminated only by spotlights and candles, Runyeon darted furiously around the altar and church aisles. He vividly displayed the pain of a woman with internal bleeding who had hoped to touch Jesus, and emitted ear-piercing wails in depicting Christ's dying moments on the cross.

Runyeon included frequent humor in his performance as well. For instance, he introduced Peter as "The Rock," slipping into the gravelly voice of Mickey, the boxing trainer from the "Rocky" movies. As a church elder, he reacted to Jesus' teaching about loving one another by shaking his finger and angrily declaring, "YOU ... ARE ..." then meekly concluding, "right."

Members of the local community who attended his Oct.

21 appearance remarked that Runyeon's performance helped bring the Gospel to life.

"It got me in touch with my faith. It opened me to what really happened to Jesus," said Katie Dayton, 16, a parishioner at Christ the King.

"We did Living Stations of the Cross last year, and my mind kept going back to that. I was mesmerized," said Lisa Bovenzi, 16, from Christ the King.

"It was like a first-hand experience," said Karen Williams, 16, from St. James Church in Irondequoit.

In addition to his play based on the Gospel of Mark, Runyeon has developed acts dramatizing the Sermon on the Mount as well as Christmas.

Runyeon acknowledged that his current performances represent quite a shift from the days when he had regular roles on "As the World Turns," as Steve Andropoulos; "General Hospital," as Simon Romero; and "Santa Barbara," as Michael Donnelly. Runyeon also had guest-starring stints on "Falcon Crest," "Another World" and "L.A. Law."

However, Runyeon said he doesn't miss that 14-year stretch as a TV celebrity.

"It was too ... too shallow. The friendships were false," Runyeon remarked. "(But) God knew that to launch this ministry, I would need the acting training."

He already had the religious training: Runyeon holds a bachelor's degree in religion from Princeton University and also studied at Fuller Seminary and Yale Divinity School before earning his master's degree from General Theological Seminary in New York City in 1994.

Runyeon travels alone on the road. His crews are derived from local congregations; at Christ the King, for example, he and a small crew of adults and teens arranged lighting equipment for about three hours on the day of his performance — and then had a quick pizza party right before he went onstage. Runyeon also enlists local people to sit at the altar during his performances, posing as apostles.

"The Gospel belongs to the community," Runyeon explained.

Runyeon and his wife, who is Catholic, have children ages 10, 14 and 17. His current lifestyle, he said, gives him a satisfaction that can't be measured in dollars or fame.

"You can go for the Hollywood glory, the drugs, the sex, the alcohol. But when I started doing this, I said, 'God,



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Actor Frank Runyeon rehearses for his presentation of "Afraid! The Gospel of Mark" at Christ the King Church, Irondequoit, Oct. 21.

this is it.' This is joy — this, and my family," Runyeon said.

EDITORS' NOTE: "Afraid! The Gospel of Mark" is available on videotape from Runyeon Productions, P.O. Box 583, Westport, CT 06881. In addition, Runyeon will return to the Rochester area April 15, 1999, when he performs at Church of the Transfiguration in Pittsford.



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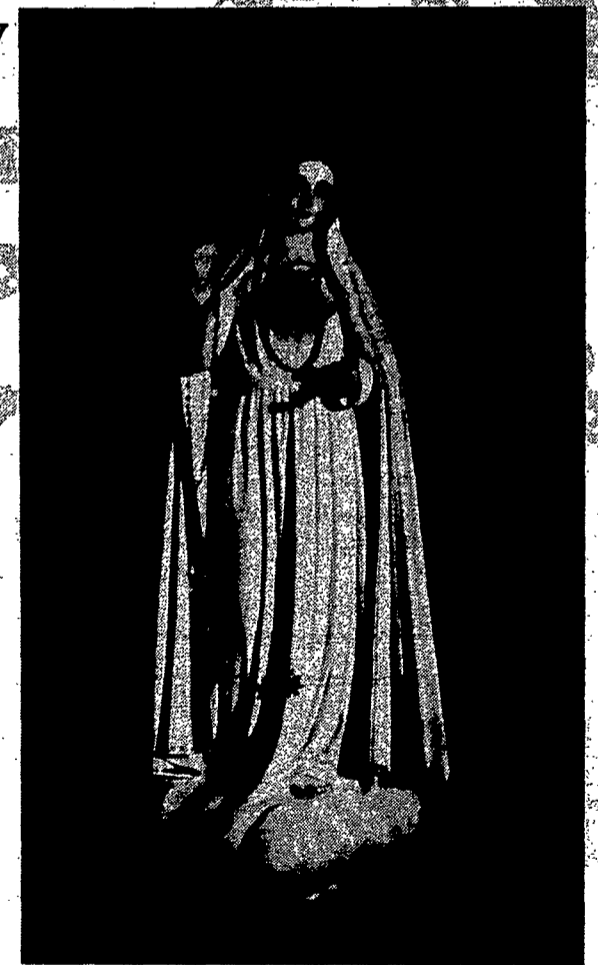
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