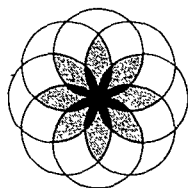




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Nancy Wiechec/CNS

Tom Key plays Jesus and a host of other New Testament characters in his retelling of the story of Christ set in the contemporary rural South.

## Gospels retold in Southern style

Regina Linskey/CNS

WASHINGTON — Familiarity has the power to dull anything, even the magnificence of New Testament stories.

That's what motivates Tom Key, producer and artistic director of Theatrical Outlet in Atlanta, to renew the suspense, shock and wonder of the story of Jesus' life in his play, "Cotton Patch Gospel."

The contemporary version of the Gospels of Matthew and John set in Georgia allows the audience to see how bizarre it might have seemed to the people of Jesus' time to meet a man claiming to be the son of God.

"It relieves them of their expectations, they don't know the end, how will we depict it," said Key, who recently presented the show at the Catholic Press Association annual convention in Atlanta. He has performed the bluegrass program for more than two decades.

Because the audience is unable to foretell what perspective the play's creators will have, Key said, they are hesitant to judge the "Cotton Patch Gospel" to be either reverent or blasphemous until the curtain falls. According to Key, this reflects the emotions that those who met Jesus might have felt.

This confusion and anxiety challenge the audience to relive Jesus' story, he said.

"It's faithful to the original story,

but puts it in a new context. It allows the audience to experience the story of Christ for the first time," Key told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview.

People should not lose sight of the mystery of Jesus' story because it has become routine or familiar, said Key, drawing on the message of Christian author and philosopher C.S. Lewis. "We can't just settle with him (Jesus) being a moral teacher — he was either a lunatic, or God or the devil," he said.

Theater, when it shares the truth, is a form of evangelization, Key said, and because art is a gift from God, people need to be "stewards of it."

"What motivates me is a story that tells the truth," he said. It is important for the entire community, Christians and non-Christians alike, to attend the Scripture-based play, he added, because both groups benefit.

"Cotton Patch Gospel" also sheds light on the faults of humanity in religious institutions, he added.

"It satirizes what's bad or absurd," Key said. "We are trying to satirize what Jesus would satirize."

Key co-wrote "Cotton Patch Gospel" with the late singer-songwriter Harry Chapin. Key has performed in 10 productions of the play, based on a book by Clarence Jordan, and he received Dramalogue Awards in 1981 and 1985 for his work.

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