

Theater Plays Unique Role in Evangelism

Observers say Sight & Sound Theatre reaches people who might never step foot in a church

What started with a slide projector, screen, turntable and microphone has become the leading faith-based theater in the nation, attracting some 800,000 patrons a year.

Glenn Eshelman, founder of Sight & Sound Theatres in Lancaster County, Pa., said he and his wife, Shirley, stepped out in faith 30 years ago with their first production, *The Wonder of It All*.

Today he says that title has become a fitting way to describe the ministry's growth and popularity. "What you see in the natural absolutely should not be," said Eshelman, a former dairy farmer and Church of the Brethren minister. "It is a miracle."

Sight & Sound's Millennium Theatre, nestled in Lancaster County's Amish farm country, is considered the largest faith-based live theatre in the U.S. Some even refer to it as "the Christian Broadway." To Eshelman, it's a way to reach people who might never sit through a traditional sermon.

Ruth was on stage at the Millennium through Oct. 22. Complete with a 68-member cast and more than 35 animals, the show carried the audience through Ruth and Naomi's tumultuous journey of faith, love, loss and redemption. The gleaning fields of Boaz came to life on a 300-foot, wraparound stage illuminated by the largest moving light system on the East

Coast.

“There is a strong need in the world today for this type of a ministry,” Eshelman said. “For too long, the world has looked at Christian drama as bathrobes and half-cut wigs. Why should it not be equal to that of Broadway, equal to that in Las Vegas.”

Sight & Sound Theatres, which includes the more intimate, 643-seat Living Waters Theatre also in Lancaster County, uses innovative production technology while remaining faithful to its mission. Patrons return year after year for more.

Lancaster County resident Beth Fisher said she has visited Millennium Theatre dozens of times. “The message is the draw,” she said. “I love how they represent the Bible so well. [The stories] are not stretched out of proportion.”

Though it isn’t a traveling theater, Sight & Sound has reached theatergoers outside the U.S. “Delegations from China have visited the Millennium Theatre in hopes of taking Noah the Musical to the Olympics to represent Christianity amongst the other religions,” Eshelman said. “Impossible logistics deterred it from taking place.”

The theater has also helped ministries from within the U.S. develop their drama departments. “Churches are doing [theatre] with excellence, not to compete with the world, but so that it would be intriguing for the world to come in and say, ‘Let me see,’” said producing director Earl Grove. “We’re just doing it in the culture in the way that the culture can understand it.”

Area ministers agree that Sight & Sound is an effective evangelism tool. "Many people that won't come to a church will come to a theatre," said Tommy Stoudt Jr., pastor of Victory Church in Lancaster. "They play a critical role in reaching people."

"The Bible speaks that the body has many members," Eshelman said. "I feel like we are an arm or member of the body of the church that presents the gospel in this fashion. [It is] all part of God's final program here to bring in the final harvest."

Psalms of David is on stage at the Living Waters Theater through December. Noah the Musical is to open in a Branson, Mo., Sight & Sound Theatre in June 2008.

Paula Hornberger in Lancaster County, Pa.