

Aimee Semple McPherson's Life Set for Broadway

Nearly 100 years ago, few women had the power to revolutionize the world.

She did it with show business ... and salvation.

As announced on NBC's *Today*, this fall, celebrated stage actress and two-time Tony Award nominee Carolee Carmello (*Parade*, *Mamma Mia!*, *Sister Act*) will star in the new Broadway musical *Scandalous: The Life and Trials of Aimee Semple McPherson*.

With book and lyrics by Kathie Lee Gifford and music by David Pomeranz and David Friedman, *Scandalous* begins performances at Broadway's Neil Simon Theatre on Saturday, Oct. 13. Opening Night is set for Thursday, Nov. 15.

Gifford has been working tirelessly for the past 13 years on this Broadway-bound musical about the life of Foursquare founder **Aimee Semple McPherson**. Gifford has been a long-time admirer of McPherson and it was while attending Oral Roberts University in the 1970s that she first heard of the evangelist's ministry.

"I remember being amazed by the stories I'd heard about her, and that turned into a lifetime fascination," Gifford says.

This lifetime passion propelled Gifford to dedicate herself to a project she considers a part of her life's purpose. *Scandalous* (formerly known as *Saving Aimee*), for which Gifford wrote the book, the lyrics and some of the music, is a musical about the life of the evangelist.

"I hope every person will realize that God has a purpose for

them,” Gifford said when asked about her hope for the musical, “that He loves them with an unfailing love and will strengthen them for the purpose He has given them.”

Along with other backers, the Foursquare Foundation, which exists to accelerate worldwide interdenominational evangelism, is partnering with Gifford in bringing this musical to Broadway.

“Aimee was a remarkable leader who made a profound impact not only in Hollywood but all around the world. Her story needs to be told and we are proud to support Kathie Lee Gifford’s creative account of her story,” says Greg Campbell, executive director of the Foursquare Foundation.

Scandalous is based on the life of Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944), the world’s first media superstar evangelist—a woman whose passion for saving souls equaled her passion for attracting overflow crowds of thousands throughout the world. *Time magazine* named McPherson one of the most influential people of the 20th century.

Set in 1920s Los Angeles, holiness collides with Hollywood in this extraordinary tale of one remarkable woman’s **charismatic** rise to fame while enduring claims of scandalous love affairs and growing controversy.

In the early 20th century, McPherson was a woman far ahead of her time. Driven, passionate and even controversial, she was the first woman evangelist to build a worldwide following of millions, at a time when women were expected to marry, have children and leave religion and other important pursuits to men.

Although she was reared in a Christian home, as a teenager McPherson began to question the Bible. When she was 17 years old she attended a **revival** service conducted by evangelist

Robert Semple. That **revival** meeting changed her life not only spiritually, but romantically as well. McPherson continued to attend the **revival** and became personally acquainted with the evangelist. Before long, Semple had won her heart. The two were married within the year and began ministering together in nearby towns.

But two years later while the couple was serving as missionaries in Hong Kong, Semple died from malaria and McPherson was left broke and alone, waiting for the imminent birth of her first child. When her daughter was a month old, McPherson returned to the United States, facing life as a single mother.

Not long after her return, she met and married a Christian businessman, Harold McPherson, and tried to settle down to a "normal" home life. But after a long illness, she made a promise to God preach the **gospel**, despite her feelings of inadequacy, and began evangelizing with her husband by going into the bars, wrestling arenas, movie houses and brothels to invite lost souls to her tent **revivals** on the east coast.

However, life as traveling evangelists was difficult. Clothes were washed in streams and many nights were spent fighting off mosquitoes, sleeping in train depots, leaky tents or their car, often with very little to eat. Eventually Harold decided that this was not the life he desired and he left McPherson in the middle of a campaign in Key West, Fla.

McPherson continued on and soon expanded and held revivals in other parts of the country, to surprising success. People gathered in ever-increasing numbers to hear the remarkable lady evangelist. Soon she was forced to rent the largest auditorium in whatever city she was in so that she could accommodate the record number of people who attended.

Once, in San Diego, the National Guard had to be brought in to control the crowd of more than 30,000. People often stood in

line and waited for several hours so that they could be assured of seats for her **revival services**.

In 1923 at age 33, she opened the doors of Angelus Temple in Los Angeles. The church held 5,300 people and was filled to capacity at every service. There, she developed an extensive social ministry, feeding more than 1.5 million people during the Great Depression.

Angelus Temple quickly became the spiritual home for thousands and a base for McPherson's worldwide evangelistic ministry. With McPherson at the helm as its mesmerizing leader, what grew out of an initial desire to have a place from which to send forth the gospel, quickly evolved into a massive megachurch organization.

McPherson presented elaborate illustrated sermons that attracted even those from the entertainment industry, looking to see a "show" that rivaled anything Hollywood had to offer. Her famous stage productions drew people who would never have otherwise thought to enter a church. She believed that the **gospel** was to be presented at every opportunity, and she used all the means at her disposal to present it to as many people as possible.

In April 1922, McPherson became the first woman to preach a sermon over the radio and in 1924 broadcasts from her own radio station could be heard from Australia to the islands of Cape Verde just off the coast of Africa.

McPherson had one of the most recognizable voices in the world and she was as well-known in the 1920s and 1930s as someone such as Paul McCartney is today. Civic leaders, politicians, actors and actresses, pastors from every denomination, as well as average citizens all attended her services.

On May 18, 1926, the citizens of Los Angeles and her Angelus

Temple congregation were stunned to hear the news that McPherson had disappeared while swimming near Venice Beach. Members of her congregation went to the waters where she disappeared. No trace of her body was found. The local police investigated hundreds of leads, including a ransom note signed by "The Avengers," which demanded half a million dollars for her safe return.

Thirty-two days later, McPherson was found walking out of the desert near Douglas, Arizona. She told how she had been kidnapped, tortured, drugged and held for ransom in a shack somewhere across the Mexican border. Only after her kidnappers became careless did she manage to escape and walk for more than 13 hours back to civilization.

While she had gone missing, rumors of sightings came in to newspapers all across the country. She was reportedly seen in 16 cities on the same day! When it was learned that an employee of the Angelus Temple radio station, who had left his job the previous December, was in Carmel during the month of May the media immediately began writing articles insinuating that McPherson faked her kidnapping in order to have an affair with him.

A media circus erupted and soon McPherson found the district attorney working hard to try her on charges such as "conspiracy to commit acts injurious to public morals." During the preliminary hearings, the witnesses that the district attorney brought forth were either found to be untrustworthy or had their testimony soundly refuted. The charges that she had been in Carmel having an affair were also proven to be false when the two parties involved in the affair actually confessed to the judge.

With the Carmel episode resolved and the rest of the witnesses' testimonies refuted, in January 1977 the DA ceased his efforts to try McPherson as a criminal, acknowledging that

he did not have even one witness who could testify against her. During the entire episode and the ensuing years McPherson continued to minister in Angelus Temple.

In 1931 she met David Hutton and she knew she was going to like him. Eventually love came to the surface and he proposed. Since she was no longer bound to her prior husband who had divorced her and remarried years earlier, she said yes. On the night of their wedding a newspaperman informed them that Hutton was being sued by another woman whom he had promised to marry. In July 1932, Hutton was found guilty and was ordered to pay \$5,000. He eventually left McPherson and filed for divorce.

Though her heart was broken and human love had failed her, the love of God had not and God continued blessing her ministry and working through her.

While ministering in Mexico in 1943 she contracted a bacillus that began eroding the walls of her intestinal tract. When the tube running to her kidneys ruptured on Sept. 27, 1944, the medication in some sleeping pills she had taken went directly into her system and McPherson passed away.

McPherson is buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, Calif. Angelus Temple, along with the Dream Center, is still thriving, caring for more than 30,000 people each week in Los Angeles. The Foursquare denomination she founded has more than 8 million members and adherents and has churches in more than 140 countries.