

You've Never Seen the Crucifixion Story Like Tyler Perry Tells It

Following a successful push into live musicals with "Grease Live," Fox is setting the stage for its next major TV event: "The Passion," a two-hour special that recounts the last hours of the life of Jesus Christ.

The event is being shot at nine locations in New Orleans in front of an audience of more than 25,000 on March 20, Palm Sunday. It will air live—but with an asterisk.

In order to make a production of this scale possible amid multiple locations, certain scenes were pre-taped weeks before, including those depicting the Last Supper and Judas' betrayal. Still, the show will provide a live experience for viewers, thanks to a choir and band performing simultaneously with the pre-shot segments, on-site at Woldenberg Park near Jackson Square.

"We'll be cutting back to the live band, the live choir, the crowd in the park," exec producer Mark Bracco of Dick Clark Prods. tells Variety. "It will all play as one big live experience, even though there are a few scenes that we have shot ahead of time, just because there was no possibility of getting from location to location within a commercial break."

Aside from syncing up the pre-taped elements, a unique challenge for "The Passion" will be one of its signature live moments: a procession of 1,000 people walking the streets, holding the cross. (Procession-goers, who signed up online, hail from all over the country; local churches and news affiliates helped get the word out.) During the broadcast, Tyler Perry, who serves as the show's narrator and host, will toss to a live reporter, who will interview attendees who

traveled to New Orleans to carry the cross.

With that element, Bracco says, the event will be like three shows in one: “We have this massive procession, which we’re almost treating as a news event because we have a live reporter there, interviewing people. We have this massive live event, which is happening in the park. And then thirdly, we have scenes that we shot around the city that are almost like little mini-movies,” he explains.

“Glee” alum Adam Anders, who serves as music producer for “The Passion,” says that it’s difficult to define the production. “To call it a musical is maybe not the best fit,” he maintains. “It’s more of a beautiful event that has never been done before.”

Rehearsals have been significantly less intense than those for recent TV musicals like “Grease” or NBC’s “The Wiz,” because the religious vehicle isn’t packed with dance numbers. Instead, sessions have been spent in the studio with stars Trisha Yearwood (Mary), Seal (Pontius Pilate), “American Idol” alum Chris Daughtry (Judas) and Jencarlos Canela (Jesus). Gospel songstress Yolanda Adams will open the production.

Read our interview with actor Shane Harper [here](#).

Getting A-list talent involved was crucial to Anders, who says Daughtry was the first singer who came to mind for Judas. As for Yearwood, he teases a Mary audiences have never seen before. “Trisha was so important because she’s the anchor of the show,” he raves. “If we had somebody that was a good singer, I don’t know if it would work—we needed a great singer. She’s a legend, and she has a world-class voice.”

Another major talent: New Orleans native Perry. As host, he was not involved in pre-taped segments and is anxious to get to the set. “To be in a city like New Orleans, that narrative is just going to be phenomenal, and to have people all over the city participating in this—it’s going to be very

powerful,” Perry says, adding that he was so moved by a production of “The Passion” in the Netherlands that he jumped at Fox’s offer to be involved in the U.S. TV version.

Local church groups welcomed the production when it arrived to shoot pre-taped segments earlier this year. “The support from the local churches has been outstanding,” exec producer Mark Bracco says. “They’re so happy we’re coming to do this.”

Bracco calls Perry the glue that holds the production together. “He tells you the story of the Passion, and after that is when all the music comes in—all of the various scenes around the city, all of the music that’s live on that stage. That’s really what makes it a different experience.”

Another defining factor for the live spectacular is the use of modern music—including hits from Whitney Houston, Imagine Dragons, Katy Perry and Celine Dion—to tell one of history’s oldest stories. “It’s unbelievable how many No. 1 songs have religious messages,” says Anders. “That’s the magic of this show. We’re taking you know and love, and putting them in a completely new context. So it’s like, ‘Wow, I know this song, but I’ve never heard it done this way before.’”

While the creative team is confident about the quality of the music and the skills of the cast, there’s one major element it can’t control: the weather. This is New Orleans, after all.

“We’ll be tracking the weather very closely,” Bracco says, adding that the production has purchased hundreds of clear umbrellas in case of rain. “Sometimes, a little bit of rain can make a shot look pretty. Just a little bit—not too much!”

If a few drops of water are the biggest concern, Fox is in good shape, especially taking into account that it has a big act to follow in “Grease,” which drew more than 12 million viewers overnight. But the team believes “The Passion” will have equally widespread appeal.

“Whether you’re a believer or not, it is an event that the family can watch together,” Bracco says. “You’re going to see a great story with a lot of drama and amazing music, moments of love, betrayal and forgiveness. Every TV show or movie you watch has those elements—it just happens this one comes from the Bible.”