

Worst Practices

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Joseph still hasn't shown up.

"Of course" says the pageant director flippantly. "Gabriel? Where's Gabriel?" she calls to the back of the church over her shoulder. "Gabriel" she musically calls again as if she's calling her child for only the second time for dinner.

"Oh" Gabriel says from the back of the church as he stumbles hurriedly down the aisle.

"I was showing her how to keep her ribbon on" he explains with more earnestness than the task would normally command.

The director comically tilts her head sideways and says "Ya? . . . ya?" as if to mock him for his failure to be up with the other angels who are, at this point, rolling on the stage floor with the shepherds who are supposed to be asleep on the hillside but have somehow missed their morning dose of Riddlin.®

As speakers number 4 and 5 rapidly mumble through their lines, it's clear that once again, nobody in the church will hear anyone say anything from the front. The fact is, they'll be cute and it won't matter. It's the *doing* of the pageant that makes Christmas.

Joseph is still not here and a couple of the angels are missing in action. How many had to show for the original nativity scene? Did God have to have a last minute rehearsal and sit them all down, barking out, "Now during this scene, you can't talk to the person next to you. And don't pick your nose. And if see any Gameboys® I'm going to take them away from you and you won't get them back. So take that back to your parents or you'll *never* see it again."

The director rattles through the order of events once again, obviously confident that their photographic little minds will methodologically and nimbly string the coming sequences of



pageant segments together with the precision of Microsoft's latest video editing program.

The mid-teen Joseph slowly walses down the aisle. "Joseph is finally here" the director says with some relief. "We're glad you made it" she says, softening even more. Perhaps her real life experience of the male absence or unreliability has taught her to work with what she's got.

Suppose the original Joseph hadn't shown up and Mary would have to go through the birth alone in the stable? Who would have wiped off the cow drool? Would she have screamed at the weird little drummer boy to go practice anywhere but in the stable – "like go play in the DMZ of the West Bank or something!" she could have blurted out.

OK, so no little drummer preadolescent or any rump-pa-pa-pums in the original production.

They should really make this last minute pageant rehearsal THE pageant. Most of the parents are here anyway and the director's expectation that this production will be anything other than what it is now (only without her prompting everything and everyone across and off the stage at the right time) is the most spectacular act of faith in the history of Christendom. "Come see a faith that can move mountains" the bulletin board outside of the church should say. People ought to get out of their beds and come here to see the futility of this rehearsal.

The children are herded back to the Sunday School classrooms to change. We expect more of



the same to happen only back out of sight. But we know that with the addition of costumes, the in-the-wings nervousness of their peers and a sanctuary packed with their family clan and a host of unknown adults grinning, the volume of their spoken lines will dive down to zero, the prompters' shouted whispers will be even more embarrassing and the pauses before the hoped-for movements of groups of bathrobed or haloed children will seem painfully strained.

So when central characters didn't enter stage right in the original production, what did the Almighty do? Whisper little prompts in their hearts? Did Joseph suddenly snap to attention out of a distracted moment and say "Oh yea" after hearing an inner prompt just before lurching over to stand by his wife who had creatively used the cow's manger for a cradle?

How much stage whispering did the Cosmic Producer of this first nativity have to do to remind Joe and Mary that these overworked and rambunctious contracted shepherders are supposed to be crashing their barn encampment in the middle of the night and just after the baby finally got to sleep?

"Mary, stop breast feeding – there's a bunch of guys coming in here!" Joe probably said.

And later on, not long after their boy would ace His bar mitzvah at the temple and be offered an internship as the youngest teaching assistant in the history of the temple's education department – why did Joseph disappear?

Did all the pressures of being the parent of a miracle worker itinerant charismatic religious guru and countercultural icon drive him to drink?

Maybe Joe had a gambling problem and when the young Jesus started turning angry bully's thrown rocks into birds before they hit their victim, Joe started making bets.



"I bet you my boy can out argue a member of the Supreme Court" he'd bet and win several hundred shekels. Maybe Joe, one day, got a little cocky and bet the whole wad and lost to some pretty heavy hitters and ended up at the bottom of Lake Galilee wearing clay overshoes.

Whatever happened to Joe must have been a major embarrassment to the Apostolic Fathers for them not to even mention him after a certain point. Maybe Joe got Alzheimer's and the gospel writers couldn't figure out why Jesus, Who could raise the dead, couldn't or wouldn't bring clarity of mind to His mom's husband.

But with all the botched lines, absences, miscues and frankly inappropriate behaviors, there was a first nativity scene with inattentive and clueless characters.

"You work with what you've got" the Almighty must have mumbled to Self after every scene in the Messiah's life.



Just before the pageant starts, the Reverend comes to the podium and announces to the congregants that "whoever has come in a blue Ford with a license plate that starts with NAZ has left their lights on."

This brings predictable and comfortable laughter among the assembly. With all of our life's struggles and our obvious failure to be the next Dalai Lama of our own faith expression, church is the one place where we can forget to turn off our car lights. Perhaps all of life is like one large Christmas pageant through which we stumble, forgetful of our parts or relevance to some unknown overriding theme.

The pastor flees the podium, just after expressing gratitude to all the children and the beleaguered director for what they are about to present.

As narrator number 1 begins to mumble through her hurried description of the scene where

Joe is turned down by the inn keeper, (who has the Gameboy® in his bathrobe pocket), I think I hear something. It's a voice but is it behind me? Perhaps a child speaking to their parent?

No, it's internal. It's within me. It's like a quiet thought that suddenly comes to you like an almost forgotten matter that comes to you in a special and profound moment.

And the voice within me says, as if it's my clue to the meaning of my life today and forever, “. . . *and don't pick your nose.*”



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