Abbey Will Host
Free Production of ‘Godspell’
by Jean Dunn

BETHLEHEM — “Godspell,” the high-energy musical retelling of the Gospel of Matthew, will be presented in two performances only, 7:30 p.m. Saturday, September 14, and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, September 15 at The Gary-The Olivia Theater, an open-air venue on the grounds of the Abbey of Regina Laudis, 249 Flanders Rd.

Featuring a student cast and crew from St. Joseph’s College in Patchogue, N.Y., “Godspell” will be presented free of charge as a gift to the community.

Conceived by John Michael Tebelak with music by Stephen Schwartz, “Godspell” opened in 1971 and has since been produced around the world. Airing in love and joy, filled with infectious music, the play draws from various theatrical traditions, including clowning, pantomime, charades and vaudeville.

The September production is directed by Sister Grace Edna Rowland, CSJ, who teaches theater at St. Joseph College.

“The theme of the play, according to the script, is transformation, about discovering what’s really important in life. It’s about creating shared community and learning how to live, ‘day by day,’ together in harmony.

Without the assumed ‘fourth wall’ of the theater, cast members communicate directly with the audience, acting out parables and allowing theater-goers to not only witness the transformation happening on stage, but to feel the transformation themselves.

‘Godspell’ is set in the underbelly of 1970s New York City. In Act I, a motley crew of clowns, fools and others in the neighborhood meet Jesus, a newcomer who wins them over by helping them uncover the goodness in their daily existence.

In Act II, Jesus’ new followers contemplate the task of taking what they’ve learned and applying it in the real world.

“Godspell” is so energetic, so powerful, so strong and loving, they [the cast members] just have to fall in love with him,” said Sister Grace Edna. Tebelak wanted audiences to fall in love with this character, Jesus, and with each other.

“The play is so different from anything else,” she said. “It’s perfect for the Abbey.”

The Abbey of Regina Laudis has a long history of hosting theatrical performances. In the 1970s, a company of actors called the Art Association formed around James and Dawn Douglas, friends of Mother Dolores Hart, who herself gave up a career in film to enter life at the Benedictine monastery.

Stage and screen actress Patricia Neal performed with James Douglas at the Abbey in James Gurney’s ‘Love Letters’ and a number of other productions followed in The Gary-The Olivia Theater, a covered, open-sided theater built in 1982.

Most recently, Sally and Tom Camm of the Theater Company produced musicals and plays with professional casts at The Gary-The Olivia, a 10-year run that ended when the couple moved to California earlier this year.

The theater is currently without a resident company.

Sister Grace Edna teaches full-time at St. Joseph College. For the past 35 years, she has also been the executive director of the Clare Rose Playhouse, a professional theater located on the school’s Long Island campus.

Seeking a place to relax in a contemplative environment, Sister Grace Edna first visited the Abbey of Regina Laudis about eight years ago.

“I came here to re-energize, to recharge,” she said. “I fell in love with everyone, and with the Benedictine spirit.”

“Sister Grace Edna is a good friend of the Abbey,” said Mother Margaret Georgina Patton. “She is a very spiritual person, and her work is in period of transition. She said, ‘We’re already doing Godspell, and everybody hates to see it end.’ Now they’re bringing it to us.”

“We want to tell everyone that The Gary-The Olivia is back!” said Sister Grace Edna, who called the cast and crew “a great group of kids.”

“This is an amazing gift,” said Mother Margaret Georgina. “They’re not changing admission, it’s not costing us anything. It comes as a gift, to thank people for all the support we’ve had over the last few years.”

“The College of St. Joseph has a new president this year, a musician who is also a black belt in karate, and a licensed yoga instructor who drives to school on a motorcycle. The man evidently thinks outside the box.

“He requested I do a show in the summer with students,” said Sister Grace Edna. “Ordinarily, I don’t do student shows. I don’t do shows in the summer. But this was meant to be. I’m very happy that this all happened.”

Over the past few years, Tom and Sally Camm worked with the Abbey to complete a number of improvements to the much-beloved theater. Theater-goers now benefit from all new lighting, comfortable seating and an extended covered entryway.

These days, the upheaval of the New Horizons Project, a multi-year construction project that affects all areas of the Abbey, precludes sustained attention to the theater. But the sisters are hopeful that a theater group in need of a home will find its way to their door.

Mother Margaret Georgina told the Town Times she’s been surprised at how affected people have been over the prospect of the theater going dark. She’s been touched by the number of people who have asked what they can do to help.

“We can maintain the facility and keep up the grounds, but it’s very difficult for us to produce a show,” she said. “We don’t have Tom and Sally anymore to direct and do choreography.

“But we believe that life is out there, waiting to come,” she said. “Our approach is, let’s see what emerges from this.

“We can’t do it all ourselves, but we want it to happen.”

“Godspell” will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, September 14 and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, September 15. Admission is free but those wishing to attend are asked to email to godspell@abbeyofreginalaudis.org indicating the patron’s name, the date of performance and the number of seats requested.

Requests may also be mailed to Abbey of Regina Laudis, attn: Theater, 273 Flanders Rd., Bethlehem 06751. Reservations cannot be made by phone.