



## **Theater as Evangelization**

### **Jeremy Stanbary's Epiphany Studio Productions**

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Inspired by the writings of Pope John Paul II, Jeremy Stanbary set out five years ago to combine his love for theater and for the faith, and evangelize through the performing arts, especially to young people.

As a young adult, Stanbary, 30, is very much aware of the competition he faces in reaching the "YouTube generation."

Still, he believes live drama has a role in the New Evangelization.

And while the road has been long and arduous for his company, Epiphany Studio Productions, his work has caught on around the country, and new projects are rolling in faster than he can keep up.

"Kids' attention spans are short, and they're so highly stimulated that it's challenging to reach them where they're at," acknowledged Stanbary. "Theater is a highly personal form of art that has potential to impact youth, even more so these days because they are so desensitized to the flashiness and digital media around them. They're looking for more personal encounters."

Since forming Epiphany Studio Productions in 2003, Stanbary has written and performed four plays before audiences in 50 cities in 15 states and at World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany, where he was hosted by the Community of St. John.

### **World Youth Day**

Teen audiences from all over the world got the chance to see him perform at WYD in Sydney, Australia, as part of the official Youth Festival. He performed two of his plays; "Lolek," which recounts the early life of Pope John Paul II up to his priestly ordination, and "Alessandro," a powerful story of conversion and forgiveness about the man who murdered St. Maria Goretti.

Both plays will be part of EWTN's 13-part series showcasing Catholic drama, in conjunction with Theatre of the Word, Inc., and sold on DVD.

"Lolek" is particularly popular with young adults, who are so intrigued by Pope John Paul II and naturally drawn in just by the subject matter, noted Stanbary. "They see him as a person just like them, facing the challenges of faith and life as a young adult. It touches them in a deeply spiritual way."

John Sondag, director of religious education at St. Helena Catholic Church in Minneapolis, and publisher of *The Catholic Servant* monthly paper, sees it as a powerful tool of evangelization for even younger audiences.

"If I were a vocations director, I would commission Jeremy to go around to every Catholic high school in their diocese to do a performance of 'Lolek.' It could be a powerful witness for vocations," said Sondag. "It shows how the cross was a part of John Paul II's priestly life."

"Alessandro," too, is geared toward younger audience, added Sondag, but it's a great play about forgiveness and God's mercy that has the potential to move adults as well.

### **Discussion Starter**

Countless priests, teachers and youth ministers who have attended the play with youth groups, have told Stanbary that it touched some of the most difficult kids that they didn't think could be reached — and opened up new lines of dialogue.

Father Matthew Wertin saw "Alessandro" several years ago while he was a seminarian at Saint Paul Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. He knew it was a powerful vehicle for evangelization, and he intends to bring the play to young audiences in the Diocese of Pueblo, Colo., where he is now administrator at Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish.

"I had never known that much about the story of St. Maria Goretti, and I remember thinking, 'Every young person needs to see this,'" said Father Wertin. "Even if they're not practicing their faith, this play would plant seeds in their hearts. I'm sure that John Paul II is smiling down on Jeremy's work."

### **'The Vitae Monologues'**

Annmarie Cosgrove, founder of Silent No More Minnesota, which ministers to women who have had abortions, is counting on Epiphany Studio Productions to help educate the public about the trauma and devastation of abortion.

She is consulting with Stanbary on a new play, "The Vitae Monologues," which tells the true, emotional stories of post-abortive women and men. Not all of the stories are about abortion, said Cosgrove.

The play will include a segment about a 10-year-old boy with Down syndrome, whose parents never intended to abort him. He may actually appear as a character in the film production of the play.

The seeds for "The Vitae Monologues" were planted when Stanbary attended a Silent No More rally at the pro-life march in Minnesota on Jan. 22, 2005. He was moved by the women's testimonies and told Cosgrove that he wanted to do something about it.

"In Minnesota, you don't plant seeds in January, but this one grew," said Cosgrove with a laugh. "These stories change people's lives, and I know Jeremy will do the play with great reverence and respect to the audience. Anyone 12 and older will be able to see it."

Cosgrove is particularly happy to have Stanbary involved in this project because of his great love for the faith. "His work doesn't honor him, but he honors his work. He really is a beautiful artist, and he has such a passion for the truth."

Stanbary has also been asked to produce a play for the Cathedral of St. Paul in St. Paul, Minn., to honor the apostle Paul, at the close of his Jubilee Year in June 2009. He is also interested in writing a play about Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati, who has captured the hearts of young people worldwide.

### **Theater and Faith**

In his spare time, Stanbary is helping kids combine their love for theatre and the faith through his E-Rhapsody Catholic Youth Theatre. Over the past two years, 130 kids ages 8 to 18 have participated in the program, which culminates with a public stage performance.

Teresa Stephenson, a parent of three girls in the program, believes it has a strong role in evangelizing, not only the audiences, but the kids who participate. Whether or not they embrace a call for acting, she has definitely seen her kids grow in patience, charity and other virtues.

"Jeremy is such a great role model for our kids, willing to give up so much to get his message out there," she said. "He is suffering and sacrificing to make the Lord known. The children can sense this and model his conviction. He encourages them to be 'fools for Christ.'"

*Barb Ernster writes from Fridley, Minnesota.*