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Holy Laughter

By

CATHERINE TRIESCHMANN

Dramatic Publishing Company

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(HOLY LAUGHTER)

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“*Holy Laughter* was originally commissioned by the Denver Center Theatre Company, a division of the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, Kent Thompson, Artistic Director, and was developed at the 2015 Denver Center Theatre New Play Summit.”

“*Holy Laughter* was subsequently presented in a workshop production by WAM Theatre, Kristen Van Ginhoven, Artistic Director, and opened on Oct. 29, 2015, in Pittsfield, Mass.”

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CAST:

Abigail.....Sadieh Rifai
Esther/Myra..... Kelley Rae O’Donnell
Lloyd/Victor Michael Santo
Martine/Vivienne Kim Staunton
Noah/Sam.....Chris Murray
Musician.....Mehry Eslaminia

PRODUCTION STAFF

Artistic DirectorKent Thompson
Director Shelley Butler
Dramaturgy Joy Meads
Stage Managers..... Christopher C. Ewing, Amy Cripe

Holy Laughter was subsequently presented in a workshop production by WAM Theatre. It opened on Oct. 29, 2015, in Pittsfield, Mass.

CAST:

Abigail..... Amie Lytle
Esther/Myra..... Dana Harrison
Lloyd/Victor.....Ron Komora
Martine/Vivienne Kimberlee Monroe
Noah/Sam.....Benjamin Zoey

PRODUCTION STAFF:

Artistic DirectorKristen Van Ginhoven
Director Megan Sandberg-Zakian
Sets..... Juliana Von Haubrich
Costumes.....Lauren Gaston
Lights David Roy
SoundBrad Berridge
Choreography..... Kimberly Ciola
Stage ManagerHope Rose Kelly

For my dear friend, the Rev. Casey Rohleder, who is always quick to provide a hand, an ear, a prayer, a glass of wine.

Special thanks to two visionary artistic directors, Kent Thompson and Kristen Van Ginhoven, whose commitment to empowering women in the American theatre is exemplary.

Thanks to Doug Langworthy, Megan Sandberg-Zakian and Joy Meads for lending their expert dramaturgical skills, and to Bruce Sevy and Chad Henry for helping shape the musical direction of the piece.

Thank you to the Rev. Sarah Fisher, the Rev. Casey Rohleder and Bishop Michael Rhyne for their expert advice on all things ecclesiastic. I apologize for not always taking their advice in the service of comedy.

Finally, thanks to my agent Leah Hamos and to my collaborator and friend Shelley Butler, who was essential in the development of this piece.

Holy Laughter

CHARACTERS

ABIGAIL: late 20s to early 30s, a priest in the Episcopal church, any ethnicity.

ESTHER: 40s to 50s, a parishioner, any ethnicity.

MYRA: 40s to 50s, a hair stylist, any ethnicity.

LLOYD: 60s, a parishioner and member of the vestry, white.

VICTOR: 60s, area bishop and Abigail's spiritual advisor, white.

MARTINE: 50s, a parishioner, Haitian.

VIVIENNE: 50s, pastor of the Church of the Good Shepherd, black.

NOAH: 20s, parishioner, amateur dancer/choreographer, any ethnicity.

SAM: 30s, any ethnicity.

NOTE: Characters paired together may be doubled.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The play uses hymns throughout, which should be played by a live musician and/or the members of the congregation.

All songs are in the public domain.

The play should be performed with no scenic breaks, flowing continuously from one scene to the next.

A “/” in the text indicates an interruption.

HYMNS

Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing
Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?
Lord of the Dance
Onward, Christian Soldiers
Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus
Savior of the Nations, Come
He's Got the Whole World in His Hands
O the Deep, Deep Love of Jesus

Holy Laughter

1.

(An empty room with a table C.

ABIGAIL, wearing a clerical collar and an unfastened alb [a priest's robe], enters. She carries a bottle of wine and a wine glass.

She places them both on the table and pours herself a glass.

She sips.

She gulps.

A rubber fish falls from the sky.

She stares at it.

Bells chime.

Stained glass windows descend from the sky.

The table becomes an altar.

ABIGAIL puts down the wine, fastens her alb and places a green stole around her neck.

The CONGREGATION enters, perhaps from the house, singing.)

CONGREGATION.

COME THOU FOUNT OF EVERY BLESSING,
TUNE MY HEART TO SING THY GRACE!
STREAMS OF MERCY NEVER CEASING,
CALL FOR SONGS OF LOUDEST PRAISE.
TEACH ME SOME MELODIOUS SONNET,

CONGREGATION (*cont'd*).

SUNG BY FLAMING TONGUES ABOVE.
 PRAISE THE MOUNT I'M FIXED UPON IT,
 MOUNT OF GOD'S REDEEMING LOVE.

(And on the second verse, it all falls apart.

*No one really knows the words. Some people stop singing
 altogether and sit down.*

Those who keep singing, do so badly.)

CONGREGATION (*cont'd*).

HERE I FIND MY GREATEST TREASURE;
 HITHER BY THY HELP, I'VE COME;
 AND I HOPE, BY THY GOOD PLEASURE,
 SAFELY TO ARRIVE AT HOME.
 JESUS SOUGHT ME WHEN A STRANGER,
 WANDERING FROM THE FOLD OF GOD;
 HE, TO RESCUE ME FROM DANGER,
 BOUGHT ME WITH HIS PRECIOUS BLOOD.

ABIGAIL. We'll try that again next week.

Friends, it's wonderful to see you—

The few of you—

Here on this beautiful Sunday morning in September.

The sky is blue.

The sun is shining.

God is with us.

Can I get an amen?

(Crickets.)

ABIGAIL (*cont'd*). No?

OK.

I'd like to begin this morning by saying thank you.

I couldn't ask for a better place to start my ministry than here
with you at St. Michael's.

Thank you for welcoming me so warmly into your community.
And that's what I'd like to speak to you about today—
Community.

At its root, community is formed around common interest.
We feel close to people when we live in the same place and
like the same things.

It bonds us together—

It is, in other words, a form of bondage.

(Beat.)

ABIGAIL *(cont'd)*. But not in a sex way.

Or in a slavery way.

Just forget I mentioned bondage.

Church community is also built around common interest.

We are here this morning, because we believe that Jesus
Christ is the son of God who died and was buried and on
the third day rose again.

(Beat.)

ABIGAIL *(cont'd)*. At least some of the time.

We're at St. Michael's Episcopal Church specifically because
we like the liturgy of high church but don't really get the
whole pope thing.

Not that I have anything against the pope.

He seems really great.

Almost makes me want to convert back to the mothership,
you know?

Of course, they don't ordain women,

So that's a problem.

I'm off track.

ABIGAIL (*cont'd, under her breath.*) Shit.

Whether Catholic or Protestant, high church or low,
Church community can be a source of great sorrow—
I mean solace.

No church worth her salt is going to let you cook a meal
when you bring a new baby home or sit in a hospital
waiting room alone.

Community can also be a challenge.

We all know grown women who haven't spoken for years
over the choice of altar flowers.

But if we let it, community can also be a refining fire,
A place where we burn up and die!

To ourselves, I mean.

We die to ourselves.

That's the whole point of a refining fire.

The flames consume you but you don't literally die.

You know how when you cook with vodka, you burn away
the alcohol to increase the flavor?

That is, if you don't drink it all yourself!

Which I don't, of course.

I use vodka for cooking purposes only.

*(Long pause. The train has left the station, and ABIGAIL
has no idea where it's gone.)*

The End.

May the peace of the Lord be with you.

2.

*(ABIGAIL remains C, as she's approached by various
members of the CONGREGATION. The congregants don't
overhear one another unless otherwise noted.*

Lights up on LLOYD.)

LLOYD. That was a very interesting sermon.

ABIGAIL. I'll be better next week, I promise.

LLOYD. From your mouth to God's ear.

ABIGAIL. How is Evelyn doing?

LLOYD. The same.

ABIGAIL. I know it's difficult. Let me know if there's anything I can do for you.

LLOYD. You can go back to the regular liturgy.

ABIGAIL. Excuse me?

LLOYD. You've changed the Eucharist liturgy. The original was written like that for a reason.

ABIGAIL. Well, there's several different versions in the book of common prayer—

LLOYD. They revised it in the seventies under the influence of hippies. The 1928 version is as God intended.

ABIGAIL. Actually, the original book of common prayer was written in 1549.

LLOYD. Revised as God intended in 1928.

(Lights up on NOAH.)

NOAH. What am I supposed to call you?

ABIGAIL. Mother Abigail.

NOAH. Mommy Abby?

ABIGAIL. Just Abigail would be fine.

NOAH. Well, Abigail, the old version of the prayer book is deadly. It was written in like, 1810.

ABIGAIL. 1928, actually.

NOAH. All the thees and thous and ye this, ye that, yee-haw. What are we, pilgrims?

ABIGAIL. Aren't we? In a manner of speaking?

NOAH. I meant like on the Mayflower.

ABIGAIL. No, not that kind.

NOAH. We need to retire that old version for good.

ABIGAIL. I hear you.

(Lights on LLOYD.)

LLOYD. The younger crowd doesn't tithe.

ABIGAIL. How do you know that, Lloyd?

LLOYD. I didn't tithe at twenty, did you?

ABIGAIL. No.

LLOYD. I think people who tithe should have more influence on what liturgy we use.

ABIGAIL. I'm afraid the church doesn't work that way.

LLOYD. The church has worked that way for thousands of years.

ABIGAIL. Well not this church. Not now. We'll use the old liturgy. We'll use the old hymns. But we're going to introduce some new things too.

LLOYD. You're changing the hymnody now?

ABIGAIL. Not changing, expanding.

LLOYD. Oh God!

ABIGAIL. What?

LLOYD. You're going to make us sing praise songs!

(Lights up on ESTHER. LLOYD remains.)

ESTHER. There's nothing wrong with praise songs.

LLOYD. They say the same thing over and over again. God is good. God is good. God is good, we get it!

ESTHER. Praise songs use words that everyone can understand. I'm sorry, the Anglican hymns are lovely, but they're also imperialist and elitist.

LLOYD. What's wrong with that?

ESTHER. You want to know what's wrong with imperialism?

ABIGAIL. The point is, the younger crowd likes praise songs, and we need to think about them too.

ESTHER. Not to mention the ESL community.

LLOYD. What about them?

ESTHER. You know what's easy to sing when English is your second language? God is good. God is good. God is good.

(Lights up on MARTINE.)

MARTINE. Abigail!

ABIGAIL. Martine. It's so nice to see you.

MARTINE. Aren't you sweet. And so robust. Such nice, round hips. When are you going to get married?

ABIGAIL. I have my hands full with the congregation. What do I need a husband for?

MARTINE. You must get married before your eggs dry up like chalk in the sun. Now, I want to talk to you about the music. There are some beautiful spirituals in the hymnal that we never sing.

ABIGAIL. You're right. I love those. Take the hymnal home and pick out next week's music, please!

MARTINE. I knew we'd see eye to eye. I have a second cousin in Port-au-Prince who is looking for a wife.

ABIGAIL. Why don't we keep my husband search to the continental U.S.?

MARTINE. He's very wealthy. By Haitian standards.

(Lights up on LLOYD.)

LLOYD. Spirituals?

ABIGAIL. Yes.

LLOYD. Charles Wesley did not write spirituals. He wrote hymns.

(Lights up on ESTHER. LLOYD remains.)

ESTHER. Charles Wesley participated in the wholesale stripping of Native American culture and identity.

LLOYD. What's that got to do with anything? I tell you what: I'll give you the hymns, if you give me the liturgy.

ABIGAIL. This isn't *Let's Make a Deal!*

LLOYD. You weren't our first choice, you know.

ABIGAIL. No, actually, I didn't know that.

LLOYD. We wanted this fella from Florida. Married to the sweetest lady. Had four kids.

ESTHER. Oh they were cute!

ABIGAIL. He sounds swell. What happened? Did he get a better offer elsewhere?

ESTHER. No, he got arrested for child pornography.

ABIGAIL. Oh God!

LLOYD. Yeah, that was a close call.

(LLOYD and ESTHER exit. Lights up on NOAH.)

NOAH. I'd like to present an original liturgical dance next Sunday.

ABIGAIL. I like how you think, but it's short notice.

NOAH. But you're not against the idea.

ABIGAIL. No, I think God is honored by artistic offerings of all kinds.

NOAH. So I can do it?

ABIGAIL. Yes, but let's find a better date.

NOAH. You promise?

ABIGAIL. Do I need to promise?

NOAH. I'd like your word.

ABIGAIL. I already said you could do it. Don't you believe me?

NOAH. I think you mean well.

ABIGAIL. OK ...

NOAH. I don't want to go into the whole backstory, but suffice it to say, there are factions against it.

(Lights up on MARTINE. NOAH remains.)

MARTINE. I believe worshipping God should be a full-bodied experience.

ABIGAIL. I don't disagree.

MARTINE. Some members can be so stiff, so stuffy.

ABIGAIL. There's room for all forms of worship at St. Michael's, including dance.

NOAH. One congregant, who shall remain anonymous, said, "Over my dead, rotting, worm-infested body."

ABIGAIL. Anonymous?

NOAH. Lloyd. It was Lloyd.

ABIGAIL. Let's put our heads together on this one.

NOAH. I've been practicing my routine for months.

(NOAH breaks out into a weird modern dance, while MARTINE sings.)

MARTINE.

WERE YOU THERE WHEN THEY CRUCIFIED MY
LORD?

OH, SOMETIMES IT CAUSES ME TO TREMBLE
TREMBLE

WERE YOU THERE WHEN THEY CRUCIFIED MY
LORD.

(NOAH looks at ABIGAIL expectantly.)

ABIGAIL. I've never seen anything like it!

(NOAH and MARTINE exit.)

3.

(A window descends from the sky: the bishop's office.

ABIGAIL unbuttons her collar.

VICTOR, the bishop of the diocese, enters, wearing a clerical collar and holding two tumblers of scotch. He hands one to ABIGAIL.)

ABIGAIL. Thank you, Bishop. How'd you know?

VICTOR. The first week is always a hard one. So how did it go?

ABIGAIL. You know, seven years ago, I was lying naked in a beautiful man's apartment overlooking the Brooklyn bridge. Well, not really overlooking. More like under it and at an odd angle. My point is: he played jazz guitar. Not professionally. He was too busy smoking pot to do anything professionally. But he was beautiful. Or maybe I was just high. I don't really remember. But it was a good life in its own way. No one demanded anything from me. I waited tables, I came home, I made love to a beautiful man, drank until I passed out and didn't think one iota about making the world a better place. It was heaven.

VICTOR. I was once a real ladies man.

ABIGAIL. You don't say.

VICTOR. Picture this. 1975. Sideburns. Turtleneck. Plaid bell-bottoms.

ABIGAIL. How did you fight them off?

VICTOR. I'm telling you, there was great gnashing of teeth when I joined the priesthood.

ABIGAIL. To the hedonistic days of yore.

VICTOR. Where have they gone?