

Solange De Santis

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Brookstone Theatre connects spirit and life

By Solange De Santis

You'll never see a typical nativity pageant – with the Three Wise Men in bathrobes -- at Toronto's Brookstone Theatre, although the theatre's mandate is to present work with a Judeo-Christian perspective. Founded in 1988 by actor/playwright Dennis Hassell and working out of a Baptist church and community center, Brookstone produces edgy, original shows that have won mainstream theater awards and reviews from secular publications. They include the Canadian Press wire service, which said Brookstone presents "works that explore spirituality's role in the hectic milieu of modern urban life ... a far cry from traditional religious theatre."

Now, Brookstone is staggering back to life after a financial crisis last year nearly closed the doors. This fall, it is presenting singer/songwriter Jacob Moon for two nights and Mr. Hassell's one-man show, *St. Hilaria*, the tale of a pastor, his parishioners and their run-down church.

Brookstone has had several touring engagements this past year also, said newly-hired general manager David Crawford, including *St. Hilaria*. Touring is a significant component of Brookstone's activities. The company offers a variety of productions for churches, schools or community centers, including *Paul, For The Defense*, a sermon-length show featuring St. Paul as a Jewish attorney in a courtroom drama that's meant to be performed during a church service.

The Christmas show is *He's Here*, a concert by actor and singer Jeanine Noyes, who has rearranged the traditional songs and written some new ones, said Mr. Crawford. That sense of creativity attracted Mr. Crawford, even as Brookstone almost went under.

Previous shows have been nominated for a total of 14 Dora Awards, Canada's equivalent of Broadway's Tony Award. They include *The Big Picture*, or "the Bible in two hours," about which the *Calgary Herald* wrote, "this ain't no Sunday school." *A Dixie Gospel*, by folk/rock musician Harry Chapin posed the question, "What if Jesus had been born in the Deep South?"

The theater's troubles began in May, 2003, when a show about a faith healer, *Almost There*, didn't catch on with the public, he said. "Brookstone found itself in a position with an inordinate amount of debt, so in January 2004, the board basically asked, 'Lord, do you want this to happen?'" said Mr. Crawford in an interview.

Brookstone had interested some powerful friends before – opera singer Ben Heppner was part of an earlier campaign – and an anonymous donor came forward with \$30,000 in matching funds. Mr. Hassell, who is artistic director, chose to forego a salary temporarily. "The money came in, in bits and pieces," said Mr. Crawford. Enough was eventually raised to hire Mr. Crawford and rehire Mr. Hassell.

Mr. Crawford, who holds a B.A. in theater and interned with the theatrical producing company Livent, at the end of September left a job as project consultant with the Manulife insurance firm to plunge into theater fulltime.

"I'm doing something I'm very passionate about and that ties in with my spiritual life as a Christian," said Mr. Crawford, who attends a Pentacostal church in Toronto, but stresses that he isn't wedded to that particular denomination. "I've been church-shopping. I needed to settle at a home church and this one was arts-focused and worked with young people and I wanted to be able to walk to church from home," he said.

Now he's building the donor list, writing grant proposals and trying to ensure that each show ideally breaks even, all on an annual budget of about \$200,000.

"We are unique in the idea of reconnecting theatre and spirit. There are very few organizations that have that mandate. We want to get a dialogue going. We're interested in probing things, engaging people in spirituality," said Mr. Crawford.

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