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November 27, 2009

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## Standout cast in 'Children of Eden' elevates Biblical musical to classic status

By Cary Ginell [soundthink@aol.com](mailto:soundthink@aol.com)



THE EARLY DAYS—Jonathan Bluth as Adam, left, Darrienne Lissette Gross as Eve and John McCool Bowers as Father perform in the Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center's production of "Children of Eden," which plays through Dec. 6.

Photo Courtesy Jan Glasband

Just because a show never makes it to Broadway doesn't mean it can't have a life elsewhere. Such is the case with Stephen Schwartz's "Children of Eden," a remarkable and intensely moving musical that is being staged by the Actors' Repertory Theatre of Simi at the Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center.

Although Schwartz is better known for his mega-hits such as "Wicked" and "Pippin," "Children of Eden" is every bit as deserving of "classic" status. It focuses on two events in the book of Genesis: Adam and Eve, and Noah and the Flood. "Eden" thus joins shows such as "Godspell" (also by Schwartz), "Two By Two" and "Jesus Christ Superstar" in its depiction of biblical tales.

But unlike the others, "Eden" removes the overtly religious elements from the stories, and the result is a morality lesson on family, parenting, forgiveness, faith and redemption.

The lead role of Father is magnificently played by John McCool Bowers, a Westlake Village attorney who gave up show business 25 years ago only to return to the boards recently. (I last saw him as Henry Higgins in this summer's "My Fair Lady.") Bowers' booming baritone powers such songs as "Let There Be" and "The Flood," but his range is deceptive; he is equally capable of singing sotto voce in the tenor register. The majesty of his performance is not to be missed.

But "Children of Eden" is far from a one-man show. From top to bottom, producer Jan Glasband and director George Kraleman have assembled a sterling cast consisting mostly of youngsters, all of whom have extraordinary voices and stage presence.

The key roles of Eve and Noah's wife, traditionally played by one person (as are Adam and Noah), are played by Darrienne Lissette Gross. In Sunday afternoon's performance, Gross' rousing version of the gospel shout "Ain't It Good?" turned the 70-year-old Cultural Arts Center into a church once again, as audience members became congregants, whooping gospel-like responses in sanctified ecstasy.

Jonathan Bluth shows sensitivity and poise in playing Adam/Noah, the true father figure of the show, as he fights the safety of ignorance by expressing his curiosity and independence in defiance of Father. Other standouts include William James Jr., playing Cain and Japheth, the rebels of the respective families. Alex Frago is an iridescent Yonah, soloing on the exquisite "Stranger to the Rain."

The role of The Snake in the Garden of Eden, usually played by a single individual, is divided into five parts, with each of a quintet of actors carrying a part of the snake, writhing and twisting it like a Chinese dragon. Their song, "In Pursuit of Excellence," is a soft-shoe number sung in beautiful five-part harmony.

The vibrant young cast performs splendidly throughout the show, most memorably in "Generations," a highly choreographed Caribbean-flavored ensemble number that opens Act II, and "The Return of the Animals," in which Noah's Ark is populated by pairs of animals: children wearing masks or hoisting pole puppets à la "The Lion King."

The small eight-piece orchestra is led, as always, by Gary Poirot, and the production is among the finest he's ever done for this theater. Whether you're a believer, a doubter or a nonbeliever, "Children of Eden" is a must-see show. It is riveting, joyous entertainment for the entire family.

"Children of Eden" plays through Dec. 6. For information, visit [www.simi-arts.org](http://www.simi-arts.org) or call (805) 583-7900.

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