

Saving Nineveh

by Lance Wilcox

Synopsis

Saving Nineveh is a mystery play. By that I mean not a “whodunit” but a mystery play in the medieval sense: a deliberately naive, earthy, comic retelling of a Biblical legend. It is, in fact, an adaptation of the Book of Jonah, the Jewish parable popularly known as “Jonah and the Whale.”

As in the original, the fractious, self-willed Jonah of Gath-Hepher is commanded by God to denounce Nineveh, capital city of the oppressive and hated Assyrians. Despite his loathing of the Assyrians, however, Jonah responds to God’s command by fleeing across the Mediterranean in a ship bound for Tarshish. A storm at sea and a fantastic fish return him to land. He then carries out his prophetic mission, marching across the Assyrian desert into the very heart of Nineveh to denounce its evils and to proclaim, with fierce exultation, its imminent destruction at the hands of an angry God. But to his unspeakable shock, Nineveh repents. And to make matters worse, God accepts their repentance and revokes their sentence. Having resigned himself to martyrdom in order to proclaim the destruction of Nineveh, Jonah must now face the even worse fate of finding himself the savior of the city. Jonah’s horror at the success of his mission and his outrage at God’s clemency provoke a final contest between human justice and divine mercy.

Saving Nineveh tells the story of Jonah in eight scenes, following him from his home in Galilee, to the storm at sea, to the belly of the fish, then across the desert to Nineveh, and finally back to his home in Israel. With sufficient doubling (and trebling) of roles, the play can be performed by as few as eleven actors. Production requirements are minimal. This is theatre as open make believe—complete with angels, pirates, wives, kings, hookers, thieves, prophets, disciples, and assorted miracles. The loosely episodic structure and the blend of affection and irreverence are inspired by the medieval mystery play tradition. In terms of language *Nineveh* follows the tradition by blending Biblical archaism and contemporary slang. The play calls for a broad, open, extroverted performance, lends itself well to outdoor production, and is suitable for audiences of all ages.