

Play energizes 'The Word'

By Cheryl Dore
Staff Writer

Bill Monaghan stands on stage, testing an uncooperative sound system. It's four days from show time, and there's a lot of work to be done.

But there's confusion in the cold auditorium at Archbishop Wood High School. Girls who should be practicing dance steps are giggling instead. Musicians are warming up, and guys are wandering around, one even teases the costume designer.

"Almost an hour after rehearsal was set to begin, Monaghan draws the cast together in a circle. Finally, there is quiet.

"It might help us to remember why we're here," he says and leads the group in a short prayer. "We've got to collect ourselves, guys ... we really have to get our minds on this. Tonight we're going to start with Act II, bit by bit by bit ..."

It's not easy being the writer, director, producer and star.

But Monaghan is used to it. It's the third time this year the cast and crew of "The Word" will perform together. He knows how to grab their attention, how to guide them and lead them. He envisions how every scene should look, and he knows every song by heart. He should, he wrote them.

Monaghan, 25, wrote the gospel opera last fall, when, planning a performance to raise funds for Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in Southampton, he discovered how expensive the royalties are for well-known musicals like "Godspell."

"I've always loved 'Godspell,'" he said. "It just hits people when they see it. It's nice to feel you were a part of that."

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Preparing for the production of "The Word" at Archbishop Wood High School this weekend are (front, from left) Mike Latini, George Wilson and (rear) writer/director Bill Monaghan and Kate Wilson. (Staff photo by Steven Stearns)

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With that in mind, Monaghan sought to capture that same spirit, those feelings he's seen in the eyes of audience members.

The result is a spirited telling of the story of Jesus, from the Old Testament to the resurrection, told through a variety of songs, much like The Who's rock opera "Tommy." Monaghan hopes when people see "The Word," they will "capture and feel God's plan and God's glory," and get in tune with their own religion.

"If we do this just as a show, then I wouldn't want to do it," he said, "because there's a feeling involved. The energy comes alive on stage."

Much of the energy is in the music. The prologue has an African flavor; John's baptism of Jesus is set to a reggae beat. There's a bit of Motown, a bit of funk and hard pop rock, and even a hoedown tune about the coming of the Lord. And when the devil appears, the stage lights turn red and the band erupts into a heavy drum and base groove.

Energy also is felt in the enthusiasm of the talented cast, made up of both high school and college students, including Monaghan, who plays Jesus. Many, like Monaghan, have graduated from Wood; several are currently students there and at Mount St. Joseph Academy in Flourtown.

The group first worked together last spring for the May production at Our Lady of Good Counsel.

They came together again in June for a performance at Father Judge High School in Northeast Philadelphia, where they raised \$1,000 for the school. This time they volunteered their time to help Monaghan raise funds to support service, ministry, cross country and soccer at Wood.

"The Word" is the second musical Monaghan has written. He co-authored with a friend his first piece, "Brunswick 2057," a story about ghosts in a theater. He's also written a children's ballet and has directed performances of several other musicals. On Saturday mornings he can often be found working with children at Theater & Kids in Lansdale.

Monaghan is modest, though, about his achievements.

"I don't exactly know what my calling is," he said.

On stage, chaos erupts again as the actors prepare to rehearse the beginning of Act II. Suddenly they burst into song and the chaos is gone. "Sing, sing, sing, sing hosanna" echoes through the auditorium.

"The Word" will be shown in the Sophia A. Friedman Auditorium at Archbishop Wood High School, 655 York Road, Warminster. Shows are at 8 p.m. today and Saturday, and at 2 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$5 for adults and \$3 for seniors, children and students. For information or reservations, call (215) 672-5050, Ext. 17, or (215) 357-1300, Ext. 132.