

## Serving God by using drama

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Catherine Zardus needed 99 sheep – not 100, but 99 – and the students at St. Damian School in Westland were more than willing to bleat. In fact, they were more than willing to volunteer to be plants and sway back and forth and play travelers.

And along the way they learned the messages contained in the Parables of Christ.

“If you take one thing away today, it is to use your imagination when you pray,” said Zardus. “Close your eyes and imagine.”

The Deaborn resident was part of a three-woman show that brought the Christ’s teachings to life in *The Parable Project*, nine short dramas of well-known teaching. Joining her in the recent performance was Amy Heard of Milford and Lise Lacasse of Royal Oak. Using simple props like chairs purchase at IKEA, shawls and a long coat, they transformed themselves into a shepherd, a judge, Pharisee and the Prodigal’s son.

As the founder and artistic director, Zardus has produced, directed, performed and promoted Magic Carpet Theatre for more than 22 years. MTC’s mission has been to inspire imaginations and promote literacy by bringing the literature of Brothers Grimm, Dr. Seuss, and Maurice Sendak to life through interactive performances.

### Call to do more

But Zardus felt a calling to do more and four years ago she started the drama ministry, conceiving, writing and producing two original shows, *The Parable Project*, and *At His Feet, Women in Scripture*, both of which promote the gospel.

“When I was a little girl I use to imagine scenes from the Bible, not knowing that this was a form of prayer,” said Zardus. “When I grew up and became an actress, while listening to the readings at Mass, I would see the scene played out and staged in my head. Again, I didn’t know this was a form of prayer. After a deeper conversion, I realized that my imagination was a tremendous gift for encountering Christ in the Living Word. All of my ideas germinated for years.”

She hooked up with Marybeth Kinnell of Wayne and Lacasse to form the drama ministry, rehearsing the skits in the living room of her home. Her dog was their audience. The women come from different Christian faiths and theatrical backgrounds.

Zardus has performed in regional theatres across the country, playing opposite David Soul in *Lunch Hour*, and with Joyce Dewitt, and Pat Paulsen in *Noises Off*. She has been nominated twice for Best Supporting Actress in Detroit and in 2012, she directed the production of *The Living Stations* at the Cathedral of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Detroit.

Lacasse has been a professional actress for more than 20 years, performing in everything from feature films, sketch comedy and improv, theatre, television commercials, radio voiceovers, educational

entertainment. She has seven feature films under her belt and has been active in MCT for 10 years. She also has been a part-time missionary to Kenya and South Africa since 2003.

“It’s great to be able to bring live theater to students, especially in this technological age,” Lacasse said. “Some schools have never seen live theater.”

Kinnell’s love for theater began in elementary school. After directing her first play, at age seven, she took to the stage in junior high and never looked back. She became a professional singer and entertainer after high school, but her early experience with drama lead her to teaching and a job as the drama teacher at Melvindale High School. She has been a part of MCT for four years.

Because of teaching, Kinnell is unable to do daytime performances, which brought Heard to the group. A professional Christian singer/songwriter and winner of two Detroit Music Awards for Outstanding Christian Vocalist and Outstanding Christian Songwriter, both in 2004, Heard is an instructor of voice, guitar, piano and theatre and a part-time vocalist and actor.

### **Scripted shows**

The trio select from 11 scripted parables for their shows. Among those performed at St. Damian were *The Lost Sheep*, *The Good Samaritan*, *The Prodigal Son* and *The Unjust Judge and the Importunate Widow*. Students were called on to play the sheep, travelers and the seeds in *The Parable of the Seed*.

The performances were filled with humor and in sharp contrast to *At His Feet* which is meant for an adult audience. According to Zardus, in 2011, the Archdiocese of Detroit asked that put together a performance for a women’s conference. In *At His Feet*, the women perform in period clothing and there is no audience participation. The show is comprised of three mini-dramas – *The Woman at the Well*, *Martha and Mary* and *the Woman with the Hemorrhage*. Zardus wrote the scripts while Kelly Nieto of The Cross and the Light wrote the music for *The Woman with the Hemorrhage*.

In February, *At His Feet* opened with three professional actresses, a vocalist and a guide for dialogue, reflection and prayer.

“This is simply not a show, it’s an interactive evening of soaking in Scripture and taking it to heart,” said Zardus. “It is powerful, profound and spirit-filled.”

The performance at St. Damian came as students were preparing for the Christmas break. On a day filled with classroom parties, gathering in the church for Mass and *The Parable Project*. A part of a tri-parish that includes Divine Savior and St. Theodore in Westland, an invitation was extended to parishioners to join students for the performance. Second-graders made Christmas cards that were given to the guests and they received Christmas canes as they left the church.

“We have a certain amount of money for enrichment and one of the recommendations was to invite the Magic Carpet Theatre back,” said Principal Jacqueline Mojeske. “We decided to open our doors to Divine Savior and St. Theodore and have them come spend time with the Chargers.”

Strong in her faith, Zardus feels honored and blessed to be able to “serve God using drama to draw people closer to Him.”

“There is nothing more satisfying than doing the work that God has called you to do,” said Zardus.

“Theater is a powerful tool for the New Evangelization because it opens hearts and allows people to feel God’s love in a personal way.”

**For more information about Magic Carpet Theatre, call 313-359-1736 or by email at [catherine@magiccparettheatre.org](mailto:catherine@magiccparettheatre.org).**