

By the author of the best seller *My Life with the Saints*
JAMES MARTIN, SJ

A Jesuit **Off-Broadway**

Center Stage with Jesus, Judas, and Life's Big Questions

*"Extraordinary revelations on theology,
the priesthood, and the theater. Bravo!"*

MARTIN SHEEN



version of the play was published, I noted with some chagrin that in the Gospel according to Stephen Adly Guirgis, Jesus' first miracle occurred in Canaan.



Arriving early for the first preview in my clerical collar and black suit, and with a few friends in tow, I met a tired Stephen outside the theater nervously having a smoke. "How are you?" I asked. "Not too good, Jim," he said. "Not too good."

Gamely, I tried to encourage him, but he was anxiety-ridden about the audience's reaction, the length of the play, and—the central concern of everyone in the cast—the reviewers. (Over the next few weeks, I would hear the name of the *New York Times's* chief theater critic, Ben Brantley, almost as often as I would hear the name of Jesus.) I started to make my way to Martinson Hall but was stopped in the lobby by a young usher.

"Sorry," she said. "The house isn't open yet. You can't go upstairs"

"Um . . ." I certainly wasn't going to identify myself as the theological advisor. I said instead, "I'm with the cast."

"Oh!" She laughed. "For a minute I thought you were a real priest!"

"I am, actually."

"Oh my *God!* Sorry . . . I mean . . . well . . . um . . . you can just go upstairs . . . Father."

It was discomfiting to see the risers filling up with people; it was as if they were somehow intruding on our personal space. I missed the plastic tables and chairs that had provided a place for our long conversations. But I was also excited to finally see onstage what we had been working on for so many months.

As my friends and I seated ourselves, I described to them how the play would begin, where the actors would sit, when Saint Monica would appear, where—

“You’re not going to tell me all the lines, are you?” one asked darkly.

The play began in a darkened theater, which gradually filled with the sound of thunder and gently falling rain. A single spotlight shone on Deborah Rush, playing the mother of Judas Iscariot. When I first met Deborah, a blond actress with delicate features, I had a hard time imagining her as Mrs. Iscariot. Adding to the incongruity was her costume. Mimi O’Donnell had dressed her in a pink cashmere sweater and a long skirt: Judas’s mother looked as if she had just stepped out of a Talbots catalog.

But as soon as she opened her mouth that first night of previews, I understood Stephen’s casting decision and Mimi’s intention. Judas’s mother was Everywoman—or, rather, Everymother—and the type of person this New York audience would need to introduce the play. “No parent should have to bury a child,” she said, her hands clasped in front of her. “No mother should have to bury a son. Mothers are not meant to bury sons. It is not in the natural order of things . . .” And then, finally, after all those weeks, the play began.

I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed it all: I laughed at things I had read dozens of times in the script and had heard dozens of times at the readings, but that were made more vital by the actors onstage. The set worked well, especially the overhead pulpit, from which the saints delivered their speeches. (One reviewer later disagreed; he called the device “hackneyed.”) At the same time, I spotted some errors I had failed to correct in the script. In his monologue, Saint Peter spoke of his younger brother “Jimmy” introducing him to Jesus. How did I miss that? Peter’s brother was named Andrew. I pulled out a pen and wrote a note on the palm of my hand.

The audience members were appreciative (many were family and friends of the cast), and the play ended to loud applause. Unfortunately, the play also ended three hours and forty-five minutes after it had begun.

“Boy,” whispered my friend during the ovations. “That was a little . . . long.”

A Christological Crisis

The next morning, I got a call from Sam. He sounded worried.

“Hey, Jim,” he said, “you have to come and see this new Jesus scene. It’s a lot different.” Stephen had changed the ending again.

That night, I wandered into the theater and took my seat in the back row, the “house seats,” where the cast and crew sat. In the final scene, in place of a placid Jesus, a confused Jesus confronted an even angrier Judas and said: “Look, I, um . . . I don’t always . . . know . . . what to say, okay? How to say. Words . . . they don’t . . . come easy always. You probably think they should, but they don’t. I’m not a talk guy. I don’t always know the way to . . . reach you. I try, I really try . . . Will you please look at me, Judas?”

For the first time, I was unnerved by the play. When I returned home, I telephoned Sam and told him that I found the final scene unsettling. Why was Jesus so confused? And then so angry? What happened to the original Jesus? Sam gently—and then not-so-gently—encouraged me to telephone Stephen.

“You have to call him,” he said. “He’ll listen to you.”

Stephen immediately wanted to know what I thought about the new dialogue. Back in preaching class, years ago, I had been trained to begin with what I liked when critiquing other classmates’ homilies. What do you commend, my professor would say, and then what do you recommend? So I told Stephen what I thought had been successful.

“Yeah, I know all that,” he said. “What *didn’t* you like?” I confided that I found Jesus too uncentered, too scattered, to be even remotely

recognizable. At the risk of hurting Stephen's feelings during such a stressful time, I decided to be honest.

"I have no idea who that Jesus was," I said. "I wouldn't follow that Jesus around the corner, let alone to the ends of the earth."

As soon as I said it, I was horrified by my bluntness.

Stephen was silent. This was unusual. Normally, our lively telephone conversations had us speaking over and interrupting each other. I hoped that I hadn't offended him: this was an important scene, and I instantly regretted my honesty, worried that I had overstepped my boundaries. After all, I was the theological adviser, not the playwright.

But Stephen listened attentively and then asked more questions about Jesus. "Okay, Jim," he said finally. "That helps. Thanks."

That night I didn't sleep well, concerned that I had offended or demoralized Stephen, and also worried that he would keep the angry Jesus.

Early the next morning, I got a call from Stephen. "Could you come to a reading this afternoon?"

A few hours later, at the theater, he explained that he had changed Jesus because he felt that he was too "divine." Stephen wanted to make him more human. But human doesn't mean angry, does it? I asked. He gave me a look that said, It does to me.

"But I changed it again," he said, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. "You'll see."

Now Jesus' character fell somewhere between placid and angry. He met Judas with sympathy but also expressed frustration at Judas's despair. His opening monologue was also cut considerably. But he still told the audience that he was everywhere and with everyone. "And make no mistake," he said, "'Who I Love' is every last one. I *am* every last one." That was how it stayed for the remainder of the run.