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## Angels in the Dark: The Church of the Holy Trinity's A Christmas Story



In 1988, the parishioners of Toronto's radical Church of the Holy Trinity were in a quandary. Should they continue with **The Christmas Story**, a theatrical pageant recounting the birth of Christ, or scrap the production? Some in the congregation worried that it was out of touch with such contemporary urban issues as homelessness, a cause close to the church's activist heart. In retrospect, it seems to have been a fuzzy debate. At its core, the Jesus story is about the disenfranchised. It is a story of the poor and the oppressed asserting themselves within a corrupt political system—in short, a story of social revolution. Today, **The Christmas Story** remains nothing short of relevant. Now in its 76th year and

with performances continuing through to Dec. 22, **The Christmas Story**, perhaps more than ever, speaks directly to the people of Toronto about important issues affecting them in the here and now. Its central metaphor of a light banishing the darkness can be said to hold urgent meaning for a city increasingly defined by a growing divide between rich and poor, not to mention a debased local government whose leader has—by his own admission—lied and debauched himself, among other indiscretions. Or should we say sins? While the story describes the coming of the Messiah—Hark the Herald Angels and all—the underlying message, as articulated by the time-honoured Christmas carol, is God and sinners will be reconciled. In other words, there's hope yet.

The message of salvation through faith and perseverance is no accident. Since the beginning, **The Christmas Story** has been a nativity play whose aim has been to give the people hope. Toronto was mired in other social problems when **The Christmas Story** was first staged in 1938 and becoming something of an antidote to the great Depression. Its original director, Patricia Frank, wife of John Frank, then rector of Holy Trinity, modelled it on a pageant created by St. Martin's-in-the-Fields in her native London for the unemployed. The aim was community preservation, a theme that continues until today under the direction of Susan Watson. Making it timeless is the emphasis on the art of gesture more than on a spoken script. While the Biblical story is narrated from the pulpit, players in the hour-long pageant bring the story and its potent symbolism alive by using stylized movements that ultimately do speak louder than words. The gestures are slow and economical, standing in stark contrast to the freneticism of the times, which might explain its universal appeal: Tradition is back in fashion. Children in the audience sit spellbound on carpets, while adults lift their voices in song. It's touching, and beautiful in the way that small intimate gestures are. And small and intimate is what this production is.

Decidedly low-tech, the entire production costs about \$30,000 to produce, the bulk of the cost going towards lighting the makeshift stage erected inside the beautiful Gothic Revival building that has been home to the Church of the Holy Trinity since 1847. Yearly, it attracts thousands to a church ironically wedged up against that most unholy shrine to commercialism, the Eaton Centre. The striking contrast between the two versions of Christmas—the one nurturing souls the other feeding sales—is also part of the show's appeal, especially today. Not only is it stubbornly traditional, it is stubbornly Christian at a time when Christmas itself is being challenged, its symbols removed from civic institutions, and its very name banished by a populace frightened that the word itself causes offence. But this is not to suggest a closed society. On the contrary, **The Christmas Story** aims to be wildly inclusive. It is almost entirely staffed by volunteers, a third of the cast and crew being recruited from within the congregation, and the remainder from the community at large. The only paid positions are those occupied by musician Clement Carelse, pumping the Church of the Holy Trinity's mighty organ, and choir director Michael Erdman whose (truly angelic) choir carries much of the Biblical narrative through song. The production itself is inter-generational, interracial, staged within a church known for being inclusive of gay and lesbian rights, and with a sign language interpreter for the hearing impaired. The players range in age from eight weeks to eighty years. Baby Jesus is a real baby. The aged Jewish priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, also visited by the Angel Gabriel and told she will be with child, are truly aged. There are toddlers among the shepherds, emphasizing the enterprise as a family affair.



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Motto

Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of the critic is to save the tale from the artist who created it.

D.H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature*.

In Memory of David Churchill (1959-2013)



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Some of the players are actually related to each other: mothers, daughters, fathers, sons all sharing the makeshift stage together. Many return to it year after year. This year's Gabriel, for instance, was baby Jesus 19 years ago. Before assuming the directorship 25 years ago, Watson played Rachel, the woman unhinged by the Slaughter of the Innocents in which all infant boys under the age of two were slaughtered in Bethlehem on orders of King Herod, trying in vain to stop the prophecy of a new-born King from coming true. "I remember when I played the role," said Watson recently, "Rwanda and Burundi were in the news and so it was very real to me, the idea of losing your children to a senseless slaughter." It resonated.



– **Deirdre Kelly** is a journalist (*The Globe and Mail*) and internationally recognized dance critic. Her first book, **Paris Times Eight**, is a national best-seller. Her new book, **Ballerina: Sex, Scandal and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection**, is published by Greystone Books (D&M Books). Visit **Ballerina: Sex, Scandal and Suffering Behind the Symbol of Perfection** and **Paris Times Eight** on Facebook, and check out [www.deirdrekelly.com](http://www.deirdrekelly.com) for more book updates.

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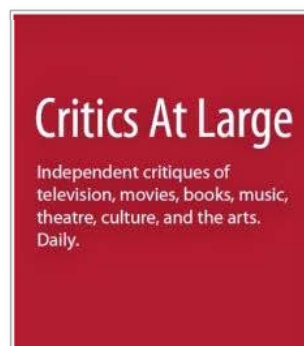
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