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By Orville Scott

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CANTON-Despite a cold, rainy Easter weekend, more than 3,000 people gathered in an East Texas rodeo arena to view "The Passion," a dramatization of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection.

The unusual setting was appropriate for a production that included live horses, donkeys, sheep, goats and chickens.

Jesus (Matt Butler of The Company) washes the feet of a disciple (Chris Cagle, youth minister at First Baptist Church of Canton) during "The Passion," an Easter drama presented in a rodeo arena. Duane Gillett

"The church sees the production in a public arena as an opportunity to meet with compassion the spiritual needs of Van Zandt County and beyond," said Mark Robinson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Canton.

One of the greatest results of the drama, staged by about 175 men, women and children from the church, was that nine people accepted Jesus as Savior, Robinson said.

At least 30 rededicated their lives to Christ, he added.

"These were the ones who gave us a written record of their decisions," he

added. "There may have been others whose lives were changed but who did not report it to us."

Monte Clearman, minister of music at First Baptist Church, hopes to see "The Passion" develop into a monthly feature during Trades Day weekend.

"Eureka Springs is known for its Passion play, and Glen Rose has 'The Promise,' but East Texas deserves to have its own drama," Clearman said.

"I dream of people from far and wide, not only attending First Monday, but also coming to see 'The Passion.'"

Dennis Parrish, associate professor of communication arts at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth and founding director of "The Company," a touring repertory group, directed the drama.

Matt Butler, a member of The Company who is adjunct professor at Dallas Baptist University, portrayed Jesus.

Besides the actors and singers, many volunteers helped make costumes and build the sets representing Jerusalem in the rodeo arena, Clearman said.

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