

‘Hope in the Heartland’ brings the gospel center stage

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IRVING—Desiring to bring the gospel center stage through an evening of toe-tapping entertainment, award-winning songwriters and worship leaders Chris and Diane Machen, members of Preston Ridge Baptist Church in Frisco, wrote and produced “Hope in the Heartland.”

“For people who attend the show and are not believers, we’re hoping this is a watershed moment for them,” Chris Machen said. “We’re praying that it opens up meaningful faith conversations and that people will meet the Lord in a real, life-changing way.

“We hope that everyone who attends will be encouraged by this story of struggle, friendship, community and faith. We also want believers to remember that the message of Christmas is to be shared, not kept, and that they will bring unbelieving friends to hear how a life can be forever altered by an encounter with Christ.”

Based on personal family stories

For Chris Machen, the idea for this musical started almost a decade ago when he felt the Lord leading him to share his own family’s personal stories of the Great Depression. He recalled the stories his father passed down about how their family’s unwavering faith in Christ helped carry them through the difficult times.

“About 10 years ago, I was trying to come up with an idea for our church’s Christmas dinner theater,” Chris Machen said. “I attended a music conference, but didn’t really find what I was looking for there. I remember

praying, 'Lord, what do I do?'

"Now you might think this strange, but I got the answer as if the Lord was whispering in my ear, 'Write your own.' I perked up, because as a songwriter, that sounded like a wonderful challenge. As I sat there pondering, I prayed again, 'Lord, what story do I tell?' Again, almost louder than words, I heard in my spirit, 'Tell your dad's story.'"

He remembered stories his father told him about growing up during the Great Depression and how his grandfather, an out-of-work carpenter, struggled to provide for his family.

"He literally wore holes in three pairs of shoes walking the streets of Amarillo trying to find work to support his family. It was a difficult time for everyone, but for my grandparents, it was made more difficult by losing infant twins," Machen said.

"Not only that, in the midst of trying to keep food on the table, they discovered they were expecting another child. They could barely support the three children that they had, including my dad. But what got them through these difficult days was their faith in Jesus.

"I'm here today, walking with Jesus because of the faith my family clung to and passed down to me. The whole time I was writing this musical for our church, I couldn't get it out of my head that if we could find a way to put the show in secular theaters, then people who might not ever go to church could hear the gospel if someone invited them to this show."

Machen describes the presentation as "a fun, bluegrass, Broadway-style musical that people will really enjoy," but he adds, "Its main purpose is to introduce people to Jesus in a unique way."

"Hope in the Heartland" debuted in 2019 at theaters in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. "And we have been performing it ever since," Machen said.

Open doors to spiritual conversations

With five performances scheduled Dec. 12-15 at the Irving Arts Center, Machen desires these shows will provide audiences with an encouraging evening for families to enjoy. But most of all, he prays it opens doors for conversations about the reason for the season.



“One thing that has surprised and blessed Diane and me about this production is that not only has it been an outreach to the community, but it’s also been an in-reach to our cast members,” he said.

“We have never stipulated that you have to be a Christian to be in our show. We just searched for the most talented people we could find. As a result, some of our cast members are believers, but every year many who have joined us are not. It’s given us a marvelous opportunity to encourage them, love them, provide a positive environment for them and speak about how deeply God cares for them.

“The theater world can be pretty dark. So, at most rehearsals, I share a word of encouragement based on Scripture. And little by little, we’ve tried to introduce them to the one who loves them the most and can change their lives forever.”

Some of the entertainers have experienced “church hurt” and are reluctant to attend a church service, Machen noted.

“But we’re trying to change that culture and help them see that God loves them and that they are fearfully and wonderfully made, as stated in Psalm 139,” Machen said.

The production involves 32 cast members, a production crew of about 10 and more than 20 volunteers.

“It’s a huge undertaking,” Machen said, “but worth it to see people introduced to Jesus, who is our hope in the heartland.”