

Big Bethel's "Heaven Bound" play enters 86th year

- Shelia M. Poole

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The greedy rich man, played by Floyd Baxter, is lead away to Hell by Satan, played by Glenn Samuels, during rehearsals for the 86th annual run of "Heaven Bound" at Big Bethel AME Church in Atlanta. Curtis Compton/ccompton@ajc.com

Once a year, Glenn Samuels channels his inner Satan.

He dons a flowing red cape, grabs his menacing pitchfork and chases a pilgrim down the aisle at Big Bethel AME Church.

He tempts an alcoholic with drink.

He pursues three young gamblers and a rich man, who tries buy his way into Heaven.

Twenty-one pilgrims hope to make it through the pearly gates. Some will. Others will taste the flames of hell.

Samuels has been a cast member since the mid-1990s.

“I used to be a young Satan, I’m an old Satan now,” he said right before rehearsals in the sanctuary of the historic Auburn Avenue church, which is now in its 86th year of producing “ **Heaven Bound**,” a morality play set to music. It may be one of the longest-running continuous plays in the nation. The two-night play is Friday-Saturday, Nov. 11-12 at the church, 220 Auburn Ave. N.E.

“I like the fact that the show has a real Satan because there is real evil out there,” Samuels said. The folk musical, set in the black church tradition, runs through Saturday. It is a local favorite, typically drawing mixed audiences from all over the city to the church that still has a huge sign on its steeple proclaiming “Jesus Saves” in big blue letters.



Pam Selby, who plays a pilgrim, is fitted for her crown during rehearsals for the 86th annual run of “Heaven Bound” at Big Bethel AME Church. Curtis Compton/ccompton@ajc.com Curtis Compton

One of its many fans was **The Atlanta Constitution columnist Celestine Sibley**, who saw the play so many times the choir made her an honorary angel, according to a book on the play by Atlanta Attorney Gregory D. Coleman.

“It caught on like wildfire and ended up saving the church during the Depression,” Coleman, a former director of the play and author of “We’re Heaven Bound! Portrait of a Black Sacred Drama” said in a 2007 Atlanta Journal-Constitution article. “There were more than 500 performances done during the Depression years.” “When blacks came out of slavery, we were almost totally a heaven-focused people, because of the slave

experience. Life centered on the church and our focus was on heaven. And a new literacy out of the Harlem Renaissance resulted in those plays.”

Sibley, who attended her first performance of the play at the suggestion of [Atlanta Constitution editor Ralph McGill](#), was asked in 1998 to award ceremonial wings to Georgia Congressman John Lewis, the show's second honorary angel. Sibley died the following spring. And she had requested that members of the “Heaven Bound” choir sing at her funeral, according to narrator Bill Petty.

"I have seen this folk story almost every November since I came to Atlanta -- first at the suggestion of our editor Ralph McGill -- and I have tried not to miss it ever," Sibley wrote in a column from November 1998. "It is one of the colorful and moving events of Atlanta's calendar."

As for Lewis, who is still in Congress, Sibley reported after the 1998 performance, quoting Gregory Coleman, that "now we are sending our own angel to Washington!"

The play was a collaboration between two church members, Lula Byrd Jones and Nellie Davis, as a fundraiser for the church.

It debuted Feb. 17, 1930 at a cost of 10 cents a person.



Glenn Samuels, who plays Satan, has been a cast member since the mid-1990s. Curtis Compton/ccompton@ajc.com Curtis Compton/The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

The Rev. John Foster, senior pastor of Big Bethel, heard the play was a must-see as soon as he arrived in Atlanta in 1996.

“The general appeal is it addresses the question of how do people from different backgrounds and walks of life make it to eternity,” he said. It’s a question, he said, that resonates with audiences even today. Petty, a retired manager and computer analyst, considers “Heaven Bound” to be part of the church’s ministry.

“It’s a play, but also embedded in it is a description of everything Scripture says about heaven,” he said. Grace Terrell-McCoy, producer and program director, said Friday night’s performance will be traditional and on Saturday the mood is updated with more contemporary music. Last year it raised about \$18,000 before expenses.

“It’s a play people can relate to,” she said. “Everybody has a story to tell.”

Carol Ann Dove, a retired teacher from Tucker, grew up with the play. Her mother, an aunt and uncles were, at various times, members of the cast. Dove herself played various roles as a child and later, as an adult. It left an impression on her young mind. “I remember as a child that the devil was very scary,” she said. “He was a jokester and could trick people into doing wrong. I didn’t want to go to hell. I wanted to be good.”

This is the first year Dove will miss the play since she can remember. Her mother, Pearlie Dove, who was involved for years, died in 2015. Dove says seeing the play that has played such an important role in her life is just too painful. “If I don’t go, I know their spirits are there and they will make it work.”



Jackie Herring works in the wardrobe room preparing costumes for pilgrims and angels for the 86th annual run of “Heaven Bound” at Big Bethel AME Church. Curtis Compton/ccompton@ajc.com Curtis Compton