

# Stage show pumps up the passion in the stories

CCRG 13 Bio Ritz

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Randy Ritz is an actor who wants to put some more flair into religion.

Ritz, drama director at Concordia College, has adapted nine stories from the Old and New Testaments to mine their theatrical potential in new ways. He says he's trying to inject some passion into the old stories, passion which is often missing in traditional presentations.

He has been performing the stories under the title *Big Story* at Knox Evangelical Free Church in Old Strathcona during this week's Fringe festival.

"As an actor, I take the words of the story and bring into life his (the Bible character's) thinking and his feeling. So when you see the characters come to life you don't just get their action, but you get their gut reaction."

The stories he's chosen range from the perennial Sunday school fare, such as David and Goliath, to more obscure biblical tales, such as the story of Naaman being cured of leprosy by following the prophet Elisha's advice.

Ritz, who has master's in drama from the University of Idaho, is working towards a doctorate in drama education at the University of Alberta. He's been performing *Big Story* for about 2½ years and has used it to show Sunday school teachers how they can use drama to increase their students' interest in the Bible stories. He sees his craft as a teaching tool, both in a secular and religious context.

The 39-year-old Edmonton-born actor comes out of a Pentecostal Protestant tradition, which is known for its emotional character. He thinks religious leaders need to



Ken Orr *The Journal*

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bring more of the Pentecostal-type pizzazz to their services to attract more people to church. Ritz sees drama as a way of doing that.

"The problem with churches today, even pastors or priests presenting the sermons, is they have to know what is dramatic, what holds an audience, when you're talking about things in the Scriptures."

Ritz feels at ease with the way he expresses his Christian faith artistically.

Christian performers often feel some conflict between what they need to do to make a living and the constraints their Christian value

system places on their behavior, Ritz says. He feels no such conflict because of the kind of material he's chosen.

"A lot of people struggle with doing secular things in the world, particularly in music and entertainment. They feel if they were to entertain in a secular way, be in a dance band, for instance, they always feel that somehow they are betraying the Christian principle. I've never felt that."

He sees this feeling as a gift from God.

"God told me one day, 'Why don't you go ahead and take Scripture and bring it to life in

## Modern touches help tell the old tales

### REVIEW

#### Big Story

**Where:** Knox Evangelical Free Church,  
84th Avenue and 104th Street  
**When:** 6:00 p.m. until Aug. 22

**Bill Rankin**

Edmonton actor Randy Ritz's off-Fringe show *Big Story* tries to put some old wine into new skins.

*Big Story* is actually nine stories taken from the Old and New Testaments. Ritz saw them as having dramatic potential for a modern audience.

Mostly he tells the stories, which include the well-known David and Goliath and Jonah in the Whale yarns, using a broad repertoire of accents and other vocal mimicry. A bit of modern idiom tossed in is meant to make these ancient biblical figures more accessible.

Goliath, for instance, is portrayed less as a brutish Philistine and more as a goofy giant, obtuse rather than threatening.

ways people have not seen before. Then you can commit yourself totally to this work."

In the end, Ritz begins with his art, not his religion, though.

The professional integrity of his storytelling is upper most in his mind as he melds his art to his

In the interest of capturing kids' attention, Ritz resorts to the vocal styling of cartoon characters such as a Snagglepuss-sounding Jonah. He does a God who sounds faintly like Cary Grant. Ritz is no Robin Williams, but the off-beat characterizations are amusing enough, if not always germane to the in-built dramatic tension of the traditional stories.

He tells some of the stories against a soundscape backdrop that generally embellishes the drama successfully. The music, composed by Andreas Schwabe, is a helpful device. I didn't find it particularly inspired, though.

Ritz has a strong stage presence, a versatile voice and imaginative readings of these cultural artifacts, but more musical support would enhance the moods he's trying to create in telling these big, old stories.

The show has an unabashedly Christian flavor to it, which may or may not be why it hasn't been drawing full houses. It's a family show. It may also appeal to Fringe-goers trying to avoid some of the mayhem found in plays like *The F\*\*\* Machine* or *Steel Kiss*.

beliefs. He also doesn't see his primary aim as evangelical. He is happy, however, when someone in the audience is spurred to look more closely at the Bible after watching him perform.

"It cannot be pandering, proselytizing theatre."