Culture
News



Eyma Scharen (Bernadette Soubirous) performs at a December press event to announce the U.S. premiere of "Bernadette, The Musical." Behind her is Thomas James (Fr. Peyramale). The show premieres Feb. 19 at the Athenaeum Center for Thought & Culture in Chicago. (Courtesy of Maija Martin)



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The story of Bernadette of Lourdes follows a teenage French girl who stood firm in her beliefs and would later be immortalized as a Catholic saint. But the man tasked with translating her life from the page to the stage and then from French to English argues that a musical about Bernadette Soubirous' life will appeal to Catholics and nonbelievers alike.

"Believer or not, it's the story of a little girl who goes against the power of adults. So it's the kind of story that we love to tell for centuries, those teenagers who want to change the world. I don't care if she's religious or not," said Serge Denoncourt, author and director of "Bernadette, The Musical," which will see its U.S. premier at the Athenaeum Center for Thought & Culture in Chicago on Feb. 19. "She's just so sure and she's not afraid of the adults saying you're a liar. In that case, that's a good story. I used to say, 'It's Joan of Arc without the war attire.' "

Bernadette was just 14 years old when she saw a vision in 1858 that would change her life. She first described the apparition as a white light or lady in white, but others would interpret her visions as the Virgin Mary. At last, the figure told her, "I am the Immaculate Conception."

In France, where secularism continues to rise and priestly vocations are falling, "Bernadette" received rave reviews in Le Parisien after its premier in Lourdes in 2019. The show toured France and was translated into Italian for its Italy tour.

Actor Kelsey Grammer, who was raised Christian Scientist, is one of the show's producers. While on a trip to the Vatican years ago, a priest told him about a Bernadette of Lourdes musical in development.

"There are those who remain skeptics but that's what keeps the story going," Grammer told reporters on a trip to Chicago late last year. "I think that's why I want to be part of it. She learned the truth and stuck to it."



Producer Kelsey Grammer speaks to the press at a December press event to announce the U.S. premiere of "Bernadette, The Musical." Also pictured are director and author Serge Denoncourt, and producer Pierre Ferragu. (Courtesy of Maija Martin)

For the English production, Denoncourt added new songs, including one where Bernadette expresses doubts about what she sees. That change also presents a new challenge for French actress Eyma Scharen, who originated the role when she was a teenager and never imagined herself singing in English.

"When Serge talked about the direction of the show, he said 'It's about a girl when she saw something but no one believes her,' " Scharen, now 23, told the National Catholic Reporter. "I love this character because she fights for her ideas."

Denoncourt approached the work from a historical, rather than religious, point of view. Although the songs in the musical take some liberty with the characters' feelings, all the dialogue is sourced directly from archives in Lourdes that detailed the French inspector's interrogation of Bernadette.

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Commissioner Jacomet, played by Steven Martella, believes Bernadette is lying to him and becomes obsessed with finding out the truth. In a preview of the English songs in Chicago last year, Martella's imposing frame and powerful vocals contrasted with Bernadette's diminutive yet strong presence.

In a show that echoes the period and drama of another French musical, "Les Misérables," Jacomet may remind audiences of Victor Hugo's sanctimonious Inspector Javert. Those parallels are no accident. Denoncourt's Canadian background and understanding of the American market pushed him to structure "Bernadette" like an American musical.

It's the show's entertainment value, not its religious values, that resonate with audiences, he added.

"That was my big challenge, to bring people who are not believers to just see the show and know more about Bernadette," he told NCR. "We're not trying to convert anybody. I'm not a believer."

When Denoncourt first staged the show in Lourdes, the local residents and priests alike expressed surprise that a non-Catholic could produce such a spectacle.

"It was kind of a joke, because when they saw the show, they said, 'How can you say you're not a believer?' " he said. "I said, 'No, I'm a good director.' "