

# Bible Meets Broadway

Lancaster, Pennsylvania is far removed from New York City, not only culturally but also geographically, yet throughout the year faith-based tourists and lovers of musicals flock to this slow-paced city, where the largest Christian musical in the nation entertains and delights hundreds of thousands of people annually.

Just call it “Bible meets Broadway.”

The theater is Sight & Sound, and each year about 1 million people visit its locations in Lancaster and Branson, Missouri where a 200-member cast and crew at each location put on a two-and-a-half hour live production – complete with animals, special effects, massive sets, and panoramic 300-foot stages.

Each production is original, and each one features actors and actresses singing and dancing through musicals such as “Moses” (currently showing in Branson) and “Samson” (showing in Lancaster).

At the end of each show, there’s even a Gospel presentation.

Sight & Sound was birthed 40 years ago by founders Glenn and Shirley Eshelman, although the modern-day productions dwarf anything they originally put on stage. And they are delighted. (The Eshelman family still owns the theaters.)

“The primary goal is to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and sow the Word of God into the lives of people we interact with,” said Maria Jose Tennison, director of marketing and show design for Sight & Sound. “But each production has its own message, and the reality is that we can’t take credit for these stories. They’re in the Bible; we just do our part to bring them to life – maybe in a way that most people have not envisioned them before.”

About 400 people work at Sight & Sounds’ corporate headquarters in Lancaster, while another 200 (cast and crew only) work in Branson. Each theater seats 2,000 people.



*Sight & Sound Theaters bring the Bible to life with the production of Samson. Venues in Lancaster, Pennsylvania and Branson, Missouri receive 1 million visitors annually.*

A rotation schedule allows local residents and tourists to see fresh content

each year, either via a brand-new production – “Samson” is in its premier year – or through a musical that is either new to the location or hasn’t been shown in several years.

From beginning to end, it takes three years for a musical to be produced. That includes the “conception of the production and the story, development of the script, diving into the Word and the historical context, and the [set] design and construction,” Tennison said.

There have been more than 25 original productions, including such musicals as Joseph, Noah and Jonah – all helping bring the Bible to life.

“Each story has a different message,” Tennison said. “With Moses, we really wanted to take Moses off of the mountain and have him be a person you could relate to. ... With Samson, it was the message of grace, and how, even though Samson just kept making poor decisions in his journey that caused him a lot of pain, the Lord continued to extend grace to him, even to his dying moment. With Joseph, it was a story of forgiveness.”



*Noah's Ark at Sight & Sound Theaters. The kids love the animals, who, if you watch closely, are rewarded for their excellent "acting" skills.*

While the lavish costumes, original scores and custom-designed sets bring back adults year after year, the live animals ensure that children want to return, too. More than 25 different types of animals have appeared in the musicals over years, including horses, camels, zebras, llamas, turkeys and even skunks. Sight & Sound owns the animals and even houses them.

“People love them, and they expect them in our production,” Tennison said. “... Success with the animals is all based on relationships – relationship with the trainers, relationship with the actors. You’ll see, if you pay attention on stage, the animals get rewarded by the actors.”

The actors are another unique part of Sight & Sound. Unlike Broadway, their names are not on the marquee out front of the theater, or even in programs. That’s because the goal is for the inspiration story and the Gospel message to remain the centerpiece – and not the person speaking or singing. Everyone in the production is a professing Christian.

“These amazing people perform on stage” and “their names really don’t appear,” Tennison said.

Not only must the actors and actresses profess Christ but they also must be able to act, sing and dance – a triple threat that Tennison said is not always easy to find. Nevertheless, there are applicants who say their sole

career goal has been to perform at Sight & Sound.

“We want the attention and the glory to go to only the Source, which is God,” Tennison said. “That’s a lot for some people to be OK with, especially in an industry where it’s very much about the billing. They are a very special group, for sure.”

For more information, visit [www.sight-sound.com](http://www.sight-sound.com).