

Behind the News: Report From Bethlehem

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DEDICATION

To Brent Wilson, who asked me if I could write a play.

STORY OF THE PLAY

If we had been able to look on by satellite television when Jesus was born, what would have been considered newsworthy? This innovative play, written to be performed live or using videotaped interviews, follows a North American news show's attempt to determine why all the baby boys in Jerusalem were murdered by Herod's soldiers. Studio hosts, Paula and Jack, put the pieces together as investigative reporters, Madeline (in Bethlehem) and Frank (in Jerusalem), talk to a scribe from the royal palace, one of the killer soldiers, a couple of other worldly Magi, an earnest innkeeper and his wife, two simple-yet-not-so-simple shepherds, a couple from Mary and Joseph's home town of Nazareth, and an old woman named Anna who spends most of her time in the temple at Jerusalem. At the conclusion, the reporters (along with the viewers) have to decide if this story will affect their lives.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(with doubling 4 m, 3 w, 1 flexible and extras)

- PAULA BURROUGHS:** Anchorwoman, attractive, young. She is fairly new in her job but professional and enthusiastic. She wears appropriate suits or dresses.
- JACK MACDOUGALL:** Anchorman, a little older. Steady, assured, smooth, and very professional.
- FRANK PROUSE:** On-location reporter. Older, experienced, somewhat jaded. Suit or trench coat, rather disheveled.
- MADELINE SMITH:** Journalist and interviewer, enthusiastic but very skeptical. Very well dressed with blazers or suits.
- PALACE SCRIBE:** "Press" secretary, nervous, anxious and haughty. Speaks pompously and slowly except when uncertain. Expensive robes and jewelry.
- CROWD:** At least three males and two females.
- SOLDIER X:** Stallone-type, wearing appropriate armor and a hood to conceal his identity.
- MAN and TWO WOMEN:** In Jewish mourning clothes.
- MAGI 1:** Friendly and talkative. In good but travel-stained robes. "Eastern" accent.
- MAGI 2:** Asian, quiet, with vast knowledge and simple faith. Brown robes. Different "Eastern" accent.
- REUBEN:** Innkeeper, middle-aged, a devout Jew and an honest man.
- MARTHA:** His wife, very much like him.
- REBECCA:** Nosy, large, and envious of others.
- SOL:** A small man, not able to withstand the force of his wife's personality, but with his own opinions.
- SIMON:** Mid-twenties, simple but not ignorant, close to God.
- NATHAN:** Young, impressionable, a dreamer.
- ANNA:** AN old widow who lives in the temple. Her faith is unshakable.
- DIRECTOR, MAKEUP, CAMERA PEOPLE, MESSENGER:** In jeans and T-shirts.

A NOTE ON CASTING: The roles of Jack, Paula, Frank, Madeline and the TV Director cannot be doubled. At least two additional men can play the roles of the Scribe and Soldier; both Magi; Reuben and Sol; and Simon and Nathan. One woman can play the roles of Martha, Rebecca and Anna. Additional actors can play the roles of the TV studio staff and crowds in Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

COSTUMES

Actors in Biblical roles wear appropriate Biblical attire.

SETTING

On one side of the stage is a television news desk with two chairs, mikes, some papers on the desk, and a backdrop with the words "Behind the News" in large letters. In front of them is at least one camera, preferably two, which can be real or fake. They must be placed so that they are visible but do not block anyone's view. There should be a phone somewhere in the area.

On the other side of the stage is a large video screen (or a TV with VCR) that can be seen and heard by the audience. The interviews may be taped ahead of time and shown at the appropriate times, or a large fake screen can be set up so that the interviews can be done on stage as though they are coming on a screen. A bed with a small table and telephone to the side of it is behind the "screen" which is moved away at the appropriate moment.

PROPS

Powder puff, several sheets of paper, comb.

SCENE 1

(Before the curtain or an offstage voice.)

ANNOUNCER: When Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, there were only shepherds to gaze in awe. But what if television had been invented? We would like you to imagine, just for a short while, that a time warp anomaly has enabled people here in North America to watch the events that took place nearly two thousand years ago. Let us imagine then, full coverage bringing the birth of God's Son into our homes.

(AT RISE: DIRECTOR, CAMERA PEOPLE, MAKE-UP PERSON, PAULA, and JACK enter. They take their places. Paula and Jack are seated behind the desk.)

DIRECTOR: Okay, everyone in place. Paula, relax. You look great! Jack needs some powder. *(MAKE-UP PERSON runs in to dust HIS nose and forehead.)* Okay, we're ready. This show may take some unexpected curves. We're using breaking news, so that's always exciting. Look eager, but in control. And 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 - we're on air.

(Cameras could have a red light on if possible.)

PAULA: Good evening. I am Paula Burroughs.

JACK: I'm Jack MacDougall. And this is "Behind the News."

PAULA: Our story tonight was to have centered on the coinage system recently introduced in Rome by Caesar Augustus. But in the past hours we have been informed that King Herod of Judea, a small country in Palestine, has sent soldiers to the town of Bethlehem. Reliable sources tell us that the soldiers have been ordered to eliminate all male babies under the age of two years.

JACK: We are working right now to confirm these reports, but King Herod and his advisors are meeting inside the palace in Jerusalem and have refused to speak to any reporters. We have ascertained, however, that a detail of soldiers under the leadership of Captain Benzoraph left Jerusalem early this morning and may even now be carrying out this grim order.

PAULA: Jack, is there no way to stop the soldiers?

JACK: From what we have learned, it's probably too late. We hope to be able to update everyone soon. Any moment now, we're expecting a message from our journalist in Bethlehem. (*MESSENGER comes in and puts a paper in front of JACK, he becomes animated and faces the camera.*) In fact, I have just received word that Madeline Smith has arrived in Bethlehem, and is standing by. (*JACK turns to the screen, as does PAULA.*) Are you there, Madeline?

MADELINE: I'm here, all right, Jack. What I have to tell you about what has gone on here is absolutely shocking! Babies are dead and dying all about us. Some men and women have also been killed as they tried to stop the soldiers. These men were merciless, and the scene is one of intense sorrow and total disbelief. No one knows why this has happened. All the soldiers will say is that they were following King Herod's orders. No one has given any indication of the reason behind these atrocities.

PAULA: How are the people in Bethlehem taking this state of affairs?

MADELINE: This is a small community, Paula, where people know each other well, and many are related. They are all in a state of shock. But I sense also a lot of anger, and that may cause a backlash, perhaps against Herod himself.

JACK: Have you found anyone we can talk with who can venture an idea as to why this has happened?

MADELINE: No one, Jack. The only comment I have heard came from an old man, a scribe, who quoted a verse from the Holy Scriptures.

End of Freeview

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