

Fun 'Catechism' with a twist is still golden

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If you're going to see "Sister's Christmas Catechism: The Mystery of the Magi's Gold," don't forget to turn off your cell phone.

That's because the interactive comedy stars a habit-wearing nun who treats the theater like a classroom. Though the setting is modern-day, Sister teaches like it is 1962. So silence your ringer, toss out the chewing gum on the way in, and don't wear anything that shows cleavage. Sister doesn't tolerate nonsense.

"Sister's Christmas Catechism" – which begins a run at Booth Playhouse next week – is the latest installment in the franchise that began with 1993's "Late Nite Catechism," written by Catholic-school graduates Maripat Donovan and Vicki Quade.

In this holiday production, Sister combines her love of Christmas with her fascination with the television show "Forensic Files." Armed with a bag of investigative tricks, she leads her audience to solve a mystery: What happened to the gold presented to Jesus in the manger?

But the novelty is what makes the show so appealing.

"It's a very odd show because it is 80 percent scripted and 20 percent improvisation and audience participation," says Mary Zentmyer, who's been playing Sister since 1996 (and who also attended Catholic school). "It's the gimmick that brings people back, because they win prizes and get trinkets, and they get to ask questions."

Zentmyer acknowledges it is also the collective memory of the audiences that add to the performances' popularity. Most audiences include senior citizens, snowbirds and families seeking wholesome entertainment.

Each show is different, and Zentmyer has plenty of opportunities to think on her feet.

“When someone's cell phone goes off, I take it away. Or you get someone who thinks he is Laurence Oliver,” she says. “The funniest thing that ever happened to me in ‘Late Night Catechism’ was, I asked a gentleman to hand me his gum, and he handed me his teeth!”

For years, Zentmyer wondered why people came to the show to be picked on. She finally figured it out.

“They come not to get picked on, but to see *other* people get picked on.”

Donovan, who wrote “Sister's Christmas Catechism” with Jane Morris and Marc Silvia, says the “Sister” plays weren't meant to memorialize nuns, but she acknowledges that they do.

“Catholic nuns are one of the groups responsible for building America,” Donovan says. “Today, the median age of religious sisters in the United States is 72. It is a very sad and shocking thing that this is the end of a huge era in our country, our culture, and our church.”

Zentmyer often reminds her audiences that – despite their sometimes harsh methods – the education provided by nuns worked.

“They made us the smart, successful, generous people we are today.”