

THE PULSE OF HOPE

For this season of Lent, I am reflecting theologically on some of the Broadway shows I enjoyed in New York City while on holiday. This week I focus on "Anastasia."

The Romanovs were the last family of Tsars in Russia. Often criticized for their autocratic and aristocratic rule – a rule which blithely ignored the plight of Russian peasants across the frozen expanse of the nation – the royal family was a ripe target for the Bolshevik revolution in 1917. After all, the Romanovs represented everything



Lennon decried about the social order of the day. The dynastic rulers of Russia were well known for their cavalier ignorance of the social structures which led to ever growing poverty, to the increasing gap between the rich and the poor and to a disconnect between what was good for Russian verses what was good for the Tsar.

The Musical opens with a tender scene between the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna and her youngest granddaughter Anastasia. Grandmother gives Anastasia a beautiful and delicate music box before leaving her granddaughter in St. Petersburg while she departs for Paris. Eleven years later, the Romanov family is imprisoned only to be swiftly shot to death. The entire family was buried in a single grave.

...But were they? The Tsar had four daughters, but the Bolshevik authorities could only account for three of them, not sure where Anastasia's body might be. A rumour begins to grow like a virus, troubling the newly powerful government. The rumour that Anastasia might still be alive to return to the throne of the Tsars and rescue the nation from deepening economic and social ruin.

The musical is about an amnesiac young street urchin called Anya. Recruited by two con artists as their escape ticket from Russia before the borders permanently close to the rest of the world, she is so convincing in her portrayal of the missing Anastasia that they craft a detailed plot to convince the Dowager Empress in Paris that Anya is really Anastasia. If successful in their plot, the two men – and Anya – will be financially secure in Paris and outside of any repercussions from the Revolutionary authorities back in Russia.





By the end of the show, it becomes clear that this dishevelled street urchin with no memory of a life before the streets is Anastasia for real. The key to Anastasia's memory returning is the music box given to her by her grandmother so many years before, miraculously purchased on a

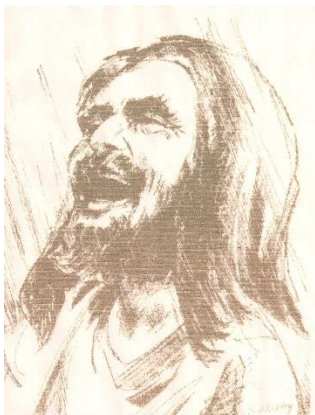
whim by the handsome, young con man with whom she is quickly falling in love. Hope blossoms as her grandmother believes her story – especially when she reveals the music box.

However, a Bolshevik secret police officer has tracked her down with instructions to kill her. After all, the new Russian government wants no possibility of return to the old order of monarchy that the re-emergence of Anastasia might motivate in a disenchanted populace. The Russian agent, however, decides to “forget” he even found her, forgoing violence for mercy – perhaps loving her a little bit like a daughter – giving up vengeance because of the sins of her father for the promise of a transformed Parisian life for “Anya.” Hope flowers because of his difficult decision.



There is absolutely no proof at all that Anastasia ever survived the assassination of her family in 1918. However, although there is proof for the death of the rest of her family, there is no evidence of Anastasia's body that has been found to date. Nevertheless, this musical is about hope, about the truth deeply woven into the narrative of redemption. Hope provides meaning to life and a zest for living.

Indeed, the entire life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a story of hope. Like



Anya, the street urchin of no status, Jesus was a man raised in the backwaters of Nazareth, in the “boonies” of the Roman Empire in Judea, who challenged the oppressive power of a militaristic regime with a message of hope in life that makes a difference. That difference is not because of force of arms, but through the power of self-giving love. This is the resurrection hope to which Lent leads. This is the transformative power of opening one's heart to love.

Maybe this Lent we can root ourselves into the lively soil of hope in Christ even as we are daily challenged in our living. As we live, may love touch our souls.