

Bringing Hildegard back

Retta Blaney | Dec. 3, 2009



Linn Maxwell portrays Hildegard of Bingen. (Sue Fischer)

NEW YORK -- Many actors talk about their work as a calling. Few, if any, feel that call came from someone who died 900 years ago. But Linn Maxwell does.

She has no recollection of how she first heard of Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th-century German abbess and writer. She only knows she couldn't say no to her. "I'm convinced Hildegard stayed on my case," she says. "I didn't choose to do it. She chose me."

With that unlikely prompting, Maxwell has written a one-woman play, "Hildegard of Bingen and the Living Light," with which she tours. On a sunny November afternoon when temperatures in New York City hit the upper 60s, Maxwell, 65, sat in the garden of the Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration and shared her story -- how this 21st-century woman bonded with the 12th-century mystic who preached salvation, but also practiced holistic healing and *viriditas*, her name for nature's green life force that nurtures us.

"I had done two or three one-woman plays that included singing," said Maxwell, who has sung opera throughout the United States and in 25 foreign countries and has appeared in cabarets and other writers' one-woman plays. "It's the genre I like best. Hildegard wrote close to 75 songs. I felt I could portray her."

A mezzo soprano who had performed with an early music ensemble, she was familiar with ancient hymns.

She began researching Hildegard's life. She made two visits to Bingen, Germany, where she stayed in the hotel that has been built on the site of Hildegard's own convent, destroyed in the 1600s by the Swedes.

Hildegard, whom many consider to be one of the most important figures of the Middle Ages, had been in charge of the abbey project from the beginning and Maxwell believes she wants to be heard today. She also read biographies and drew as much of the script as she could from the nearly 400 letters to or from Hildegard that still exist.

"I had to put her words in my mouth," Maxwell says.

What has developed is a 70-minute show in which Maxwell, as Hildegard, shares anecdotes and talks directly to the audience, eliminating the "fourth wall," that invisible barrier between performer and audience. Clad in a habit made of layers of black chiffon that give it an ethereal illusion, and a lovely bodice of scalloped French woolen white lace, Maxwell lets Hildegard speak.

"I became quite well known during my lifetime," she tells the audience, employing wry humor frequently. "Certainly not by being well-behaved or obedient."

And Hildegard explains why she is there.

"I came back to reassure you that the light you are seeking is already in you and it longs to shine forth."

Maxwell not only sings seven of Hildegard's songs, she also accompanies herself on two psalteries, the organistrum, and Anglo-Saxon and medieval harps, instruments she learned to play for the show, which she has been developing for close to two years. Before each performance, she prays to be open to God's promptings.

"I pray that God will use me however he will want and for me to reach whatever needs people in the audience have."

Erv Raible, the show's director, said audiences have been quite receptive. "It hits home immediately," he said, adding that for a woman in her day, Hildegard "had a lot of chutzpah."

In a review of the play, John Hogle wrote: "This is one of the most original and historically captivating pieces of art to emerge in many moons from a cabaret-theater artist. It's opera. It's theater. Mostly, it's unique in the truest sense of the word."

Maxwell has been invited by the International Hildegard Society to perform the show next May at the International Medieval Congress at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo.

Hildegard's life has definitely hit home with Maxwell, who was raised in an evangelical home, was an Episcopalian for a while as an adult and now follows her husband of 20 years in worshiping in the Methodist tradition in Alto, Mich., where they live.

"I've learned that when God speaks to you, you may not want to be out there, you may not want to go, but you've got to go forth," she says.

Her show makes it clear that Hildegard, in her own quest to do God's will, became a woman who wasn't afraid to confront authorities when she felt something was amiss.

"I wrote back to the pope and told him he should work harder to try to reform the church," Hildegard tells her listeners, much to the delight of the audience.

In this regard, as well as in her concern for the environment and interest in holistic healing with plants, Hildegard has a message that may be even timelier today, Maxwell says.

"That message is so contemporary, with corruption in the church. We know we need to be open to cleaning out the church."

Hildegard was a woman with a deep inner life that she creatively expressed in many forms. She was caught between a patriarchal institution and her recognition of the divinity of all creation, anticipating by many centuries the dilemma of our own time.

Asked if she thinks Hildegard would support women's ordination, Maxwell lets out a heartfelt "Oh! She went on four preaching tours. She was doing it anyway. She would heartily approve."

Retta Blaney is the author of Working on the Inside: The Spiritual Life through the Eyes of Actors. Her blog, Life Upon the Sacred Stage (uponthesacredstage.blogspot.com [1]), features news, reviews and insights into the worlds of faith and the performing arts.

Source URL (retrieved on 05/29/2017 - 16:02): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/bringing-hildegard-back>

Links:

[1] <http://uponthesacredstage.blogspot.com>