

## Christmas Treasure Returns to New York for Anniversary Shows

By John Armato

**T**his year it will happen in New Jersey. It will happen in Chicago and in Downer's Grove, Illinois. It will happen in North Carolina. It will even happen, incredibly, in Ketchikan, Alaska. And it will finally happen back where it belongs – in New York City. "Bending Towards The Light: A Jazz Nativity" returns to the Apple for its 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary and our city will swing through the holidays better than it has in years.

Born at St. Peter's Church at the request of the late Rev. John Garcia Gensel, the Jazz Nativity owes its story to the Gospels. It owes its music to tradition and the swinging hearts of singer/songwriter Anne Phillips, saxophonist Bob Kindred, and Dave and Iola Brubeck. And it owes its direction to Beth and Tad Jones who created a vibrating delight of costumes and light.

Over the years, the show has attracted the horns and voices, drums and feet of countless patron saints of the Jazz Nativity: Lionel Hampton, Al Grey, Tito Puente, Slide Hampton, Savion Glover, Jon Faddis, Clark Terry, Jimmy Slyde, Candido, Stanley Turrentine, Paquito D'Rivera and others.

From the very beginning, the Jazz Nativity moved from venue to venue, from St. Bart's to Lincoln Center and stops in between while weathering financial challenges and the challenges of the weather itself. Two

years ago the cast plowed through the Blizzard of '03 to get to the production at the Patriot Theater in Trenton. Hundreds of die-hard Jazz



*Slide Hampton as one of the Three Kings*

Nativity fans were just as committed and filled the house. But for the Jazz Nativity, that's not an anomaly. One couple has flown in from Phoenix every year for the show. Charles

Kuralt, a former host of the Jazz Nativity, mentions the intrepid duo with the empathy of an insider in an essay about the show in one of his books. "To feel the way I felt when the curtain came down that night," he mused, "I'd cross a continent, too."

Once, when a venue just couldn't be found, the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue opened its doors to the production. That year the headlines read "Rabbi saves Christmas." Oh the good works of Jazz ... For the past five years, the Jazz Nativity, now a published show available to amateur and professional theater groups, has thrived nearly everywhere except here.

It has even attracted worldwide attention. On December 24th & 25th, BBC's "World Service" will air a documentary about The Jazz Nativity featuring interviews with Dave Brubeck, Dr. Billy Taylor and Clark Terry reaching 100 million listeners worldwide. (Tune in to WNYC at 9 a.m.)

But, finally, thankfully, like a cherished ornament lost then found just in time to hang on the tree on Christmas Eve, the Jazz Nativity is back – for two productions December 20 and 21 at Symphony Space.

If jazz is, indeed, the sound joy makes when it leaps from the soul, then get ready to swing with the most authentic sounds of the season. It is time to welcome this prodigal production back home.

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### BENDING TOWARDS THE LIGHT: A JAZZ NATIVITY

December 20 and 21, 2005, 8 p.m. at Symphony Space, 2537 Broadway at 95<sup>th</sup> Street. Written and conducted by Anne Phillips. Musical direction by Bob Kindred. Directed by Beth and Tad Jones. Original music by Phillips, Kindred and Dave and Iola Brubeck. Hosted by Gil Noble, from ABC's "Like It Is." With Slide Hampton (trombone), Jimmy Slyde (tap dancer) and Dave Valentin (flute) as the Three Jazz Kings. Featuring singer Dee Daniels as "Mary," Allan Harris, Latin legend Candido, and Brenda Feliciano as the Archangel, plus an all-star band and jazz choir. Produced by the Kindred Spirits Foundation. Tickets: Symphony Space Box Office (212-864-5400) or [www.symphonyspace.org](http://www.symphonyspace.org).