

Superstar, Schmuperstar: Musical about the son of God falls short

Okee dokee folks... I am not a religious person by any stretch of the imagination. I fall somewhere between atheist and agnostic but more towards atheism every day. I don't believe in Bible stories any more than I believe in the Marvel Universe. I honestly think that religions were all created by primitive cultures because they lacked the understanding of the surrounding world and it has simply carried on as a means of control. That all being said, one of my favorite musicals of all time is Jesus Christ Superstar. Go figure.

My mother took us to see the film Jesus Christ Superstar when we were kids. It was 1973 and I was just twelve years old. Back then I was clueless about religion and had already lapsed in catechism attendance but I loved the movie and many of the songs stuck in my head. Since that time I have seen JCS on stage many, many times. Besides the Broadway productions, two of the best JCS shows I experienced were by local theatre groups. One was about ten years ago and included locals such as David Tessier, Ava Callery and the late Sarah Good. Another was at a theatre in Westerly and not surprising David Tessier was part of that one as well and Jesus was portrayed by the lead singer of the local band, The Merchants of Cool. I cannot remember his name but he nailed Jesus! Oops, was that wrong to say?

The Providence Performing Arts Center has hosted many runs of JCS over the years and I have been fortunate to be in the audience for most of them. I was thrilled to have seen the stars of the '73 film, Ted Neeley as Jesus and Carl Anderson as Judas, reprise their roles in a couple of productions. Now there is a new cast and the fiftieth-anniversary tour of Jesus Christ Superstar pulled into Providence last week for several superstar shows.

The audience at PPAC applauded excitedly as the lights went down and the JCS logo-emblazoned curtain parted exposing a dark stage, save a single spotlight on a hooded guitar player picking the first notes of the JCS overture. A fog machine was hazing the multi-tiered girder-like scenery on stage. I felt a WHOOSH as the cast of the show ran past my seat and down the aisles. They jumped onto the stage and began their dancing. This was not a typical JCS production. It was somewhere between a concert and a musical.

The JCS overture and the first song, "Heaven On Their Minds" are two of my favorite pieces from the musical. The band, who were spread out across one of the levels of the stage structure, flawlessly and effortlessly tackled the score. "Heaven On Their Minds" by Judas unfortunately didn't have the raw vocal power and emotion that it needed and the performer who played Judas didn't seem to fit the role. He seemed too American Idol-ish and clean cut. Happily, halfway through the night, his voice gained more power and edge.

Jesus. Well, Jesus, what can I say? I didn't care for Jesus at all. The pseudo hipster, man bun, guitar playing Jesus just didn't work. Certain things are sacred and Jesus shouldn't be messed with. If a change was going to be made maybe they should have gone with a more ethnically accurate Jesus. One of color? I was mostly disappointed by his weak performance but surprisingly he did rally once and manage to knock "Gethsemane" out of the park. Other than that, the local singer from The Merchants of

Cool put him to shame.

I was glad that the rest of the ensemble managed to elevate the show in spite of Jesus. This was generally a high-energy, fast-paced performance that clocked in at 90 minutes with no intermission. There was a lot of dance and movement. When "The Temple" was performed they danced in low light with illuminated crosses as glitter fell from the ceiling. Unfortunately, the ensemble was costumed in grey sweat pants, sneakers, hoodies and some even wore drop crotch, MC Hammer-style pants. This strange, drab attire didn't detract too much, though it was puzzling.

The priests were very well cast and Caiaphas' deep, rich, bass voice contrasted with Annas' higher tenor range made their presence on stage one of the evening's stand-out group performances. Their simple, drape costumes and sceptre-like microphone stands were all they needed for their contribution.

Mary Magdelene was one of the better performers in this production. Her renditions of "Everything's Alright", "I Don't Know How To Love Him", and "Could We Start Again" were immaculate. The latter was sung as a duet with Peter accompanying on guitar. My only criticism of Mary was her costume. Why was she, like most of the cast, trapped in an unflattering grey sweatsuit?

Simon, Pilot, Peter, and Herod all presented their parts with power and polish. I actually thought the actor who played Simon would have been better in the role of Judas. They all had outstanding voices and presence. Not unexpectedly Herod had the most outlandish entrance and costume of the night. He was decked out in a long gold robe, long eyelashes, and gold headpieces that resembled something Adam Lambert would wear when he sings with Queen. "Herod's Song" was predictably over the top campy and added a little humor to offset the heavier bits of JCS.

By the time the BIG song of the night came along, "Superstar," Judas' voice was better and meeting expectations though visually he still wasn't. He was clad in an all-black biker-esque outfit that didn't quite match the music nor the image of Judas. The ensemble whirled about in white robes, over the sweats, and three soul singers backed Judas from level 3 of the staging. This is always a "bring down the house number" and it didn't disappoint.

I went into this show with skepticism. I wasn't sure what to expect. I had read about this version and saw snippets of a commercial for it. I tend to be a JCS purest. In general, I like productions to stick to the original vision without modernization. The original JCS is a product of the times - 33AD and the late 1960's/early 1970's AD. If a producer wants to present a modernized version of something they should find something new and leave the classics alone. I have attended other modernized versions of JCS and they worked but mostly because they stuck with the popular Jesus archetype. This one did not. Overall I would have to give this production a B-. I enjoyed it but when the character of Jesus is weak and given a man bun it is he that betrays, not Judas. Thank goodness for the Apostles.

That's it for now. Thanks for reading. www.JohnFuzek.com