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# 'Superstar' rocks with the power of its tunes

A host of fine musical performances provides an auditory feast for CT audiences

BY JON STINNETT  
 The Cottage Grove Sentinel



photo by Matt Emrich

Mary Magdalene (Autumn Carter) comforts Jesus (Kory Weimer) while Judas (Melissa Miller) looks on disapprovingly.

Several days later, a handful of unforgettable tunes still refuses to let go. It's been several years since my last viewing of the film version of "Jesus Christ Superstar," a movie that appeared on the television screen at my childhood home more than I'd cared to remember. So it's probably not surprising that, a few minutes into the Cottage Theatre's production of the rock opera on Friday's opening night, the memorable hooks of the tunes penned by legends Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber had again lodged themselves deep in my brain, where they remain even as I write this. (I can only imagine that many among a weekend's worth of theater-goers are having the same experience.)

Set in the final hours in the life of Jesus, "Jesus Christ Superstar" is loosely based on the Gospel accounts of his last days, beginning with a warning from the apostle Judas about the growing influence of Jesus' followers and ending with his crucifixion.

There is much to say about the performances and staging of the Cottage Theatre version of this classic, which features a large community ensemble and a stage set unlike anything the theatre has attempted before (a sparse set featuring scaffolding that took the theatre to "new heights (quite literally)," according to CT Executive Director Susan

Goes). Still, the finest aspects of the local version of "Jesus Christ Superstar" worked to augment and convey the power of its music, and there was much to enjoy from the singers and musicians that made it possible.

Particularly powerful were the performances and emotion of Melissa Miller, who brought an earnest angst to the role of Judas and started the play off right with a strong rendition of "Heaven on their Minds."

The ensemble joins in for the first time for an upbeat "What's the Buzz," and credit should be given for casting that brought a diverse and multi-talented group to the stage. Autumn Carter next offers a soothing bit of soul as Mary Magdalene with "Everything's Alright!" High priests Annas (played by

Nick Forrest) and Caiaphas (Gabriel Wolfe) debate how to handle the Jesus question in "This Jesus Must Die," in the process navigating the tune's challenging melodies and range and adding a believable sneer to their respective characters. Pontius Pilate, played by Ward Fairbairn, showcases some of the musical's best vocal performances.

And of course there is Jesus, played with stoic power by CT veteran Kory Weimer, who wisely allows the mounting emotion and action to unfold onstage around him. Dressed in white and sporting a nineties-style "No Fear" shirt (Jesus Grunge Superstar?), Weimer's wide eyes tell the tale of the fascination and adulation that Jesus Christ fosters on earth, and he seems to resist the urge to snatch center stage and attempt to out-belt the singers around him.

A five-person band of Keri Davis on piano, Chris King on electric keyboard, Michael Anderson on guitar, Noah Ferguson on bass and Jim Reinking on drums put the rock in rock opera, and the band showcased a flawless, emotive performance of nonstop rock that would have been enjoyable alone.

Regrettably, sound issues proved the only major flaw in Friday night's performance, as many of the countless microphones onstage were at times scratchy and nearly inaudible, and at times frightfully loud. It's an understandable issue to confront in such a complex musical production, and it's one that was no doubt addressed before future performances.

"Jesus Christ Superstar" runs for three more weekends in October (including Thursday-evening performances and a Sunday matinee.) Those who attend are sure to carry the play's impossibly catchy tunes home with them.

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