

Theater Review: ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ is Supersonic at Lyric Opera of Chicago

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 1, 2018 - 8:55am

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CHICAGO – As a wee lad, I would often go into my parent’s record collection. One day, out of the blue, that brown double album with the gold embossed angels appeared, like a gift from the divine. “Jesus Christ Superstar” began as a record album “rock opera” in 1970, evolved to a Broadway show and film, and then was interpreted through a myriad of stage revivals over the years. The latest is an exciting piece of stagecraft at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. The show has a various evening/matinee run through May 20th, 2018. [Click here](#) [21] for more details, including ticket information.



Play Rating: **5.0/5.0**

In a sense, “JCS” cannot miss, because at its core is the instantly memorable songs by composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice. From the opening power chords to “Heaven on Their Minds,” “What’s the Buzz,” “Pilate’s Dream,” “I Don’t Know How to Love Him,” “Gethsemane (I Only Want to Say)” and the title song, among all the others, the songs are classics. Combine that with the right stage concept and cast, as the Lyric Opera did, and it is simply extraordinarily entertaining. Despite some sound mix issues in the first half, the young cast delivered JCS with the power the legend deserves.

The story is a variation on the Passion Play, the days leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Heath Saunders). Judas (Ryan Shaw) is the antagonist, lamenting the popularity of the movement that Jesus has built (“Heaven on Their Minds”) as opposed to the message. This popularity has aroused the power structure of Rome (“This Jesus Must Die”), and the potential savior has too much pressure on him (“Simon Zealotes”). He is comforted by Mary Magdalene (Jo Lampert), but eventually he must face his accusers (“Pilate and Christ,” “King Herod’s Song”), before facing his destiny (“Jesus Christ Superstar”).



Hosanna Hey Sanna: Jesus (Heath Saunders) Meets His Fans in 'Jesus Christ Superstar'

Photo credit: Lyric Opera of Chicago

The number of times this stage version and its variations have been performed over the years runs into the tens of thousands, including the recent live performance on Easter Sunday featuring John Legend as Jesus. The stage simplicity of the Lyric version is its strength, as the three level set is unadorned except for the orchestra perched on the top tier. There is also a ramp shaped as a cross, on which all the principals enter. The dress and manner are modern, and the actors perform as if they are presenting a rock show.

And all those actors deliver. Heath Saunders as the title character has a singing voice that is “smooth jazz Jesus,” but brings the power when necessary when his character’s back is against the wall. Ryan Shaw as Judas takes advantage of his three octave range to add color and expression to his big numbers, especially “Heaven on Their Minds” (“it’s all gone sour”). Jo Lampert is a peaceful Mary Magdalene, adding calm to a chaotic timeline... “Could We Start Again Please” is particularly effective in her realm. The supporting players that stand out is the outrageous Herod (Shaun Fleming) and fiery Simon Zealotes (Mykal Kilgore).

The choreography (by Drew McOnie) is inspiring, giving the songs with a movement that appropriates the importance of the story. The way the dancers move is approximate to the message of the show, how a crowd can be swayed from passion (Jesus’ message) to fear (the threats of the Rome). Highlights are “What’s the Buzz,” “The Temple” and of course, “Herod’s Song,” which is presented as a king being an outrageous “queen.”



A Flamboyant Herod (Shaun Fleming) in ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’
Photo credit: Lyric Opera of Chicago

Where the interpretation for the Lyric wasn’t as intent was in the title song and exposition. The song is sung by Judas, but he has come back to modern times from an ethereal afterlife to comment upon what Christ has wrought, both in the time he existed and what has happened since (“Why’d you choose such a backward place in such a strange time?”). Although the choreography again sparkled, it was folded into the other numbers, and didn’t stand out.

But this is a wonderful overall JCS, and is a must see if you are a fan of the opera (yes, the Lyric Opera is presenting a rock opera). In my book, this is the best presentation of the so-called “Passion Play” in my lifetime, filled with the reverence for the godhead of Jesus Christ, but at the same time expressing the contradiction of what popularity can do to his message. Both those ends of his life and death must be considered to understand his “Superstar” status.

The Lyric Opera of Chicago presents “Jesus Christ Superstar” in both matinees and evening performances on various days through May 20th, 2018, at the Lyric Opera house, 20 North Upper Wacker Drive, Chicago. Featuring Heath Saunders, Ryan Shaw, Jo Lampert, Michael Cunio, Mykal Kilgore and Shaun Fleming. Composed by Andrew Lloyd Webber. Lyrics by Tim Rice. Directed by Timothy Sheader. For more information about the Lyric Opera of Chicago, [Click here](#) [22]



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