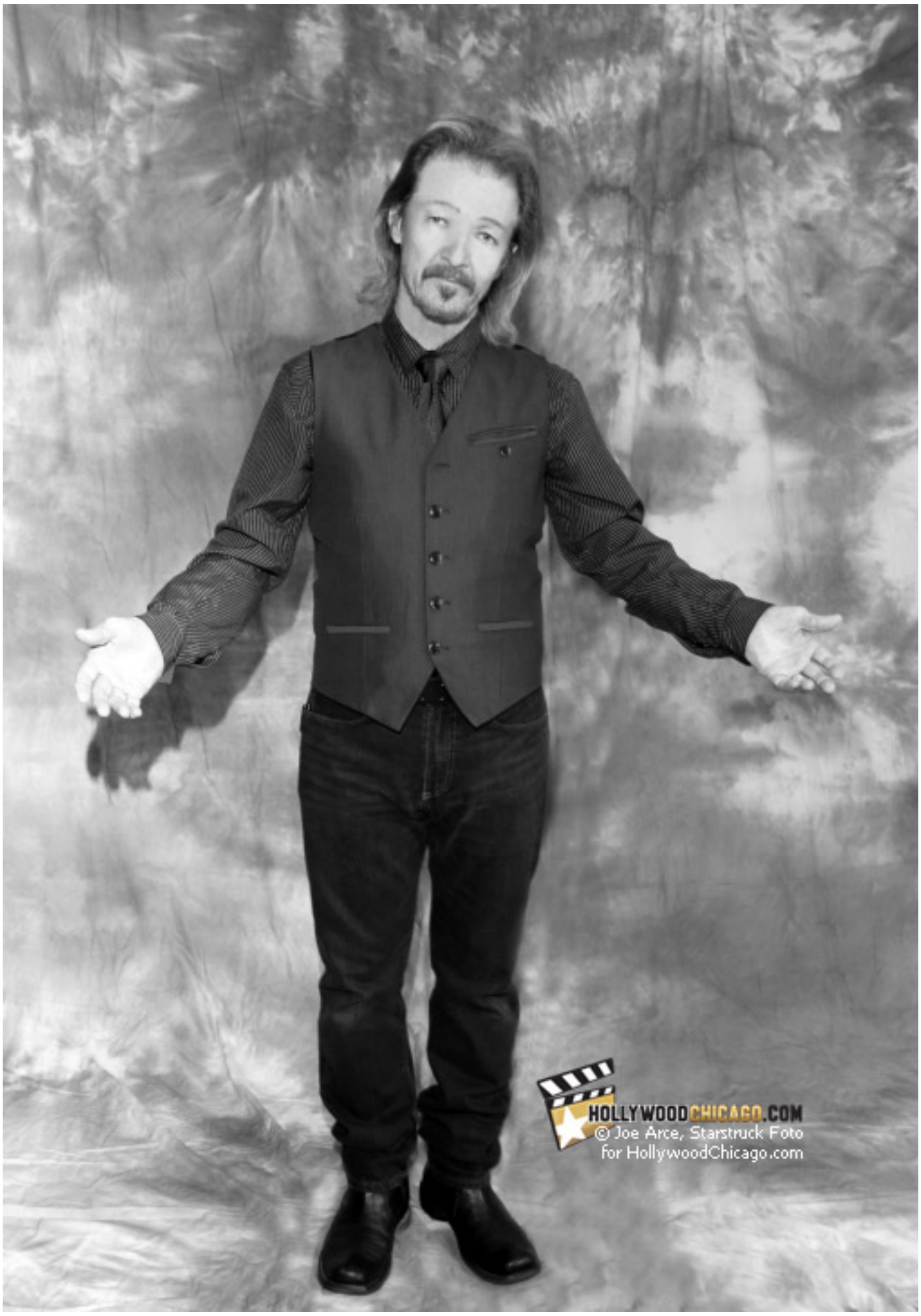
FLASHBACK Interview: The Confessions of Ted Neeley, Superstar

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on April 19, 2019 - 8:23am

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CHICAGO – What can be said for a man who has portrayed Jesus close to 5,000 times, and starred in the definitive Broadway and film versions of the most famous rock opera about Christ? Ted Neeley is as virtuous as his famous title role in “Jesus Christ Superstar.” During this Easter weekend, HollywoodChicago.com reprints this comprehensive overview of Ted Neeley, Superstar.

Ted Neeley had the perfect show business start when coming of age in the 1960s. After venturing out of his native Texas to find a music career in Los Angeles, Neeley landed the role of Claude in both the Los Angeles and New York versions of “Hair” in 1969. The director of that show remembered Neeley when he was casting for the Broadway stage version of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s rock opera, “Jesus Christ Superstar.” He understudied in New York, and played the role on Broadway and in Los Angeles. That garnered interest from the producers of the 1973 film version, and he portrayed Jesus once again for director Norman Jewison.



Ted Neeley, Superstar, at the “The Hollywood Show” in 2013

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

After completing the film, Neeley turned to acting, music and film scoring, including Robert Altman’s “A Perfect Couple.” But the specter of his most famous role continued to follow him. He reprised his Jesus in the late 1970s, and would produce a touring company of the show in the 1990s that ended up running five years. In all – including a revival of the show in 2006, Neeley has portrayed Jesus over 5,000 times.

The spiritual Mr. Neeley sat down to talk with HollywoodChicago.com in 2013 at “The Hollywood Show” Chicago, an annual event in which fans can mingle, take photographs and get autographs from the celebrities who appear there.

HollywoodChicago.com: What style of music inspired you to get into the 1960s rock scene and what got you the contract with Capitol Records back then?

Ted Neeley: What inspired me was growing up in Texas and listening to the radio, I would do impersonations of all the musicians I loved. I was a drummer and singer, and my group was a weekend human jukebox. We’d play and sing anywhere, and would take requests from the crowd, and if we didn’t know it, we’d practice the next day and have it ready the next night. That’s how I started.

The day after I graduated from high school, the band played our graduation party, then we packed up and played a graduation party 180 miles away, and then we kept doing that until we reached California. I would call the Musicians Union, and ask which bars we could audition at, play two weeks in a particular town, and move on.

HollywoodChicago.com: What happened when you finally reached California?

Neeley: There were clubs everywhere on the Sunset Strip. We auditioned for them all and never got turned down. We got hired everywhere we went, because we were doofuses from Texas who played all kinds of crazy music [laughs]. We played the Sunset Strip clubs like Whiskey-a-Go-Go, The Trip and The Red Velvet. This was right where the Hollywood actors, directors and producers would hang out. They liked what they heard, and soon we had a regular crowd hanging out wherever we played. The club owners loved us. We were like a karaoke band before the term, while groups like “The Doors” were doing original stuff.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was the range of your covers?

Neeley: We did everything. We’d do Elvis or Johnny Cash one minute, and then shift to Perry Como and Dean Martin. It was just a crazy act that would pack them in. We started doing private gigs after that, including some movie star homes. We once did a party at a house owned by Anthony Franciosa. It was a huge place. Everybody who was anybody was at this party. We were playing, and there – for example – was Steve McQueen watching us, and we were trying to be cool.

There was somebody leaning against a tree, and he kept watching us the whole night. Even when we came back from a break, there he was again. It turned out to be Alan Livingston, the president of Capitol Records. He signed us to his label based on that party at Tony Franciosa’s house.

HollywoodChicago.com: You worked throughout most of the mid-to-late 1960s. Would you say that you fully participated in the youth movement of the era, or were you too busy to notice?

Neeley: We participated. We left Texas specifically to do so, to tour and play music. We were invited to all the parties, and partook of all the ‘cookies,’ ‘candies’ or whatever was being served [laughs]. I wasn’t really as in to it as the others, but we were there.

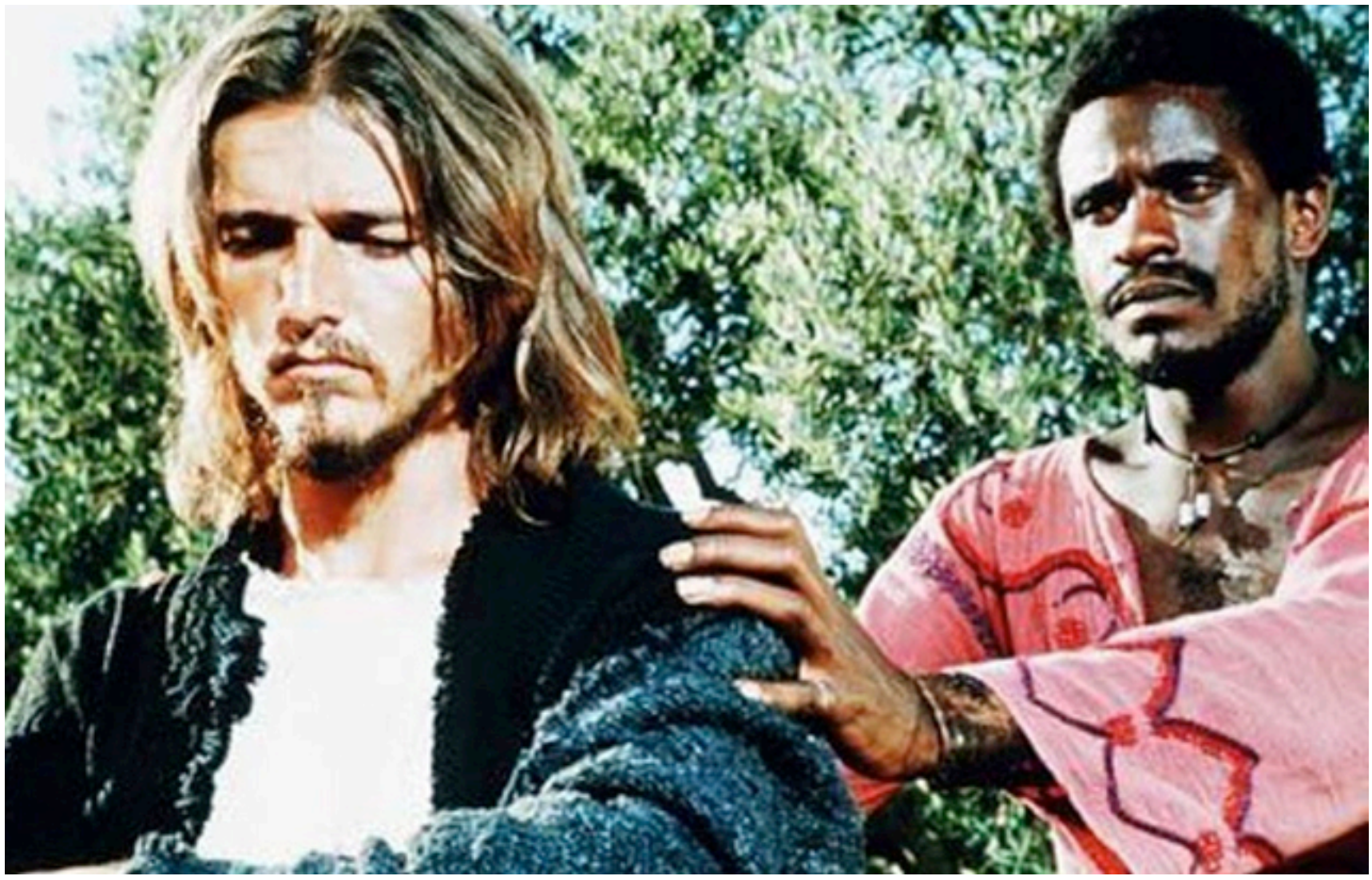
HollywoodChicago.com: You were on Broadway with the legendary show ‘Hair’ in the late 1960s. How do you think that show changed the course of theater history, given that you followed up with the stage version of ‘Superstar’?

Neeley: It absolutely changed everything about musical theater. It happened because Tom O’Horgan – the director of ‘Hair’ – was able to sit down with Jim Rado, Gerry Ragni and Gait MacDermot [the creators of the musical] and take it off Broadway to develop it. He was a very creative man. Once the buzz started, it was a path for the show to Broadway. The investors on Broadway could actually come see the show before they put money into it, which was a great strategy. What we were doing on stage every night was happening in the streets. We became the authority on the movement, with the cast actually invited to colleges for lectures.

HollywoodChicago.com: What kind of relationship did you have with Norman Jewison on the set of the film version of ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’? What did he want from your interpretation that you hadn’t necessarily thought of, after you had done the character a number of times on Broadway?

Neeley: Without Norman Jewison, there never would have been a film version of ‘Jesus Christ Superstar.’ And it certainly wouldn’t have kept making the spiritual connection that it does to the world up to today. It was Norman Jewison all the way.

The story of Norman’s involvement with ‘Superstar’ is fairly miraculous. He was doing the film version of ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ in Yugoslavia, and Barry Dennen was in the cast – Dennen was at the same time working on the Pontius Pilate role in the recording of the ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ rock opera, in collaboration with the creators Anthony Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. He let Norman listen to the demo songs to help him with the character, they weren’t even finished yet. Norman heard them, and asked who owned the rights. They were producing it on Decca Records, and Norman knew immediately that was Universal Studios. He called the studio, and told them that he wanted to purchase the underlying film rights to a project called ‘Jesus Christ Superstar,’ based on the three demo songs he heard.



Ted Neeley and Carl Anderson in the 1973 film version of 'Jesus Christ Superstar'
Photo credit: Universal Studios Home Video

HollywoodChicago.com: What was Universal's reaction?

Neeley: The executive there said, 'what do we have to do with it?' He didn't even know that Decca was producing the rock opera. They bought the rights, and as soon as he finished work on 'Fiddler,' he started working on the film version of Superstar. He wrote the screenplay and put the unknown cast together. Everything that was the film version came from Norman Jewison. Everything I did came from his decision.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you've portrayed him over 5,000 times, what is your personal relationship with Jesus Christ right now?

Neeley: I was born and raised in Texas, and knew as much about the Bible at ten years old as I knew anything. I've had a personal connection to God and Jesus since then, and I am a believer. The only thing I challenge in that relationship is what happens when religion becomes organized, and which interpretation do you believe?

My feeling about what Andrew and Tim wanted to do was to look at the last seven days of the man called Jesus of Nazareth, seen through the eyes of his friends and contemporaries. They saw him as a man, as they saw the divinity. We're seeing Jesus in the rock opera before he died and before he was resurrected. In that connection, human beings can relate more to what they perceive Jesus to be.

HollywoodChicago.com: Have you experienced that absolution in the feedback regarding your role in the film and stage versions of Superstar?

Neeley: Apparently, because I've been hearing it for forty years – people say to me, 'you brought me to my spiritual recognition.' I always contend I'm a rock and roll drummer from Texas, what are you talking about? I recently saw the film again, for the first time on the big screen. I do see what they're talking about in that experience. It was powerful and visionary, and beautifully plays up Andrew and Tim's interpretation of the relationship between Jesus and Judas. The essence of that is Judas thought he was doing the right thing – it wasn't about betrayal, but what he thought was his purpose and humanity. I'm not quoting the Bible, I'm quoting the philosophy of 'Superstar'.

HollywoodChicago.com: What song from the show that you perform is based on the philosophy you've just espoused?

Neeley: The song 'Gethsemane (I Only Want to Say)'. The lyrics to me are a conversation, just like I had with my father when I was a child. When I didn't know something, we'd sit and talk. He'd give me answers, and I would ask questions. I'm not 'Jesus talking to God' in that song, but a son talking to his father. That is the way I perform and interpret that song.

HollywoodChicago.com: Finally, you had a unique relationship with the man who portrayed Judas opposite you so many times, the late Carl Anderson…

Neeley: We were on the road with the show for years. Three to six months is considered a success for most road companies. When we put together the movie's 20th anniversary stage tour, we couldn't find a producer that was interested. They loved the show, but they just thought there would be no demand. So we produced it ourselves.

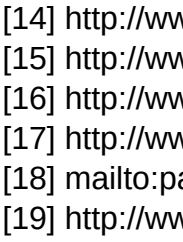
We started the run in Baltimore, got the promoters together, and ran for two years there, and another three on the road. Carl and I were together more than any two human beings in the world during that time. We were the yin/yang of the show, because we knew if one guy needed it, the other guy had his back. It freed us to perform, because we knew we could try different things, and it was just brilliant.

HollywoodChicago.com: What story do you think best defines your connection and friendship?

Neeley: We did a church seminar, just to talk to people, and they were listening to us as if we were the real deal. It was two guys talking about the human nature of those divine characters. We were astounded that they were listening to us, I had to remind Carl 'no profanity.' He looked at me and said, 'Neeley, all this time we've been together, why don't we just get married?' [laughs]

That, in a nutshell, was our relationship. We had wives and families elsewhere, but no matter where we would go we had the authority of those two characters, filtered through the relationship we had. We accepted the blessings of receiver and transmitter. Whatever the audience saw in us through those characters, we didn't challenge it, we just accepted it. We were thankful for it, and let it be.

"The Hollywood Show" in Chicagoland presents celebrities meet-and-greets and memorabilia vendors every spring. For more information click here. *[17]*

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