



KING OF KINGS: Paul Nolan (center) as Christ & cast of revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Photo: Joan Marcus.



Theater Review

Jesus Christ Superstar: Retro gospel according to Lloyd Webber & Rice rocks

JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR

Lyrics by Tim Rice

Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber

Choreography by Lisa Shriver

Directed by Des McAnuff

Neil Simon Theatre

250 West 52nd Street

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By Scott Harrah

By today's standards, *Jesus Christ Superstar* is tame indeed. On the surface, it is merely a retelling of the Passion Play, but with a 1970s twist since the show was a rock opera. This was Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's first musical collaboration, and was considered "blasphemous" by some Christians when it first came to Broadway four decades ago.

Regardless, the controversy gave the show international publicity and made it a sensation. The show might appear dated to some, but this production is anything but, for the tale of Christ's last days on earth is timeless and, by the intrinsically tragic nature of the "Greatest Story Ever Told," lends itself beautifully to opera, regardless of one's faith.

Since many already know the story, it is the songs and the unforgettable score that really stand out here. From the magnificent title track to "I Don't Know How to Love Him" (a pop hit for Yvonne Elliman, the original Mary Magdalene in the 1971 production) to "Everything's Alright"

to Act Two's spine-chilling "Gethsemane," belted out with dynamic ferocity by Jesus Christ (the incandescent, golden-voiced Paul Nolan), the score is both memorable and instantly recognizable, even if one has never seen a stage production of *Superstar*. The soundtrack shot straight up the Billboard charts to Number One in 1971 in the USA, but was initially banned by the BBC in Britain for being "sacrilegious." Any claims of the musical being "sacrilegious" seem silly now, for *Jesus Christ Superstar* is more faithful and accurate about the last days of Christ than most films, and much more reverent and emotionally intense than the dreadful *Godspell* revival currently running on Broadway.

As a musical, with no real book, this revival is primarily an excuse to come listen to the now-classic score. The songs soar with seamless timing, propelling the story of Christ forward at a dizzying pace, and that is something we rarely see in a modern stage musical. Robert Brill's sets are minimalistic; some work, while others do not. Especially effective is a news zipper scrolling across the upper part of the stage, like something one might see in Times Square, spelling out the days, cities in ancient Judea, and scenes that lead to Christ's downfall. Modern touches have been added, from industrial-looking scaffolding to high-tech projections, but some actually make the show visually spectacular and compliment the music instead of being distracting.

Tony winner Des McAnuff (*Jersey Boys*) sometimes directs the cast with the hit-and-miss precision of a wonky shuttlecock, allowing Jesus Christ to woo over his disciples in Act One, complete with some unnecessary music-video-style choreography by Lisa Shriver. This is *Jesus Christ Superstar* for the post-Baby Boom generation, weaned on MTV, VH1, "American Idol" and pop concerts. Although there are some borderline camp moments, such as Christ arriving in Jerusalem amongst a backdrop of projected palms, while the chorus dances around with palm fronds like something out of a glitzy Las Vegas revue, the score and most of the brilliant cast overshadow much of the gimmicky spectacle.

Mr. Nolan's Jesus is like a longhaired rocker dude from the 1980s, sporting Paul Tazewell's ill-fitting, flowing Biblical costumes, but his performance is consistently riveting, and when he sings, his mellifluous, grand voice often brings down the proverbial house.

One of the problems with any story of "the passion" is that we never learn the scale and significance of Christ's teachings and why some believed he was "King of the Jews" and the messiah. Most "passion" stories, either on film or the stage, always focus on the grim last days of the ill-fated savior, from his unfair trial to his painful walk, carrying the cross down the Via Dolorosa of Jerusalem to be crucified. *Superstar* is no exception. In previous productions and the 1973 film adaptation, the role of Judas Iscariot (played here with chilling conviction by Josh Young) seemed more fascinating than the purported "Son of God" himself. However, in this 2012 version, Mr. Nolan's interpretation of Jesus actually makes the character multifaceted, and

we feel real sympathy for him.

Supporting cast members also make this *Superstar* a must-see. The aforementioned Josh Young is outstanding as Judas, and Tom Hewitt, as Pontius Pilate, and Marcus Nance, as Caiaphas, are equally first rate, with their ethereal voices. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Chilina Kennedy, as she is simply miscast as Mary Magdalene. Her vocals are too thin for the show's most famous number, "I Don't Know How to Love Him." No one will ever match the melodic, emotional intensity of Yvonne Elliman's interpretation of the song, but Ms. Kennedy's take on Mary Magdalene's haunting ode to Christ is flat and lifeless.

Despite its minor shortcomings, this is a surprisingly razzle-dazzle and ultimately touching *Jesus Christ Superstar* revival. It is more relevant than ever, and (dare I say it?) truly rocks.

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