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## Stage Reviews

### Boogie-woogie Bible boy

*Jesus Christ Superstar gives the Good Book a great beat*

by STEVE BORNFELD

**JESUS CHRIST, PEZ DISPENSER** -- no? How about J.C. as a contestant in Biblical Idol? (Would that make Pontius Pilate the Simon Cowell of Judaea?)

Whatever your cup of holy water, try not to trip over the lepers coming out of the floorboards. It's all in the gospel according to PS Productions, resurrecting Jesus Christ Superstar at Spring Mountain Ranch. Mounted a dozen years ago by director Phil Shelburne under the Red Rock stars, this Bible with a backbeat returns, imaginatively reconfigured.

The 1970 messiah musical, yielding the classic "I Don't Know How to Love Him" and electric (if bombastic) title tune, was an early Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice collaboration. It covers Christ's final days from Palm Sunday through the Crucifixion, filtered through the political and personal conflict between Jesus and Judas. Its rock-operatic structure with no dialogue to tether it to specific sets or concepts leaves a roomy canvas for invention, and productions endlessly exploit its Rorschach-test theatricality. The lyrics even encourage such liberties, fusing the reverence of the biblical story with the irreverence of contemporary sensibilities -- modern slang and clothing, and that indispensable accessory of our age, irony -- for an intentionally anachronistic spin on The Greatest Story Ever Told. For a director, the piece is a challenge to the imagination, and Shelburne's is operating at full throttle. Even with young,



The cast of *Jesus Christ Superstar*

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relatively inexperienced actors, the cast's exuberance is contagious.

Though the opening-night performance contained some glitches, they weren't nearly enough to diminish the power and pleasure of this production, a multimedia affair that incorporates film clips to complement and magnify the live action. Scenic designer Evan Baroletti crafts a sleek stage that conveys divinity without fuss: A riser arches upward to be crowned by a sunburst-shaped screen. They're framed by wall sets sliced into squares dotted by mini-lights -- a nightclubby, hip simplicity against which a timeless tale can play out.

Onto this stage steps dazzling Keith Dotson (also the choreographer), whose menacing, tortured Judas gives this play its juice. Thuggish in black bandanna, pants and shirt over a red tee -- gang-banger chic -- Dotson is a bracing surge of personality belting "Heaven on Their Minds." While Dotson's flamboyance is occasionally so overpowering it threatens to suck up all the oxygen onstage, the bigness of his portrayal galvanizes this piece from the first sung note.

Taylor Campbell's Jesus is harder to lock onto, more believable in despair than divinity. Draped in angelic white, his boyish bearing falls short of hallowed charisma. He certainly radiates goodness, but sometimes he's less a Christ figure than a turbo-charged Opie. But just when you think Dotson's Judas could devour him, Campbell stiffens Jesus' resolve, and the tension between them is palpable. And as he grows weary of his standoff with Judas and disappointed with his disciples, Campbell ratchets up the anger and anguish, particularly when he chases the moneychangers out of the temple and is trapped by the sick begging to be healed. It bursts out of him in the dramatic "Gethsemane" -- a bitch of a song to sing -- that he delivers with fearsome fervor.

Campbell and Dotson benefit from fine support, including: Monique Hafen, a warm, soulful Mary Magdalene, despite a nasal singing quality that compromises her heartfelt "I Don't Know How to Love Him"; Cory Benway, whose thunder-throated Pilate is a riveting creation; Carlos Emjay's compelling Caiaphas; and Joe DeBenedetto, whose comic King Herod struts wearing a giant "H" belt buckle.

Surrounding all this -- Judas' betrayal, the high priests' relentless persecution, Pilate's wrath, Jesus' trial and death -- is Shelburne's lightning storm of sight and sound that washes over the audience like electric waves. He has flaky fun with touches such as followers hawking J.C. tees and wearing a giant, shoulder-mounted Jesus Pez dispenser, and casting his appearance in Herod's court as a vaudevillian American Idol knockoff with a "Performing Tonight: Jesus!" marquee, the screen declaring him voted off. A kaleidoscope of film bits include juxtaposed images of Hanukkah dreidels and a roulette wheel (gambling on the King of the Jews?). Lepers rise from under the stage to overwhelm Jesus; in the chilling mob scene, their assault on Jesus is overlaid with filmed close-ups of their taunting faces, amping up the vitriol; and when Jesus is whipped, blood symbolically spurts onto his name on the screen with each lash. Judas' suicide, though not depicted as the usual hanging, is a visual grabber as he descends into the fires of hell. The Crucifixion, stark and soaked in blood-red lighting, stuns the audience into silence.

Dance numbers throb with joyful urgency, backed by an onstage band that sometimes overwhelms singers but really rocks the Scriptures. Jay Ledane's skillful lighting, pinwheeling from ominous shadows to bursts of startling color, is practically a character in itself, and Frederic Pineau's costumes, spanning biblical robes to Gap-casual, accentuate the production's liberating timelessness.

Flying by in a frenzied 100 minutes, this Jesus Christ Superstar is a new testament to creativity.

***Jesus Christ Superstar***



Wed.-Sat., Aug. 15-18 and 22-25, 8 p.m.

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