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Director takes another crack at musical 'Jesus Christ Superstar' was 'good learning experience'

By KEN WHITE

REVIEW-JOURNAL

what: Super Summer Theatre when: 8 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday (and Aug. 15-18 and Aug. 22-25) where: Spring Mountain Ranch State Park, 18 miles west of Las Vegas tickets: \$10-\$15 (594-7529)

Director Phil Shelburne first directed the Andrew Lloyd Webber-Tim Rice musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" for Super Summer Theatre 12 years ago.

Initially, the production that starts Wednesday at Spring Mountain Ranch State Park "was the exact polar opposite" of the previous version, Shelburne says, but as time went on "I had to modify and change things" and now there are more elements of the original concept onstage.

"But it's not even remotely the same show," Shelburne says. "It has a different message. It boils down to the different personalities of the people onstage and how they say the words."

Out of necessity, Shelburne says, he had to change his concept of this production. "It started out with a very strong concept, but it got very controversial and I had to back away from that. It's a very open show. The script is nothing but a bunch of lyrics, the interpretation can be very open. You're dealing with a character that probably everyone on the planet has heard of. And everyone has an idea of how it should be done. This is a story, it's not the Bible."



Taylor Campbell, center, as Jesus is surrounded by his followers during a rehearsal of "Jesus Christ Superstar" at Spring Mountain Ranch State Park. Keith Dotson, upper left, stars as Judas and also is the show's choreographer. Photo by Ralph Fountain.

His original idea was to base the story on the Gnostic "Gospel of Judas," which tells a different version of events in the last days of Jesus.

Having to drop that idea "was a good learning experience for me," Shelburne says. "There are some things that are still very, very taboo."

This "JCS" also features some video segments that will be mixed with live action onstage and a live band consisting of Dave Braun and Matt Baldoni on guitar, Adrian Garcia on bass and Tony DeAugustine on drums. Before, Shelburne had to use pre-recorded music.

"It looks pretty cool. We did some crowd scenes. Primarily it's an accent to the live action," says Shelburne, who also directs the "Tournament of Kings" show at the Excalibur. He previously used video for "Tommy."

The weather played havoc with the company's first rehearsal at Spring Mountain Ranch last Tuesday. It got to the point where the cast and Shelburne were joking about "throwing up a Hail Mary and see where it lands," he says. "The weather blew us out of there. There was so much water that stuff was floating around everywhere."

However, Shelburne doesn't sound worried about how the show turns out. "Just the energy and the joy from the cast is inspiring," he says, pointing out that the cast -- Taylor Campbell as Jesus, Monique Hafen as Mary Magdalene, Keith Dotson as Judas, Cory Benway as Pontius Pilate, Joe DeBenedetto as King Herod, Gregg Stokes as Peter, Carlos Emjay as Caiaphas, Brian Gressley as Annas, Justin Rodriguez as Simon the Zealot -- averages 18 to 24 years old.

"It becomes a very different animal of what you can do," Shelburne says. "It's the experience level. But I couldn't ask for a more enthusiastic cast. They're positive and upbeat and they support each other," even through a few cast

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changes that occurred along the way.

Dotson also is the show's choreographer, while Tom Lipps directs the music, Frederic Pineau designed the costumes, Evan A. Baroletti designed the sets and Jay Ledane designed the lighting.

Gates to the Ranch open at 6 p.m.

Tickets can be obtained at unlvtickets.com and at the UNLV Performing Arts Center box office (895-2787).

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