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Pleasant 'Superstar' can be enjoyed without shame

By ANTHONY DEL VALLE

REVIEW-JOURNAL

REVIEW

What: "Jesus Christ Superstar"

When: 8 p.m.
Wednesdays-Saturdays
(through Aug. 25)

Where: Spring Mountain
Ranch State Park

Tickets: \$10-\$15 (594-7529)

Grade: A

Pity the poor theatergoer who goes to "Jesus Christ Superstar" expecting quality music, or interesting theology or real characters. But what you can get -- and in Philip's Shelburne's production at Super Summer Theatre, you get it in spades -- is pleasantly light-hearted, bouncy fun.

This [Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice](#) sung-through rock tale of the events leading up to the crucifixion can be laborious if performed too seriously, and stupid if kidded too broadly. Shelburne gives the story just the right amount of respect, while allowing us to laugh at and enjoy the pop vulgarization of sacred text.

The stage often is stuffed with people, yet, every pocket feels alive with carefully designed action. [Keith Dotson's](#) choreography is full of play. The often expert cast infuses the dancing with the kind of infectious energy one usually finds only in first-rate musical comedy.

Shelburne creates a feast of memorable images -- among them, the brutality of Jesus' ([Taylor Campbell](#)) being flogged, the Faustian descent of Judas (Dotson) into hell, the touching delicacy with which the apostles remove Jesus' body from the cross.

Evan Baroletti's set is an open grid hosted on a raked, grated stage towered over by a giant wristwatch-shaped screen that depicts video of action and images. It's always pleasing to the eye, and the screen images give the story the pulse of an apocalyptic, Nostradamus nightmare. Shelburne shows remarkable restraint with the video device. He doesn't abuse the production's technology. Jay Ledane's aggressive, sensual lighting goes a long way in giving us the illusion not only of passion but of multiple sets.

Campbell makes Jesus a young, Donny Osmond-style pied piper. His teen-magazine boyishness is an effective contrast to Dotson's angry and over-the-top (and expert) vocalizing. Cory Benway is an authoritative Pontius Pilate. Joe DeBenedetto proves there are still inventive ways to camp up the King Herod role. What's surprising is not that DeBenedetto is amusingly ridiculous, but that his character (made here into an "Idol"-TV host) seems to believe all the loony things he says. The actor's skill is in taking a one-note sketch character and, in just one brief scene, establishing a believable reality base.

The score is well served by onstage musicians Matt Baldoni, Dave Braun, Tony DeAugustine and Adrian Garcia.

There are one or two major problems, and a few quibbles. But the important things have been gotten very right. The show's exuberance and good feeling allow you to bob along to the nonsense Webber-isms without shame.

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