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Judas is angry. Jesus is angry. Everyone's really angry in the Harrison Hilltop Theatre's *Jesus Christ Superstar*
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Okay, maybe not everyone, but there was a *lot* of anger going around during Friday night's performance – and, from some of the cast members, little else. Granted, composer Andrew Lloyd Webber's and lyricist Tim Rice's Biblical characters are rather one-note, due to the pair's failure to flesh out the personalities of Jesus and his disciples and detractors. Yet while most of director David Turley's actors don't do much to improve upon that failing, they do sing the hell out of this rock opera, and that's what really makes the show worth seeing.

Webber's and Rice's musical incites some controversy, due to its creators liberally altering the details of the scriptural story, and ending the account of Jesus' final few days with his crucifixion but without including his resurrection. Unfortunately, Turley's take – with the hippie look of *Hair* and the minimalist feel of
Godspell –
actually takes some of
Superstar
's edge off, despite this show's employment a female Judas. There's little examination of the underlying points of the piece, the psychology of Jesus and his disciples, and the level-headed questioning of Jesus' choices.

Judas is meant to be that voice of reason, but that intent isn't fully realized in Sara Elizabeth Speight's interpretation; she creates a Judas who is pretty much just resentfully angry with Jesus. With the role played by a woman, there's an intrinsic undertone added to the plot that could really be edgy – it's possible to see Judas' anger as born out of jealousy from a romantic love for Jesus – but this isn't played up in Speight's portrayal. (Of course, there is the betraying kiss Judas gives Jesus, which Speight delivers lip-to-lip with Tristan Layne Tapscott, instead of lip-to-cheek.) Speight does show a talent for nuance, though, in her song "Judas' Death," when her Judas is trying to convince herself of what she *thinks* she believes – that Jesus is a man and nothing more – and we see that thought process clearly on Speight's face and hear it in her voice. Oh, and that voice! Boy, does she rock the theatre with her powerhouse vocals. While

Speight's acting effort could use more subtlety, it's the lack of it in her singing that really sells her performance; her rich, full sound is one of the best things about the Hilltop's production.

In truth, with the exception of Tapscott's mostly off-key falsetto phrases, the show's vocals are fantastic. Every single soloist is a pleasure to hear, with beautiful tones that reverberate through the District Theatre, and even with so many great voices on hand, there are a few standouts. Joe Maubach, with his perfectly pitched vocals, sent chills down my spine in his militaristic turn as Annas, and John VanDeWoestyne, portraying Ciaphas, showcases one of the richest voices in Quad Cities theatre. Jenny Winn paints her Mary's "Could We Start Again, Please" with a sweet sadness fitting of a love lost. And Brian Nelson's Pontius Pilate was my personal favorite from Friday's performance. His "Pilate's Dream" melted my heart with its exquisite sound mixed with emotional depth and nuance, creating the most moving moment of the night.

The District Theatre space, however, sometimes works against the singers. With tones bouncing off the walls, the large room actually adds richness to the voices – similar to what happens when you sing in the shower – but it also muddles the actors' diction, making it difficult, at times, to discern specific lyrics. The effect is cruelest to Speight, which is a shame, because her singing is so good.

And then there's the problem of the penultimate song, "Superstar," the show-stopping number that (aside from "I Don't Know How to Love Him") is the most recognizable from Webber's score. Its presentation here, however, prevents what is otherwise a quite-enjoyable show from ending on as good a note. Speight performs the song well, but her back-up singers are loose in their harmonies and either uncommitted to or uncertain of their choreography, and while the choir that comes out toward the end is a nice touch, Turley places them in the theatre's "balcony," peripheral to where our attention lies. The whole number just falls flat, not living up to its reputation as the most rocking song in the musical, and left a bad taste in my mouth as I left the performance. There is, at least, a nice attempt at lighting the scene by designer Joe Simpson, with bulbs flashing in an alternating pattern along the sides of the stage. Yet it's also the only notable lighting in the whole show, most of which is so dimly lit that it's hard to see the actors' faces. (Sometimes, they're made visible with the use of what seems to be a flashlight instead of a full spotlight, which wavers distractingly during the entirety of its use.)

As for Tapscott's take on Jesus, it also has negative repercussions. Vocally, he certainly sounds good, and he even shades his savior a bit beyond how he's written. However, Tapscott's Jesus is quick to anger, and an intense, physical, fists-ready-to-fight anger, at that. His Jesus is more of a hothead enjoying the accolades of his followers than a man aware of his ultimately sacrificial role in saving the world; it's hard to connect with him, to attach to him, which renders his death much less moving than it should be. With the lackluster "Superstar" followed by a not-so-emotionally-effective crucifixion, this *Jesus Christ Superstar* ends on a sour note, making it too easy to forget the previous pleasures of the production.

For tickets and information, call (309)235-1654 or visit HarrisonHilltop.com .