

Written by Paula Jolly
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The years have turned it into a classic of musical theatre, but when it first appeared on stage, Andrew Lloyd Webber's and Tim Rice's *Jesus Christ Superstar* met with criticism as well as critical acclaim. And even though it's no longer controversial, *Jesus Christ Superstar* still has all of its power and theatrical brilliance.

Ann Nieman, director and choreographer of Circa 21's current production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, has gathered an amazing group of local and national performers and designers to give Quad City theatre-goers a fabulous opportunity to see a high-quality treatment.

The musical opens with Judas' struggle to understand how the "celebrity" of Christ's ministry meshes with the message Judas heard when he first met Jesus. Judas is tormented and confused, and the rough edge to Craig McEldowney's voice clearly displays these elements to the audience. It's no wonder he's agitated: Judas is constantly plagued by his two tormentors, Andrea Moore and Perry Greene. They are forever in his way, spinning confusion with their dance and blocking certain paths when choices need to be made.

Christ's calm is a stark contrast to Judas's chaos, even though Jesus is fully aware of the suffering he will face. Matthew Ellison does a good job handling the nuances needed for Christ's character as well as performing the difficult vocalizations beautifully. His presence is understated, and that makes his performance all the stronger, as it blends with the intensity of light, sound, music, and dance.

One of the most controversial characters in *Jesus Christ Superstar* is Mary Magdalene; her relationship with Jesus, in Webber's and Rice's musical, has been open for debate. Mary Jo Curry gives her portrayal sensitivity and class, and her interpretations of "Everything's Alright" and "I Don't Know How to Love Him" are two highlights of the show.

There are also three standout performances beyond the leads. David Lewis, as Pilate, has enough regal aura to make the audience feel that it's sitting in a king's court. John Saunders, recently seen as an Elvis impersonator in Circa's production of *Discovering Elvis*, takes Herod

"Superstar" Brings All the Elements Together: "Jesus Christ Superstar," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse

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to new heights. And last but not least is Larry Allen Coke as Caiaphas; I couldn't tell if his vocal performance was electronically enhanced, but nonetheless his Coke is fabulous.

Jesus Christ Superstar is a packed musical, and it can easily become a nightmare production in which each designer goes in a different direction, leaving continuity to the wind and the audience wondering what they are watching. But Neiman blends the creative talents of her set, lighting, and costume designers into a cohesive and stimulating visual treat.

Dawn Robin Petrlik has created a set that allows the actors easy movement while giving the audience the opportunity to place the action where they choose. It was easy to see the scenes played out in Jerusalem or an alley spray-painted with graffiti in any major city of the world. Erika Conner's costume design holds flavors of the past and present, while lighting designer Russell A. Thompson highlights the calms and chaos brilliantly. And Nieman's direction and choreography bring all of these elements together into a must-see production.