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Theater Review

## Open Circle Puts New Shine on 'Superstar'

By Michael Toscano  
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Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar" was at the forefront of the 1970s movement that utilized pop culture in the search for spirituality.

The opera tells the story of the final week in the life of Jesus Christ, which is depicted as a fatal rivalry between Jesus and Judas and is set to Webber's nearly continuous score of often-raucous rock-inspired anthems combined with a few folksy ballads. Mixing the sacred with the strident seemed quite daring at the time, but the musical began to seem dated and stale almost immediately.

Enter Suzanne Richard, guiding spirit of Open Circle Theatre, who has resurrected, as it were, "Jesus Christ Superstar" with an entirely new approach that maintains the integrity of the music and lyrics while giving it a ripped-from-today's-headlines sensibility. Richard thrusts the story into the 2004 media/political maelstrom, turning Jesus into a candidate for president as if he were the man Ralph Nader pretends to be, a candidate created by a genuine grass-roots movement to be a savior and not a self-absorbed spoiler.

The focus on the intersection of commercialization, media hype and political oppression is creative and refreshing, a suitable backdrop that allows us to see Jesus as an imperfect human figure requiring healing as much as his followers. This is underscored as Jesus is portrayed by Rob McQuay in a wheelchair. Open Circle Theatre integrates artists with disabilities into its productions, a sensibility that informs rather than distracts

from Richard's message and adds a dramatic edginess to the familiar history. Performers with a variety of challenges flesh out the cast, utilizing wheelchairs, American Sign Language and whatever it takes to communicate.

Richard sees Pilate (Rick Foucheux) as a Bill O'Reilly-type broadcaster, blustering and bloviating as he tries Jesus in the media until recoiling from the negative energy he has unleashed. Herod (Jay Tilley) is a Rush Limbaugh-type charlatan, a radio blowhard who is really an agent of a reactionary government's political oppression and who skulks about Jesus's political rallies as an FBI-style gumshoe dressed in fedora, trench coat and shades, covertly recording Jesus's words to use against him.

Grady Weatherford's clever multimedia presentation mixes authentic present-day media imagery with the characters, blending Richard's vision to Webber and Rice's. Even with the new thematic approach and Richard's pointed political messages, Webber and Rice's story is intact and Jesus's journey is seen through the prism of his relationships with Judas (Matt Conner) and Mary (Lindsay Allen).

Richard directs with high energy and is aided by the vigorous choreography of Fred Michael Beam and Stefan Sittig that nods to the show's flower-power genesis with dance sequences that often appear to have been culled from old "Laugh-In" party sequences.

The musical performances are high octane, and several are joyous, particularly Act One's "Hosanna." Tracy Olivera's music is loud, played by a small band often overpowered by drumming that is way too heavy. Some of the singing veers dangerously close to dissonant screeching as the performers cope with Webber's occasionally overwrought score. That is a frequent problem for Conner, whose voice sometimes goes flat as he squeezes out big notes, detracting from what is otherwise a vibrant portrait of a jealous, conflicted figure

whose death scene Richard has boldly updated.

McQuay's singing and acting are powerful and rich with character; his rendition of "Gethsemane," as Jesus contemplates his death, is chillingly exquisite. The famously melodic "I Don't Know How to Love Him" has never sounded prettier or more meaningful than when performed by Allen.

In the relatively small role of Herod, Tilley brings the passion and beautifully soaring voice that imbues all his stage work.

So forget the musty stage versions you may have seen or the hippie film version. The granola has been pumped up with steroids, making this "Jesus" a savior for our times.

*"Jesus Christ Superstar," performed by Open Circle Theatre, continues through Oct. 17 at the Clark Street Playhouse, 601 S. Clark St., Arlington. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sundays. Tickets may be purchased online at [www.boxofficetickets.com](http://www.boxofficetickets.com) or by calling 800-494-8497. For more information, visit [www.opencircletheatre.org](http://www.opencircletheatre.org).*

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