

Jesus Christ Superstar

In rethinking Andrew Lloyd Webber's half-baked rock-gospel-according-to-Judas, Suzanne Richard throws a double handful of smart directorial ideas at the fourth wall. Plenty of 'em stick, too, but it'd be a stretch to say they form much of a pattern. Richard and her Open Circle Theatre cast serve up tart observations on celebrity culture, on the corrupting effects of power and of politics, and on the debasement of the media, all in telling the cautionary tale of a Candidate Christ (Rob McQuay) who moves through a present-day political campaign in a wheelchair. (Open Circle exists to make a place in professional theater for performers with disabilities, often finding artistic alchemies in what happens there.) The idea of a savior who's as much in need of healing as anyone who comes to him turns out to be an interesting one, tying in neatly with the themes of a show that is surprisingly sophisticated. Tim Rice's book glances now and again in the direction of issues that heavier thinkers have explored more fully--among them the dark allure of martyrdom (T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*) and the complicated texture of Christ's humanity (the central subject of Nikos Kazantzakis' *Last Temptation of Christ*)--and Richard proves she's ready to wrestle with them. Her Herod is a [Limbaughian] windbag, her Pontius Pilate (who knew Rick Foucheux could sing so well?) a talk-show host with too much political savvy not to see what's coming (and too much conscience not to be horrified). Nerviest of all is what I keep thinking of as "the Judas Pietà"--the show has always been the story of the betrayer as much as the betrayed, but Richard underscores the idea that Judas (Matt Conner) could have been any of us, that his fall is a tragedy, too. (She robs one of her strongest interpretive ideas of its full impact, though, by giving it away in her director's note.) Lloyd Webber's early-'70s scream-rock can be grating, and not everyone in Richard's sprawling cast negotiates its noisy angularities as confidently as J.P. Gulla's fearful Peter, but "I Don't Know How to Love Him" still manages to be moving, and Lindsay Allen's Mary nicely vulnerable. And if Richard's sparks of directorial imagination don't quite set the Clark Street Playhouse afire, the show itself is at least partly to blame--it never gathers its various thoughts into a single philosophy.

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Clark Street Playhouse 601 S. Clark St., Arlington. Thursdays-Saturdays & Wednesdays at 8 p.m.; matinees Sundays at 2 p.m. \$20 to Oct. 17 (800) 494-8497