

Paramount's 'Superstar' lets the cast reinvent those Webber-Rice songs



By **Chris Jones**
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If you are one of those people who know every note of "Jesus Christ Superstar," the anthemic rock opera penned as a concept album by a couple of pimply upper-class Brits named Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, you might be surprised by much of what you hear at the **Paramount Theatre** in Aurora, where this perpetually popular and yet perennially bizarre show is enjoying a splashy new production with a formidably talented cast that really does have something new to give.

In 1970, Lloyd Webber — who was all of 22 when he popped this one out — was a legit classicist gingerly monkeying around in a new genre. It wasn't until Ian Gillan, variously the lead singer of Deep Purple and Black Sabbath and inarguably the owner of one of the greatest voices to work in heavy metal, got hold of Lloyd Webber's florid "Gethsemane" and turned it into a wailing tour de force featuring his spectacular vocal range that Lloyd Webber was given a leg up in the rocking-out business. The rest of the show — all of that "Hosanna" and "Could We Start Again Please" stuff is so legit it's still sung by children's choirs. And the comic number given to King Herod is pure and sticky

pop pablum: it had its origins in a number written for the Eurovision Song Contest, which is about a milquetoast as you can get.

Which brings me to what goeth on in Aurora, where director Ron Kellum (a nationally known choreographer and live spectacular specialist) has assembled a formidable African-American cast for his revival of a piece that, despite the conceptual efforts of many a director, resists the narrative impositions of mere mortals and always comes out as a mix between a group concert and a flashy theatrical event.

Kellum doesn't push his luck there. The designer Kevin Depinet has created a bunch of faux-Roman and crumbling columns and platforms, an environment that fits the confined aspect of a story that restricts itself to the last week that Jesus of Nazareth was alive and that would not look out of place at a Beyonce concert (and I mean that as a compliment). Kellum's bets are placed mostly on his cast, which is full of performers with Broadway and "American Idol"-like credits, including the remarkable Rufus Bonds Jr., whose Pilate is predictably fabulous.

Given how busy all these folks are, I suspect the rehearsal period was short, and, indeed, there are some moments of less specificity than, say, the closing 10 minutes, which are fabulous, and include Jesus ascending to the heavens before your eyes. One person near me rose in tandem to his feet.

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For those of us who've seen this show scores of times, the main interest is experiencing how these terrific vocalists — and that was the emphasis in the casting — perform this material and make it work for themselves. The co-music directors Kory Danielson and Tom Vendrafreddo clearly allowed the performers a lot of freedom: I've never heard "I Don't Know How to Love Him" sung with the embellishments that Felicia Boswell offers (and why not?), and, as Judas, Mykal Kilgore is as unfettered as any Judas, ever. The ensemble singing is much the same — I swear I heard different harmonies on "Hosanna", and there are a few other smart theatrical changes toward the end. I could go on. It's also worth noting that many of Rice's lyrics — a real stylistic mixed bag — take on compelling new resonance when sung by an all-black cast, which is a great way to approach this show. A bet someone has this idea the next time "JCS" is talked about for Broadway.

Only Evan Tyrone Martin, who stars as Jesus, really sticks to the traditional phrasings. Martin was a late replacement in this role, and he is a phenomenal Chicago talent. But the impact of this incredibly honest and moving actor not really letting loose vocally — and both this piece and certainly this production give him all the freedom in the world — is to make Jesus seem less charismatic. It's not that Martin is doing anything wrong; in an ideal world, though, his singing would fit better with the reinventions of the whole.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

cjones5@chicagotribune.com

Twitter @ChrisJonesTrib

"Jesus Christ Superstar"^{TV} - 3 Stars

When: Through May 28

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

Running time: 1 hour, 50 minutes

Tickets: \$44-\$59 at 630-896-6666 or paramountaurora.com

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