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Review: "Jesus Christ Superstar's" 50th anniversary lap is a wild ride

The shows runs through Jan. 28 at Denver Performing Arts Complex



Jack Hopewell (center) plays Jesus in the North American tour of the 50th anniversary "Jesus Christ Superstar." (Photo by Evan Zimmerman for MurphyMade)



By JOHN WENZEL | jwenzel@denverpost.com | The Denver Post

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Tuesday's performance of "Jesus Christ Superstar" at the Buell Theatre raced and banked like a roller coaster, with all the stomach butterflies and whiplash that implies.

The [six-date run of the 50th anniversary tour](#) of the Broadway classic is, as fans know, another shot of life for the all-singing, all-dancing rock opera, the success of which pushed Andrew Lloyd Webber's music and Tim Rice's lyrics into households around the United States.

The 90-minute, intermission-free show remains faithful to its early 1970s origin, with strenuous choreography and herky-jerky melodies. The Gospel-inspired lyrics and songs aren't for everyone; one has a hard time imagining anyone but young theater nerds clamoring to see it for the first time in 2024, despite "Superstar" being the first musical many older fans experienced.

But Tuesday night's effortful showing proved the durability of its commercial appeal, if not its message of peace amid psychological and physical torture.

With cast members practically cartwheeling onto stage from the aisles, the show presents disciples and commoners in hoodie sweatshirts, sneakers and the occasional track pant (a spiritually faithful nod to the original production). The live band, with guitarists spotlighted, looms from a second-story perch. Like the hip-hop-driven "Hamilton" and its imitators, it's a breathless reimagining of a familiar story through pop music. Missing some of the rapid-fire and occasionally hard-to-follow lyrics is not a dealbreaker. We all know where this is going.

The parade of meaningful looks into the rafters begins with our Jesus (Jack Hopewell), whose wickedly high voice is the summit of the show's vocal tower. What first seems like an understated performance from Hopewell reveals itself to be centered and confident. One initially wants him to reach out more to the audience, his nonexistent body language lagging behind his jackrabbit voice.

But that's an asset when contrasted against the officious and intimidating High

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Along with Jesus, traitor Judas (Elvie Ellis) and Mary Magdalene (Jaden Dominique) anchor the show, with Ellis delivering a particularly explosive turn. It's tough to imagine there's anything left for him after each performance, as much as he gives in his crucial role. Dominique provides a soulful and smooth respite to the record-skipping, medley-like milieu, offering another moral center of gravity.

On a local note, Colorado's own Joshua Bess, who this month sang the National Anthem at a Denver Broncos game, also stands out in an ensemble that's expected to run, jump, flail and sing nearly nonstop. His unflagging energy is typical of the members' performances.

The baubles — internally lit crosses, gallons of golden glitter, and enough mistiness to keep the fog-machine industry in business through the end of the decade — are omnipresent in the second act as the cast flits and climbs through original designer Tim Scutt's versatile set. By the end, the constant motion has drawn our eyes over every inch of the stage.

This is a contemporary reading of a contemporary reading. Jesus wears a very 2020s top-knot, his silhouette more Instagram wellness-influencer than robed Biblical figure. Improbably, his message of peace and tolerance feels newly controversial in light of distant wars and domestic divisions, as painfully relevant now as in the '70s.

The music, too, still grabs, with searing electric solos, film-score swells and jazzy interludes. Music director Ryan Edward Wise fills this tall, complicated order with aplomb, given the show's demanding sung-through format, and the mostly hidden live band is immaculate.

Balancing an instantly recognizable brand with its own heart and soul, director Timothy Sheader makes this "Superstar" worth revisiting thanks to its raft of killer players and their fresh takes. But it is, at heart, the production that it's always been, and it's up to you whether that's worth worshipping.

"To conquer death you have to die," sings Jesus in "Simon Zealotes/Poor Jerusalem." Given the longevity of this show, we'd beg to differ.

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