



Society : SWMTC Productions
Production : Jesus Christ Superstar
Date : 10th April 2014
Venue : Theatre Royal, Windsor
Report by : Jacque Stedman

Report

As your Regional Representative, Gordon Bird, had been called away on family business, I was delighted to be able to cover for him, as we were already attending the matinee performance on the Thursday. Our thanks to Jeni Money for her warm welcome and to the Director, Simon Woodbridge in taking the time to exchange a few words before the performance began. I was so knocked out by the whole production that I am not sure quite where to start so I think I will look at the technical bits first and then go on from there.

On entering the auditorium the atmospheric blue spots on the black stage enhanced the feeling of anticipation which I always get whenever I see this show, and when the solo guitar gave us those haunting few first notes the stage was set. The set worked very well with different levels and entrances giving great scope for interesting movement about the stage. A bit more light on the upper level would have helped in various places and would have given us a better view of the players who were up there. The lighting throughout was excellent and so atmospheric. During 'Hosanna' the lights went alternately from the crowds to Christ depending who was singing at the time, and this sort of attention to detail continued throughout the entire show. At the end when Christ died the spotlights on him faded slowly as the poppies came down – very effective.

Because the whole production had a more modern feel the costuming must have been so much easier than usual. I liked the fact that the priests were in black, setting them apart, but would have liked to see Caiaphas and Annas with some sort of headwear to indicate their authority, although their costume did display a bit more opulence than the others. The total black of Judas' costume with its chains and studs was totally opposite to the white simplicity of Jesus, giving us the visual reminder of good and evil.

Judas's death was very well done, although I would suggest that the noose should have gone round his neck before he tried to secure the harness (I did mention this to Damian in the bar when I met him). I am pleased to note that the harness was not visible and I didn't notice that he had done up his leather jacket to cover it either. The nailing of Christ to the cross (supposedly under the instructions of a senior Roman soldier) was also most realistic and because of the positioning the audience, fortunately, could not see what was being done. The hammering of the 'nails' indicated the progress of the soldiers, but what had to be done to secure William's body was not obvious and the cross rose slowly and surely into position.....watched by a totally silent audience! The falling poppies were a lovely touch, presumably to indicate the spilling of Christ's blood, and this concentrated the audience's attention on his death better than just having an empty silent stage. Congratulations to the entire team – it must have been a H&S nightmare! The nailing of Christ to the cross and the

crucifixion was all very moving and at the end still and silent, but the emotion was tangible both from the players on the stage and the audience.

This is a show where the words are of vital importance because, although we all know where the story ends, the words are so clever and so insightful that they deserve to be heard. They are in a language that everyone can understand and not the language of the ancient Bible. I am pleased to say that the words came across very well and the diction from all the singers was excellent. This is also very much a collaboration between all the players, some having more involvement than others, but everyone on the stage WAS a character from this time and those characterisations were maintained during the whole time they were onstage. There were a couple of times when the band could have been slightly quieter but this is, after all, a rock opera and loud music is what's to be expected. It was a shame that during 'This Jesus must die', and in parts of Act II the sound balance was not quite right so not all the parts were heard clearly. However, one assumes that it must have been very difficult to get it spot on because of the difference in volume throughout the show.

Apart from the stunning performances I think the thing that struck me most was the sheer joy, energy and excitement which permeated the whole of Act I, and the pace throughout was excellent. This was aided by the number of young people in the show, which was a delight to see. The emotion which was generated by the cast was both tangible and infectious as far as the audience was concerned.

Throughout the overture members of the cast came on from different directions and held a superb freeze as the stage gradually filled, giving us a slow build up to the coming action and then erupting into the first song.

Although this is the 'Easter' story I always think it is Judas' story really. It is he whom fate decided should betray Christ and he feels this very keenly, even though, ultimately, Christ was treated far worse than he would ever have imagined. It seemed unfair to him that, as Jesus' favourite, he should have been chosen for this task. The part of Judas was in the very capable hands of Damian Sollesse who seemed to inhabit the character rather than play him, and from the moment of his first entrance to his delivery of 'Jesus Christ Superstar' he was totally involved in the action, even when he was not at the front of the stage or singing. At the start he gave the impression of desperation wondering how he can get through to Christ and stop his teaching. One forgets that this was an occupied nation and they all lived in fear of the Romans, but this fear was felt very keenly in Damian's portrayal. He really was terrified that because of Jesus he and all the disciples would be punished for their association with him. Judas's indecision (to and fro across the back of the upper level) was very well done, and his final decision to go to the High Priests was still fraught with trepidation and fear when he realises he will be 'Damned for all Time' when he is offered the 30 pieces of silver. The band was a bit too loud at this point so that the impact of the words was partially lost. 'Superstar' was so well done (and with a change of clothes reflecting his change of status), portraying Judas's disdain for Jesus as he dragged his cross along. Everyone was very disciplined throughout this number, and it had some excellent movement. This whole number was such a big contrast to Judas' persona throughout the show to that point. It was a very vibrant number against the sight of a pitiful Christ on his way to Calvary. Damian's singing was of the highest calibre and he had the right voice for the songs he was required to sing. Through the range of his singing he managed to convey all the worry,

desperation, fear and anger that he was feeling, which left us in no doubt of the turmoil which was going on within him.

William Branston gave us a very measured, calm and loving performance as Jesus – a portrayal that had lots of human elements, but also an ‘other worldness’ as the story progressed. His was the polar opposite of Judas, although his love for Judas and, indeed all the disciples and the populace was the driving force of his characterisation. From the time of his song in the Garden of Gethsemane, he seemed to withdraw into himself, almost as protection against what was going to happen. His delivery of the song was so emotional – showing him as a man fearing the future and asking God to find another way, but accepting that there is no other way and his destiny is set – but also so angry that he had no say in his fate. There were only two occasions when he lost his calmness – once in the temple when he overthrew the merchants and the other when all the lepers surrounded him and he appeared to be lifted up, but also overpowered by them all, making him cry out in desperation. His humble portrayal, his disappointment in the knowledge of the behaviour of the Apostles, his acceptance of his fate at the hands of Pilate and Herod, and then his crucifixion gave real credence to the part. This was a superbly judged performance and together with Pilate gave the story real depth.

Mary Magdalene (Nikki Plummer) is the person who, it seems to me, had undergone much more of a change in her life than any of the others. She had turned her back on her profession and was in a situation with which she was obviously not familiar. She showed such care and love to Jesus, much to Judas’ disgust, never once doubting that this was the right thing to do. It is very obvious that she is in love with him, although feeling completely out of her depth, and this is illustrated in her song ‘I Don’t Know How to Love Him’. She had a lovely voice and gentle persona, but looked like a rabbit in the headlights when Judas confronts Jesus about her. Nikki’s voice was beautiful, melodic and sincere and her characterisation gentle and full of love and consideration – as she truly must have felt. She also showed great support to the Apostles throughout the story and particularly after Christ’s betrayal. There was nothing rushed or agitated about her – a very good performance.

Caiaphas (Nathan Auerbach) had a beautiful base voice giving depth to the most significant words that he sings and his interaction with Annas (Oliver Brand) had real hints of evil and fear of Rome. Together with the other priests, Albert Helog, Eddie Hinds, Roman Lach and Vinnie McCann they made up the ‘opposition’ to Christ’s teaching, fearing the loss of their position and retaliation from Rome.

Pontius Pilate (Austin Marshall) was a very troubled man. Pilate’s Dream’ well delivered, and when he appeared later in the story he was obviously very disturbed by the whole episode and tried so hard to get Jesus to stick up for himself so that he didn’t have to take the case any further. By passing him to Herod he showed such relief that this was no longer his problem. But when he was confronted with Christ again he had no choice but to carry out what was being required of him by the insistence of the priests. The reaction of the crowd during the ‘39 lashes’ was superb, and by the time Pilate said stop he looked visibly sickened as though he had hated every lash that was delivered. I felt that, although Jesus was ‘tied’ during the lashing, his knees should have buckled, or he should have collapsed before it was finished. The slow motion beating of Jesus against ‘Could we start again please’ made a very poignant contract contrast. And all the time Judas was SL watching with horror – this was not what he imagined would happen!

Your interpretation of 'King Herod's Song' (Paul Sheppard's excellent rendition) was so well done. Every time I see it this is done differently, but with ultimately the same venom in Herod's voice. The movements were extremely slick and the whole thing worked so well and with energy. A small, but vital element of the story, giving a lighthearted interlude in an otherwise tragic sequence of events.

Peter (Ben Miles) and Simon Zealotes (Luke James) led the Apostles through the show with quiet authority. It was very noticeable that whenever Christ was going to be amongst the populace, the Apostles were always protecting him and unobtrusively surrounded him at such times as he might have been vulnerable. This was so subtley done. The scene in the garden of Gethsemane was well balanced with Judas the first to sit down at the Last Supper but keeping separate from the others, who gradually all took their places as a united band. The blending of their voices throughout was perfect and their relationship with each other very believable. Although calm most of the time their scared reactions at Christ's arrest was justified, and the horror at the realisation that they had betrayed Christ well portrayed.

So all the above were the main players, but this show couldn't have stood up had it not been for the continuous involvement of the Ensemble. Their portrayal of an occupied people searching for a leader gave them all energy which was constant. They were all involved all the time, taking on different roles as the story progressed. The clearing of the temple after Jesus loses his cool was tremendous and so swift it was hardly believable. The movements and the dancing that the show requires was of the highest standard and their characterisations remained believable throughout.

The Director/Choreographer Simon Woodbridge, the MD Peter Dodsworth and the Choreographer David McMinn must have worked so hard to bring this production, with all its different elements, to the point that they did. There were very emotional performances from the entire cast – with total involvement all the way through. And it really was first class, not just because the casting and the performers were excellent, but because the technical team were too. This was truly a team effort and I congratulate you for all your hard work, and allowing us, the audience, to be part of the experience.

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