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Review of a better Jesus Christ Superstar just down the street from the other one



posted by [Christopher Arnott](#)

Thanks, New Haven Co-op High School kids, for restoring my faith in Christ.

I always found to Jesus Christ Superstar to be virtually infallible. I've seen this most sacred of all rock musicals performed well by just about every sort of company you can imagine: national tours, community theaters, colleges, churches, summer camps.

Then I saw Ted Neeley's rotten resurrection at the Shubert (see review a couple of posts back), which set the rock-opera cause back a couple of centuries. In reflection, perhaps the worst offense was Neeley's inappropriate blues-rock growl, in a show that for its original 1969 album was already dismissing that line of rock and ascending to progressive metal territory.

So when I heard, in the Shubert lobby during that ill-fated production, that the new Co-Op High School just half a block away was presenting JSC themselves that very same weekend (April 2-4), I realized that this could be my salvation. I showed up at the school early the next evening, just as they were setting up the ticket-sales table, and nabbed one of the last seats to the last performance.

Though it had none of the musical bombast that a pit orchestra in a full theater can bring, just a hardworking pianist and a four-piece student back-up band, this was the Jesus Christ Superstar I needed to see.

Where the tour at the Shubert pushed everything into broad gestures in some absurd bout of religious pageantry, the Co-op students really tried to drive home what they were singing, spitting and stroking and ACTING to get the points across. Vocally, they weren't trying to format the show into old-world music theater, they were trying to make it fresh by adding hip-hop and soul flourishes that came to them naturally. Their energy was genuine, not forced. The show's conflict between Jesus and Judas, crucial to its momentum, was palpable, whereas at the Shubert everyone onstage took pains to that kind elderly gentleman Ted Neeley.

Another bonus: the racial mix was real. For as long as it's been produced onstage, most Broadway touring productions of JSC have typecast Jesus as white and Judas as black, with a worst tormentor, Caiaphas, usually black as well. At Co-op, Judas (Isaiah Jefferson, snappily sinful in a leather jacket) and Caiaphas (Stephen King, who unleashed a surprise saxophone solo during "Damned for All Time") were indeed black, but so was Jesus (the soulful, never superficial Henry Green), with the supporting cast being as wide a mix of races and genders (two of Caiaphas' minions were female) as the show has ever seen. Multi-culturality really serves a modern reimagining of an age-old legend, as do a few fun present-day visual gags (the ensemble snapped cell-phone photos of the messiah as he paraded through Jerusalem).

Hosannas to director Robert Esposito, musical director James Teti (pounding those keyboards) and the entire Co-op cast and crew for reminding everyone how this show should be done—reverently, but not holier-than-thou. With humanity, not mysterious-ways misguided godliness. With youth, not grumpy aged "wisdom."

Jesus Christ Superstar was the first musical to christen the brand new Co-op Arts & Humanities stage. It's a tremendous space, full of possibilities. Layout-wise, it reminds me a bit of the Rich Forum in Stamford, a full non-nonsense proscenium in a usefully boxy auditorium with seemingly no bad seats. I'm told the sound system's not all up yet, and other tune-ups still need to be made, but I'd say they're off to a blessed beginning.