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## Theater: *Jesus Christ Superstar* Not Divine, *Regrets* Has a Few

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**JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**REGRETS** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**NEIL SIMON THEATRE**

First things first: *Jesus Christ Superstar* is not really a rock musical. Composer Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber has about as much affinity for rock and roll as Liberace. This production contains thudding, muffled orchestrations that emphasize the anonymous nature of Lloyd Webber's

"pop" sound. He's much happier taking inspiration from Puccini than the Rolling Stones. (Or even from the tango and other non-pop areas, as *Evita* would soon prove.) The music direction and supervision is by Rick Fox, but the blame lies with Lloyd Webber.

The show has been revived on Broadway twice before (once briefly in 1977 and again almost as briefly in 2000). On each revisit, the work seems less distinguished and the same is true here. This production began in Canada and is helmed by Des McAnuff, who had such a success with *The Who's Tommy*. Unfortunately, his magic is lacking here. It would take a miracle to keep this open for much longer than the five months the show enjoyed the last time around.

Despite the title, the musical -- which began as a concept album -- really focuses on Judas. Rather than a pure villain, it takes the revisionist approach to imagine Judas as confused by Jesus suddenly seeming to embrace divinity, worrying about the presence of women among his followers (a scandalous, radical act for the time) and genuinely striving to keep Jesus from endangering his life. Their back and forth as Judas struggles with what to do before making the fatal mistake of betrayal he immediately regrets is the engine that powers the show.

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Of course, any musical lives and dies by its songs and Lloyd Webber is always good for a few catchy numbers. This time they are the brief "Hosanna," sung by the crowds when Jesus enters the city before Passover; the three note riff of "Jesus Christ Superstar" (effective even in this context) and "I Don't Know How To Love Him." But songs don't work if they're not sung well and this show commits the mortal sin of casting poor singers. That always seems unforgivable for a Broadway show, when New York is bursting with so much talent.

Chilina Kennedy is not remotely up to the vocal or acting demands of Mary Magdalene, modest as they are. Paul Nolan has a few effective moments as Jesus, especially his wrath at the moneychangers in the temple, but is otherwise undistinguished in a role that is admittedly very passive and sedate. Tom Hewitt actually commands attention as Pontius Pilate, turning "Pilate's Dream" into a quiet highlight and creating genuine drama out of Pilate's desire to get Jesus to say something, anything that can help Pilate spare him in "Pilate and Jesus." But up and down the line, virtually every other part large and small is sung poorly by the ensemble.

The shining exception is Josh Young as Judas, who not only betrays Jesus but practically steals the show out from under the Messiah. I'm tempted to call it a star turn by Young, but the material doesn't quite justify that. Still, from the very first note, Young makes the most of Lloyd Webber's melodies and the lyrics by Tim Rice, such as they are. Every moment he's on stage, you can look at Young and know what Judas is thinking and feeling, his internal conflict and moments of grace. Looking sexy and confident in an all-blue suit at the finale (despite having just hung himself), Young singlehandedly almost manages to shake the show out of its dreariness. This is his Broadway debut but hopefully it won't be his last.

Other than Young, there's little to praise. The scenic design by Robert Brill is functional and unsurprising. The costumes by Paul Tazewell are drab and -- for the "naughty" scene at Herod's -- just silly. The lighting by Howell Binkley confuses glaring brightness with a glimpse of the divine. And the choreography by Lisa Shriver leaves no impression.

Obviously, a better production of *JCS* is possible, starting with a cast that can bring to life the not-very-demanding songs. But it seems doubtful the show is worth the effort. Lloyd Webber would soon far outpace this effort with *Evita* and other works. What once seemed cheeky and modern (Herod's joke about daring Jesus to prove he's a God by walking across his swimming pool) now seem mild and tame. *Godspell* seemed hopelessly naive in comparison even at the time. But it has influenced the music of Christian worship for generations and its revival [makes the piece feel timeless](#), if not exactly earth-shattering. This *Jesus Christ Superstar* is stuck in the seventies.

It's true that audiences often give standing ovations at the drop of a hint but surely this show has a guaranteed one built in. When Jesus has died for your sins and the bright lights break out and the orchestra plays the triumphant "da-da-dum" of the title song and the actor playing Jesus strides in blazing white to the front of the stage, you can't help but feel it would be churlish not to rise to your feet, whatever you thought of the show. Besides, you never know -- He might be watching.

**REGRETS** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT NEW YORK CITY CENTER**

Matt Charman is clearly the hot young playwright in the UK. He's got a commission from the National Theatre for a new work, he's writing a screenplay for the venerable film company Working Title and he's developing a drama for the BBC. Let's hope they're all more promising than this thin play about a group of men isolated at cabins in Nevada in 1954, waiting to establish residency so they can get a divorce.

It takes six weeks to stake that claim to residency, just enough time for men to bond over their travails, reveal why their marriages collapsed, fight, bicker and have a sentimental goodbye. This is a perfectly valid basic for a play, but Charman piles on the plot twists and buried secrets, confusing revelations with drama. The new guy shows up but Caleb (Ansel Elgort) immediately sticks out like a sore thumb. Caleb claims he's 21 but he sure doesn't look it. And even if true, that's an awfully quick leap from the honeymoon to despair.

The other guys almost can't believe it, but since they make a game out of figuring out the backstory of newcomers, they don't have to believe it. Gruff, ex-military man Robert (Curt Bouril) imagines Caleb killed a man and is hiding out. Timid pet store owner Alvin (Richard Topol) guesses that maybe Caleb stole something. But the one-time school teacher Ben (a fine Brian Hutchinson in the show's best performance) figures out something deeper and unexpected is at work and at the very least nails Caleb over his age, forcing the kid to admit he's just 18 years old.



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Mrs. Duke (Adriane Lenox), the owner of the establishment, just wants the men to bother her as little as possible and keep women out of their cabins. That brings her in sharp conflict with Chrissie (Alexis Bledel), the local prostitute with a heart of gold that -- surprisingly -- doesn't take a shine to the preternaturally handsome Caleb but sleeps with the besotted Robert and yearns for the stability of Ben.

Again, the basic material for drama is here, but Charman doesn't trust his characters enough to simply let them come to life. He brings in the Red scare, Hollywood, abusive fathers, suicide and more in revelation after revelation to spice up the events. None of it is terribly convincing.

The cast is by and large capable, though Lenox is saddled with a cliched, truth-telling black woman. She drives two white men to their cabins from the bus station and later says she could already see death in the eyes of one of them. Because, you know, black women are always in tune with the supernatural.

The two unfortunate exceptions are Bledel and Elgort. Bledel is a charmer on TV and has proven *Gilmore Girls* was not a fluke with movies like *Tuck Everlasting*. However, in her New York stage debut, she clearly doesn't have her theater legs yet and needs voice work to allow her to project the wonderfully natural and quirky delivery she's capable of in a live setting.

Even less successful is Elgort, making his professional acting debut. Typically, young actors can shine in roles that reflect who they are in real life, at least to a degree. But the complicated backstory of Caleb (married, in love, fleeing the Feds) is far afield from the experience of any teenager. Elgort simply doesn't have the tools to tackle this part and struggles to look comfortable onstage, despite his background in professional ballet. Director Carolyn Cantor was simply wrong to cast him. The play is flawed but certainly might have been presented better with a more experienced lead.

In a rare show of restraint, Alvin talks repeatedly about getting up the gumption to start playing his clarinet again. I would have bet money we'd end a scene or the show with Alvin breaking out into a glorious tune. Instead we hear him practicing roughly and sketching out rather nicely but tentatively a song at one point. It's believable and true, something Charman would do well to focus on in the future.

#### **The Theater Season 2011-2012** (on a four-star scale)

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[Death Of A Salesman](#) with Philip Seymour Hoffman \*\* 1/2

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[Hugh Jackman: Back On Broadway](#) \*\*\*

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*Lysistrata Jones* \*  
*The Maids* \*\*  
*Man And Boy* \* 1/2  
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*Mission Drift* \* 1/2  
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*The Mountaintop* \*\* 1/2  
*Newsies* \*\*  
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*Painting Churches* \* 1/2  
*Pigpen's The Nightmare Story* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Once* \*\*\* 1/2  
*Once on Broadway* \*\*\*\*  
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*One Arm* \*\*\*  
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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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**Fern Siegel: Stage Door: *Evita***

The Broadway revival of *Evita* at the Marquis Theater may have star power, but it lacks sizzle.



**David Finkle: First Nighter: Declan Donnellan Takes No Pity on John Ford's "Tis Pity She's a Whore"**

'Tis Pity She's a Whore -- John Ford's 1633 tragedy about a brother and sister who fall in love and voraciously act on it -- isn't often seen and hasn't been presented all that frequently since it first played a London theater.



**Michael Giltz: Theater: F. Murray Abraham, Early O'Neill and a Victorian Adventure**

The winter theater season in New York has a certain rhythm. A few shows open on Broadway and then there's a lull until the crush of big names in March, April and May. Here are three shows, all of them aiming high though not succeeding for one reason or another.

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**Gronkie**

*Radical Independent*

888 Fans

12:00 PM on 04/02/2012

Ironic that the original story has aged well but the Broadway adaption isn't aging well at all.

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**HCBurlingame**

32 Fans

11:13 AM on 04/01/2012

Well it's difficult to incorporate separating the blessed wealthy from the sinful poor. The chorus of fetus's and Jesus now played by Rush Limbaugh defunding a public school before a trip to Haiti's child prostitute warrens. I've heard the sets burst into flames.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER  
**Tulka2**  
*Solidarity. Courage. Humor.*  
2315 Fans

04:21 PM on 03/31/2012

The emperor has no clothes and yet the subject matter makes most polite people refrain from stating the obvious. The story has to have a Lucifer, a Judas because he is the only interesting personality. Perfect is not personality.

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**jokamachi**  
6295 Fans

06:34 PM on 03/30/2012

Never saw the play but the movie was awesome. That guy who played Judas was off the charts.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER  
**cloudmaker**  
1010 Fans

01:23 PM on 03/30/2012

Tim Rice is the worst lyricist in the business. I can't imagine how he gained his reputation.

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HUFFPOST COMMUNITY MODERATOR  
**Gronkie**  
*Radical Independent*  
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12:01 PM on 04/02/2012

I'm not so thrilled with Lloyd-Webber either. I think they're both incredibly over-rated.

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER  
**cloudmaker**  
1010 Fans

10:29 AM on 04/03/2012

Could not agree more.

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**miz mendo**  
*unbind your mind, there is no time*  
58 Fans

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11:49 AM on 03/30/2012

Horrible songs, horrible book...jeezis, Jesus!

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER  
**CowboySandtoes**  
44 Fans

08:14 PM on 03/29/2012

Lady Gaga as Mary Magdalene

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HUFFPOST SUPER USER  
**Halter**  
54 Fans

07:36 PM on 03/29/2012

It wasn't that great the first time around.

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**glitterpet**  
251 Fans

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04:09 PM on 03/29/2012

um, IMHO the original had no place to go but Up . . . my mind boggles at it getting worse! =(

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**ProCynic**  
*An armed society is a polite society*  
414 Fans

10:27 AM on 03/29/2012

Poorly executed revivals can ruin the reputation of a show. I have been lucky enough to see "Cats" (BW), "Phantom" (London), and "Chess" (London), loved them, won't see them again because they were good. I wish I could find a good production of "Rent" because I hear it was good, the ones I've seen have been blah.

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**3fingerbrown**  
**609 Fans**

09:19 AM on 03/29/2012

Yep.

We have to admit that Jesus Christ Superstar -- as a thing, as an entity -- simply isn't good enough to sustain a full night in the theater or to merit the absurdly high price of admission, no matter who's producing it or starring in it. We survivors of the '70s should simply say of it, "Well, I guess you had to be there," and move on.

And it isn't just that the melodies are, with a few exceptions, mediocre (which can be said for every Lloyd Weber score I've ever heard). It's also that the libretto/lyrics are technically clumsy and emotionally feeble-minded. Tim Rice is, and has always been, a hack. That a man with nearly no talent at all could succeed so spectacularly never ceases to amaze me.

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**HUFFPOST SUPER USER**  
**donnyraindog**  
*Grass shack nailed to a pinewood floor*  
**1614 Fans**

10:27 PM on 03/29/2012

Wow,I was thinking almost the exact same thing but must admit I still have a soft spot for the movie .

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