

'Joseph' colorful but thin

By Chris Rawson
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This is certainly the right season for a lively, colorful pop rock musical based on an upbeat Bible story. "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" fills the bill.

But it's fortunate to have the handsome Heinz Hall decorations

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(the tree is now up) and the general seasonal cheer to obscure the fact that it's really a very minor musical.

It has a distinguished parentage. Andrew Lloyd Webber (music) and Tim Rice (lyrics) were joint creators of "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Evita," and Webber wrote the music for "Cats."

But the lyrics are bland, and even Webber's remarkable melodic fertility has produced no memorable tune.

"Joseph" is a series of songs with some cute staging, but without any strong narrative or thematic or character development to hold the whole thing together. Given this lack of substance, it's probably just as well that it runs barely 90 minutes from start of overture through intermission to the end of the ultimate curtain call. Its rosy-cheeked briskness makes the glitter seem more clever than it really is.

David Cassidy is the star who plays Joseph. "Star" is the right word because, the lyrics insist, a fellow who can interpret dreams becomes not a hero or sage or leader but a *star*. Here, the story of Joseph is turned into something as superficial as a media event.

So Cassidy is certainly the right choice. He plays Joseph with the same mocking self-parody he brought to "The Partridge Family." It's not his fault that Joseph isn't very likable. Shouldn't a hero be given some quality more admirable than the ability to be in the right place at the right time?

Sometimes the gags are set up too obviously. But the main running joke that does work is a series of broad anachronisms: Potiphar buys Joseph with a credit card, two Ishmaelites sport Groucho noses, Jacob wears overalls.

These anachronisms culminate in the best part of the show, a number of broad stylistic parodies. The hit of Act 1 is a funny country-western

number, "One More Angel in Heaven," sung by Joseph's brothers; at the start of Act 2, Pharaoh turns the account of his dream into a first-rate Elvis burlesque, complete with buttocks-flexing and a joke about Memphis; and the brothers later become both a mariachi band and French cafe troubadours.

Hal Davis has the good fortune to play the Pharaoh and makes the most of it. Many of the brothers have nice bits, and Robin Boudreau expends superhuman energy in working to hold it all together as the narrator.

I realize this rather sour review is entirely out of tune with the happy response of last night's sold-out house. If you are one of the many people who love "Joseph," go right ahead — don't let me be the Grinch who tried to steal your cute little musical.

"Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" plays nightly at Heinz Hall at 8 p.m. through Friday, with matinees today, Thursday and Friday at 2. For ticket information, call 392-4900.