

Stunning 'Superstar' electrifies Starlight stage

By Robert W. Butler

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Jesus Christ Superstar. "rock opera" with music by Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyrics by Tim Rice. Directed by Jack Allison with choreography by Helen Butleroff, musical direction by Michael D. Blagi, scenic design by Howard C. Jones, lighting by Kirk Bookman, sound by Denny Selgrist and stage management by Mitch Lemsky.

The stage long ago forfeited its sense of spectacle to the movies, but evidently word never reached Starlight Theatre, which unveiled a mind-boggling production of "Jesus Christ Superstar" on Monday before an enthusiastic crowd of nearly 7,000 people.

Theater

I'm talking Cecil B. DeMille here, folks, with a cast of thousands, sweep, grandeur, pageantry—all that good stuff. It is beautifully sung, impeccably

staged and stunningly designed.

The only complaint, in fact, lies not with this production but with Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's original "rock opera." It's not that pop music shouldn't be applied to the life of Christ, and this isn't the first time the Gospels have received revisionist treatment. But for all its memorable melodies, Mr. Webber and Mr. Rice's creation lacks a coherent point of view—*theologically, historically or dramatically* (a problem that was to recur in their "Evita"). No wonder it's a favorite of so many. Everyone from atheists to hard-shell Baptists can watch it without having their convictions threatened.

That gripe aside, this is a tremendous production, a cross between the Oberammergau Passion Play and a rock concert. The principal players clutch microphones and sing up a storm, and the Jerusalemites boogie all over the stage like the faithful at a Grateful Dead show. Director Jack Allison and choreographer Helen Butleroff use the big Starlight stage as well as it has ever been used, creating a different design for each song (there's no spoken dialogue) by grouping pockets of players in various areas for the slower songs and

flooding our vision with carefully controlled chaos for the big crowd numbers. For once, a Starlight show actually looks better from the back rows, where the viewer can take it all in. There's a special bit of magic at the end of the intermission, when the disciples one by one drift back onto the stage to form a tableau of da Vinci's "The Last Supper."

As Jesus, David Cassidy has made no effort to look like the traditional iconography, being clean-shaven. Oddly enough, that works in his favor, allowing him to offer a mythic rather than perilous literal interpretation; after all, the authors seem not to know what to make of Jesus. Mr. Cassidy's singing voice was slightly strained in the tortuous and frequent falsetto passages, but for the most part he nicely negotiated the tricky score and was quite magnificent on "Gethsemane."

He also risked life and limb in the startling crucifixion scene, a Dali-esque bit of surrealism for which he hung 20 feet above the stage on a huge vertical platform while boiling smoke and back lighting created a fair approximation of the landing of the mother ship.

The supporting players were

dynamite. Reprising his Broadway role, Patrick Jude was a wonderfully angry Judas, a social reformer whose seething discontent erupted in savage singing that put a new part in the hair of the front-row customers. As Mary Magdalene, Nicolette Larson had two show-stoppers with "I Don't Know How to Love Him" and "Everything's Alright."

John Aller was excellent as the conscience-plagued Pilate, and Michael Davis very nearly stole the evening with his late appearance as Herod in a comic vaudeville-style number. Mr. Webber and Mr. Rice had no business injecting humor at this tense stage in the proceedings, but it nevertheless got the biggest applause of the night.

The Starlight orchestra under Michael Blagi played its collective heart out, effortlessly blending guitars, electric organs and strings. Even the sound mix was nearly flawless. Howard C. Jones' setting is a rough-hewn latticework city of ramps, towers and platforms, and lighting designer Kirk Bookman has pulled out the stops with all sorts of electronic trickery.

It's an eye-popping conclusion to a very successful summer of theater at Starlight.