

‘JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR’ NEEDS MORE SPARKLE

BY GAIL CHOOCHAN
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The Kennedy Center is not the only one celebrating its 50th anniversary. “Jesus Christ Superstar” is also turning the big 5-0, and with this golden milestone comes an anniversary tour and lots of glitter.

The production now rocking the Kennedy Center’s Opera House is the 2017 Olivier Award-winning revival version, originally produced at Regent’s Park Open Air Theatre in London. Sidelined temporarily by the pandemic, the North American tour is back on the road and bringing this classic musical to old and possibly new followers.

Timothy Sheader is the director behind this dark-and-heavy version of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s iconic rock opera, loosely based on the Gospels’ account of events leading up to Jesus’ crucifixion. The legendary pair’s music and lyrics thrill and delight, with songs such as “Heaven On Their Minds,” with that irresistible guitar riff; the slow-and-tender “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” and of course, the show-stopping closer “Superstar.”

Part rock concert, part theatrical spectacle, this compact production reimagines Jesus’ last days from the perspective of best friend-turned-betrayer Judas. The 11-member orchestra, led by conductor Shawn Gough and accompanied by Kennedy Center guest musicians, superbly brings the songs to life from their second-floor perch in Tom Scutt’s striking industrial set design. A large fallen cross cuts through the scaffolding and serves double duty as both a walkway and the Last Supper table.

The creative team has dreamed up a “Jesus Christ Superstar” bearing a contemporary feel amid an arena-rock atmosphere. This Jesus wears a hoodie, skinny jeans and man bun, a guitar slung over his shoulder. And most of



MATTHEW MURPHY, EVAN ZIMMERMAN—MURPHYMADE

Aaron LaVigne and Jenna Rubaii star in the 50th anniversary tour of ‘Jesus Christ Superstar’ at the Kennedy Center.

IF YOU GO

“Jesus Christ Superstar,” The Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. Feb. 22–March 13. \$49–\$185. kennedy-center.org.

the company is outfitted in loose-fitting athleisure attire in soft tones, and those sneakers come in handy as they breeze through Drew McOnie’s relentless aerobic choreography.

The show gets off to an exciting start as the performers rush down the aisles onto the stage, but what follows is a mixed bag of a production.

This cranked-up anniversary reboot is overloaded on artistry, but comes up short on performance and emotional connection.

As Jesus, Aaron LaVigne delivers a subdued portrayal missing of any charisma that would attract a rock-star following; he does come out strong on the moving “Gethsemane.” Omar Lopez—Cepero fares much better as the conflicted Judas, who’s concerned about Jesus’ rising popularity and relationship with Mary (a lovely Jenna Rubaii).

In supporting roles, Alvin Crawford as Caiaphas and Tyce Green as Annas are delightful as

the plotting priests, their deep bass and high tenor voices playing off of each other. Eric A. Lewis leading the energetic ensemble through a rollicking performance of “Simon Zealotes” is a show highlight.

There are some visually striking moments in this 90-minute spectacle, such as “The Last Supper” scene that looks like a painting, and the intense “39 Lashes” musical number. Handfuls of glitter are whipped across Jesus’ body by the bloodthirsty mob, while Caiaphas and a guitar-playing Annas watch from above. And the appearance of a glam-rock King Herod (played by Paul Louis Lessard) decked out in a seemingly never-ending gold robe is campy and fun. However, the priests stroking their mic stands is a sight that could be unseen.

What first began as a concept album has evolved into a wildly popular worldwide phenomenon. The show’s legacy has been lined with film adaptations and numerous productions, including NBC’s star-studded live television special and Signature Theatre’s spectacular minimalist 2017 staging. However, for this reviewer, this heavy-handed production falls short of a heavenly experience.

EDITOR'S PICK TOP STORY

Theater review: A daring 'Oklahoma!' puts Broadway classic in a new light

BY GAIL CHOOCHAN THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Apr 9, 2022



Sasha Hutchings and Sean Grandillo star in the national tour of Rodgers & Hammerstein's 'OKLAHOMA!' Daniel Fish's reimagined musical runs through Sunday at the Kennedy Center.

Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman for MurphyMade

BY GAIL CHOOCHAN THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The production of “Oklahoma!” now stirring up the Kennedy Center is a long way away from the Rodgers & Hammerstein musical you grew up knowing. You won’t find grand musical numbers and elaborate staging in this story about a tight-knit community in the Oklahoma territory just after the turn of the century. And that epic dream ballet has, well, been re-dreamed.

This daring production, which took home the 2019 Tony for best revival of a musical, breathes new life into a treasured classic. Director Daniel Fish takes this pioneering musical—Rodgers and Hammerstein’s first collaboration—and shepherds it into the 21st century with a compelling show that is more raw, realistic and relatable.

“Oklahoma!” has been stripped down, resulting in rootsier and sometimes edgier musical arrangements. The musical opens with that irresistibly sunny tune “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin’,” led by the handsome guitar-strumming cowboy Curly. The entire cast and seven-

piece orchestra are on full display in Laura Jellinek's brightly lit scenic design, which centers all the action in a community hall. Colorful, metallic-fringed banners hang above wooden picnic tables, a farm is etched into the back wall and a collection of rifles adorns another. Lighting designer Scott Zielinski's bold color choices bring plenty of pop to a handful of scenes.

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Without all the frills that one would expect with a golden-age musical, the show focuses more on the words and heightens the emotions as it taps into the story's darker undertones. That's never been more apparent than the smokehouse scene when Curly visits Jud, trying to convince his romantic rival to hang himself. The lights cut out, plunging the stage into darkness, and every word uttered becomes that much heavier. When Jud's face is projected on the background, audiences can see the hurt slowly washing over him and the two men just inches away from each other.

This musical is not afraid to get real close. Sasha Hutchings as the fiercely independent Laurie and Sean Grandillo as the laid-back Curly are quite the match—you could feel their chemistry all the way to the back of the theater. The duet "People Will Say We're in Love," exquisitely sung, drips with romance.

The depiction of Jud—the lonely, brooding farmhand also in love with Laurie—is a welcome interpretation. He's seen not as a hulky brute but as a quiet, delicate-looking man in Christopher Bannow's portrayal. His solo "Lonely Room" showcases the actor's magnificent, booming voice, after Curly's disturbing song "Poor Jud is Daid." In Fish's revival, Jud's fate leads up to a more powerful, haunting finish.

Ali Stroker won the Broadway musical its second Tony for her high-spirited performance as Ado Annie and made history as the first wheelchair user to win the award. Here, trans actress Sis makes a memorable turn as the boy-crazy and vivacious best friend, from the wildly fun crowd-pleaser "I Cain't Say No" to the sweet "All Er Nuthin'" duet with hapless cowboy Will Parker.

Hennessy Winkler as Will and Benj Mirman as the Persian peddler Ali Hakim are both delightful as the men who capture Ado Annie's affections.

With a pared-down cast, it's interesting to see how the famous dream ballet would be handled. The lengthy dance number, more like a piece of modern performance art, is all shouldered on just one performer. Jordan Wynn (alternate lead dancer who shares the role with Gabrielle Hamilton) appears barefooted in a heavy haze of smoke, wearing a long white shirt reading

“DREAM BABY DREAM,” as she conveys Laurey’s conflicting emotions. At one point, a man follows her with a video camera, her face projected onto the background. Accompanied by a super cranked-up rock overture, it’s a bold concept that doesn’t quite pay off.

The production makes some interesting artistic choices, which can make for an uneven experience. Characters are often carrying conversations over others while seated on opposite sides of the room. Many times they’re speaking with feeling, and on some occasions, it’s as though they’re doing line readings. And depending on where you sit, the show can hit a bit differently. Near the back of the house, some of the lines were almost unintelligible, but someone up front could hear everything clearly. It’s worth a mention that the more intimate Broadway production was staged in the round, with chili and cornbread served at intermission. The Kennedy Center show is running in the smaller Eisenhower Theatre; maybe a much smaller space would be a better fit.

Fish’s “Oklahoma!” has swapped out soaring golden-age grandeur for a grittier, darker take grounded in realism, and brings a new perspective to this classic work. This blistering and entertaining revival may not be for everyone, but it’ll certainly get the folks talking.

If You Go

“**Oklahoma**,” The Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C. April 5–10. \$69–\$159. Contains fog, loud gunshot effects, moments of total darkness and violence. Recommended for ages 12 and up. kennedy-center.org.

ARTS

VIBRANT 'THE COLOR PURPLE' PACKS AN EMOTIONAL PUNCH

BY GAIL CHOOCHAN
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Simply put, Signature Theatre's "The Color Purple" is one of the best shows you'll see onstage this year.

The Broadway musical, based on Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel and the 1985 Steven Spielberg movie, is getting the Signature treatment. For those who have not visited this Arlington theater, known for reimagining big works on a more intimate scale (think "Les Misérables," "West Side Story" and even "Titanic"), watching Walker's heart-piercing tale unfold up close is a divine experience.

Under Timothy Douglas's splendid direction, "The Color Purple" will unleash all the emotions in this powerfully moving story about one woman's journey to rise above hardship and heartbreak, and finally find her voice and happiness. The production, with musical direction by Mark G. Meadows, features a sumptuous soundtrack set to jazz, blues and gospel, and enhanced by dazzling choreography from Dane Figueroa Edidi.

At the center of "The Color Purple" is Celie, a young Black woman in the rural South who was abused by her father and then married off to an abusive older man. Robbed of her childhood and her sweet little sister Nettie, whom Mister initially desires before Pa squashes that idea, Celie is resigned to live a miserable life as an obedient wife and mother to Mister's children. With the arrival of Shug Avery and Sofia, two very independent and outspoken women, Celie discovers that there is another way of living.

Nova Y. Payton is extraordinary as she transforms from



PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MUELLER

Signature Theatre brings the musical 'The Color Purple' to the stage through Oct. 9.

IF YOU GO

"The Color Purple," Signature Theatre, 4200 Campbell Ave., Arlington. Through Oct. 9 in the MAX Theatre. sigtheatre.org.

a beaten-down, mousy teenager, who is told time and time again that she's "ugly," into a strong woman who taps into her beauty and worth. It's been quite the year for this actress, who possesses one of the biggest and brightest voices in the Washington-area theater scene. After appearing in the new musical "Grace" at Ford's Theatre this spring, Payton delivers another standing ovation-worthy performance. In "The Color Purple," the empowering anthem "I'm Here" is the showstopper, which slowly and steadily builds in emotion



Danielle J. Summons and Nova Y. Payton star as Shug Avery and Celie in 'The Color Purple' at Signature Theatre.

to an epic finish.

The amount of talent that has been assembled on this small stage is staggering, from the leads to the wildly entertaining

church ladies played by Jalisa Williams, Nia Savoy-Dock and Gabrielle Rice (swing). Scenic designer Tony Cisek keeps the staging simple with wooden

plank walls and a few chairs, giving everyone ample space to shine. Every performer in this tight-knit ensemble is at the top of their game and belting their hearts out—and it shows. When the musical winds down to the company's exuberant finale, there won't be a dry eye in the house.

Shug Avery, the traveling jazz and blues singer who steals both Mister and Celie's hearts, is wonderfully played by Danielle J. Summons. Mister's sometime mistress plays a large part in Celie's awakening, and shows her that she is both seen and loved. Summons is a captivating presence onstage, whether she's getting the whole town riled up in the sizzling musical number "Push Da Button" or tugging at the heartstrings in the tender ballad "What About Love?" gorgeously sung with Payton.

And Frenchie Davis is a scene-stealing firecracker as Sofia, who had to stand up to all the bad men in her life and encourages Celie to fight back, too. The rousing "Hell No!" sung with the other housewives is a crowd-pleaser.

Another standout: Solomon Parker III, one of Signature's most nimble performers, is always a delight to watch on stage with his energetic dance moves. Here, the actor and the show's dance captain plays Mister's happy-go-lucky son Harpo. The playfully sexy number "Any Little Thing," featuring a reconciled Harpo and Sofia, brings a lot of levity to this poignant story.

With stellar performances and a soul-stirring story about family and faith and loving yourself, Signature's "The Color Purple" is absolute perfection.