

We're in the 4th week of our look at Christian themes in Broadway musicals. And today my task is easy. Today I want to focus on two Broadway musicals based upon the story of Jesus: *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Godspell*.

First, I want to talk about *Jesus Christ Superstar*. It was written by two men in their early 20's: Andrew Lloyd Webber the composer, and Tim Rice the lyricist. They had some minor success with an early shorter version of their work, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, based on the story of Jacob and his 12 sons from the book of Genesis.

But in the late 1960's, Webber and Rice were turning to a different project. An influential British priest from our mother church, the Church of England, had suggested that since they'd done the Old Testament, they ought to turn to the New.

And so Webber and Rice decided to write a musical based on the Passion of Jesus. But they added a twist—they really tried to dig into Judas's character and motivations in betraying Jesus. The result was *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which they labeled as a "rock opera." But they couldn't get any real interest in Britain—theater producers thought the subject matter was too bizarre to stage.

So in 1970 they recorded *Superstar* as a concept album. It fizzled in Britain. But the album was a huge unexpected hit across the Atlantic in the United States.

In fact, a number of American churches around the country spontaneously started doing unauthorized plays based on the album.

Given the huge degree of the album's success in America, *Jesus Christ Superstar* was officially staged as a musical in 1971 and released as a movie in 1973.

Superstar places its focus on Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' earthly life. And Judas and Jesus are the two primary characters.

I preached about Judas back during Lent. There are a number of questions about his motivations. Money is the easy one—he was paid thirty pieces of silver. But then he threw it back at the feet of the Jewish priests. So was that really his prime motive?

There are possibilities that he was of the revolutionary zealot faction. Perhaps Judas was wanting Jesus to start a revolution, and became disillusioned when Jesus didn't. Or perhaps Judas was disillusioned with Jesus for some other reason.

This is the tack *Jesus Christ Superstar* takes. Judas is disillusioned and questioning who Jesus is. From the opening song to the flashy 2nd to last song—which is also the title song—Judas is questioning Jesus.

In the show's opener, the criticism is basically two-fold. First, Jesus is talking about his relationship to God, and Judas doesn't like anything that suggests that Jesus is more than a man. Second, Judas worries that the authorities will soon take notice. He sings:

*I am frightened by the crowd
For we are getting much too loud
And they'll crush us if we go too far*

Later, when a disillusioned Judas goes to the priests to betray Jesus, he sings,
*I came because I had to I'm the one who saw
Jesus can't control it like he did before*

And at the Last Supper when Judas departs to betray Jesus he says to Jesus,
*To think I admired you
For now I despise you*

Judas later repents of his betrayal and hangs himself in sorrow. And then Jesus is tried and condemned to die. And as Jesus goes to the cross, Judas sings the big, flashy, penultimate song of the show. It's the title song. And since Judas is dead, the script cryptically describes the singer as "The Voice of Judas." And this voice of Judas is asking the key late 20th and early 21st Century questions about Jesus. The chorus asks,

*Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ,
Who are you? What have you sacrificed?
Jesus Christ, Superstar,
Do you think you're what they say you are?*

And those are key questions that everyone must answer. Who is Jesus to you? Just a regular man? Or something more?

Jesus Christ Superstar took a fair amount of criticism in the early 70's from a number of Christian groups for even daring to raise those questions. But that's unfortunate. A faith that can't stand up to some difficult questions is nothing more than a house of cards that can be easily knocked down.

To be fair, *Superstar* does not come down heavily on the side that Jesus is God. It asks the question, 'is he or isn't he?' And then it lets the question hang there for the audience to answer.

But, what *Superstar* does do well is give a compelling portrait of very a real Jesus. And this was a VERY important corrective at the time. Christians have classically held that Jesus is fully God and fully human. Not 50/50. Not 60/40 or 70/30. But somehow 100/100, 100% divine, 100% human.

But early 20th century portrayals of Jesus, especially those in movies in the 50's and 60's leaned WAY too far on the God side. If you watch those old movies, it's not hard to believe that Jesus is God. But it is difficult to believe Jesus is really human. In some of those movies Jesus almost seems to float around like some alien visitor from another planet, unattached to the realities of our human condition.

Thus *Jesus Christ Superstar* does a good job at showing Jesus' human side. Jesus gets tired. Jesus gets frustrated. He gets overwhelmed by the demands placed on him. These are all things that a real human being would encounter.

And while *Superstar* does not deal with Jesus' divine side, it is very clear that Jesus thinks he is doing God's will in going through with the Passion. While Judas is often the focus of the play, Jesus really takes center stage in both the Garden of Gethsemane and in his trial before Pontius Pilate. And in the Garden, Jesus is wrestling spiritually with God and God's will. And he is portrayed as having a VERY clear sense that God wants him to go through with being Crucified. And so Jesus acquiesces and is obedient to God's will. And the play ends with his Crucifixion.

This was also a criticism of the original work, that it ended with the Crucifixion and didn't mention the Resurrection. It's interesting that a number of later productions try to portray the Resurrection symbolically. One I saw had Jesus' body ascend off of the cross at the end. Several that I've seen have bright lights that swallow up Jesus' crucified body in an overwhelming blaze of glory. One production had Jesus and the entire cast come out for the curtain call in outfits that were identical to the costumes they had worn throughout the play, with one exception—they were all pure, dazzling white, as if they had all been transformed. And if you watch the 1973 movie, all of the actors get back on the bus to leave the movie set, except the one who plays Jesus. And the last shot is the silhouette of a shepherd walking with his sheep, a nod to the Resurrected Good Shepherd.

But then again, we mustn't forget that *Jesus Christ Superstar* was not written to give definitive answers. It was written to ask questions, and let the audience decide. So we mustn't be too hard on it for not taking one side or the other.

About the same time as *Superstar*, there was another musical about Jesus, but this one had a different take. It was *Godspell*. If you wonder about that title, *Godspell* is the old English word for Gospel, originally 'Good Spell,' or 'Good Tidings.'

Whereas *Superstar* portrays only the last week of Jesus' life, *Godspell* focuses on his entire ministry, from his Baptism to his Crucifixion. But the bulk of *Godspell* focuses on Jesus' teaching ministry, with a lot of Matthew, plus some Luke and John thrown in for good measure.

The music was composed by Stephen Schwarz, who later went on to write many other scores, including the wildly popular *Wicked* (which I finally got to see ten days ago). The lyrics and book were written by John-Michael Tebalak, and part of his inspiration came from his masters' thesis, taking texts straight from the Episcopal Church's hymnal, and updating the music. Of the 14 songs, 6 were lifted straight from *The Hymnal 1940*, and 4 of those are still in our current 1982 Hymnal.

Like *Superstar*, *Godspell* was criticized in some circles. Some folks objected to Jesus and the disciples being in clown makeup and hippie clothes. To be fair, that look does make the 1973 movie seem a little dated. I've seen several modern productions that have completely dispensed with that look, and *Godspell* works just fine without the clown makeup.

The other criticism is that, like *Superstar*, *Godspell* ends with the Crucifixion, and not the Resurrection. That is true, and like many newer productions of *Superstar*, newer productions of *Godspell* often try to do something at the end to suggest the Resurrection.

In this case, though, I prefer the original ending, because it is a powerful ending. First off, unlike *Superstar*, *Godspell* doesn't leave any doubt about the divinity of Jesus. As he is hanging on the cross, Jesus sings,

"Oh God, I'm bleeding." Then "Oh God, I'm dying." Then "Oh God, I'm dead."

But the disciples sing back something slightly different. Jesus is praying to the Father. But the disciples address Jesus directly:

"Oh God, you're bleeding." Then "Oh God, you're dying." Then, "Oh God, you're dead."

And then the disciples take Jesus body down from the cross. And then they lift it above them, with Jesus still in a cruciform posture. And they carry him into the world. And as they do so, they sing two things:

"Long live God."

And then,

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord."

And I find that a very powerful ending. True, it's not a blatant depiction of the Resurrection. But carrying Christ Crucified into the world singing "Long live God" certainly points to the Resurrection.

Anyway, a few years ago Stephen Schwarz wrote these words about the creators' original intent in writing the ending the way they did. He says,

"Over the years, there has been comment from some about the lack of an apparent Resurrection in the show. Some choose to view the curtain call, in which JESUS appears, as symbolic of the resurrection; others point to the moment when the cast raise JESUS above their heads. While either view is valid, both miss the point. GODSPELL is about the formation of a community which carries on JESUS' teachings after he has gone. In other words, it is the effect JESUS has on the OTHERS which is the story of the show, not whether or not he himself is resurrected."¹

And regardless what you think of Mr. Schwarz's original intent, I see the ending as it stands as a powerful illustration of St. Paul's words:

"We proclaim Christ crucified."²

Paul in that same epistle will also speak powerfully about the Resurrection. And speaking of one does not preclude the other.

For Christians, we have to decide two things.

First, is to answer the question from *Superstar*:
Jesus Christ, who are you, what have you sacrificed?

¹ *Godspell* Notes for Directors, Music Directors and Musicians, Producers

² 1Cor 1:23

And if we believe that Jesus is who he claims to be, if we join the countless Christians before us who believe that Jesus is God with us, fully human, fully divine, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and raised on the third day... If we believe those things, then we have a task before us.

Then we have to answer the *Godspell* question. How will we be to be Jesus' people? How will we share his teachings? How will we proclaim his death and resurrection?

The *Godspell* proclamation is a good starting place.

Long live God.

Prepare ye the way of the Lord.