

**THEATER REVIEW | JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR**

# Director, cast, design at Otterbein breathe vibrancy into '70s pop opera

**By Michael Grossberg**  
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Everything's all right, everything's fine — *better* than fine — in Otterbein College Theatre's *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Under Dennis Romer's inspired direction, the breakthrough 1971 pop opera is brought to renewed life with great conviction.

Boasting a top-notch cast and vivid design plus a few fresh directorial touches, the production captures the majestic, tragic and satirical aspects of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's once-controversial concept. The musical, which opened last night, replays Christ's final days as a rock-concert parable about the pitfalls of dissent and the power of celebrity.

At Wednesday night's preview in the newly renovated Cowan Hall, the superb singers and first-rate orchestra exploited the improved acoustics to achieve greater power and clarity than what has been heard there before.

Guest Equity actor Johnny Hawkins — who has starred in *Superstar* on tour and regionally — deftly takes advantage of

► Otterbein College Theatre will present *Jesus Christ Superstar* at 8 tonight and Saturday night, and 2 p.m. Sunday — and 8 p.m. May 26-28 — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$20. Call 614-823-1109.

Romer's greater focus on Jesus to underline the title role's gentle spirit, strength and agony.

Hawkins, as good a singer as an actor, finds the heart of *Gethsemane* and the tortured soul of his Crucifixion sequence.

Other hosannas go to Brett Kemp's angst-ridden Judas (whose vocals lift *Heaven on Their Minds* and *Damned for All Time*) and Selina Verastigui's empathetic and sensuous Mary Magdalene (a standout on *I Don't Know How To Love Him* and *Everything's Alright*).

The student chorus is solid, too — and looks right in David Zyla's understated costumes, whose desert colors of white, tan and brown help make his unobtrusive modern-dress styles seem timeless.

College casts sometimes strain to fit older roles. This cast and its young-looking guest star seem

age-appropriate, reflecting the youthfulness of a rock musical that has outgrown its hippie-era roots.

Among Romer's best touches: highlighting Jesus with a new opening montage in which he prophetically meditates on his future and having Jesus whipped in turn by each member of a complicit crowd that has "no king but Caesar."

The director's only questionable choice: boosting the comic villainy by presenting *King Herod's Song* as a Las Vegas lounge act, complete with David Bahgat's mincing Herod. That type of trendy spoofing, à la *The Producers* and *Spamalot* — while invited by the script and in tune with the satirical elements — comes at a price, undermining the later drama.

Under the assured conducting of Craig Johnson — who returns to the baton after a half-decade hiatus — and the harmonious musical direction of keyboardist Dennis Davenport, the 18-member orchestra balances the rock rhythms and gentler melodies in Lloyd Webber's first good score.

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