

Jesus Christ Superstar– Chelmsford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society

Performed Tuesday, Sept 24, 2014 at Civic Theatre, Chelmsford

Director – Ray Jeffery, Musical Director – Rob Wicks

I have to confess, since we are in religious mode, that JCS has never been a favourite of mine and shows that don't strike a chord demand a much higher degree of objectivity in the eye of the reviewer. Consequently I was initially focussed, like a laser beam, on the production values but soon found my lens widening and being drawn into the content itself. The curtain opened immediately onto a recognizable scene of the nativity and unfolded into a short but hugely engaging story of Christ's childhood and growth into a man. What became apparent very quickly was how every inch of stage, from top step to bottom, from stage right to left, was busy with something happening. While the principals were superb, especially Jesus and Judas, whose vocal range was indeed miraculous, and about whom one could run out of superlatives, for my money this production was more about the chorus. Well-costumed, head-dressed and bearded when appropriate (mostly the men!) this large chorus could be joyous, sad or angry but always individuals. This is not to say they weren't well drilled during key numbers; they were but still managed to maintain some personality. This was obvious when the chorus were plain Jewish folk but became more so during the hilarious Herod scene or the delightfully quirky Judas scene at the end when everyone was dressed in a unique white costume. Many congratulations to all involved in the chorus, especially for the wonderful shapes and movement in three dimensions. I have no idea how much rehearsal time was available to the cast using the steps but the speed with which everyone leapt around suggested a lot of time or a chorus with the balance of mountain goats.

Vocally, JCS must be one of the most demanding shows for principals, with so many notes off the stave at one end or the other. For the most part this was not a problem, although some reduction in orchestral volume during the more rock-orientated numbers may have been helpful since some lines were lost. It was obvious during the acoustic numbers (I hope my loose descriptive vocabulary makes sense to somebody) that the balance between band and cast was much better. The deceptively simple set and the clever lighting created some great dramatic effects. The technical set up of the cross was a tad slow and probably gives the stage manager nightmares but the final effect was extremely dramatic and worth the wait. Overall this was a very accomplished production, moving at times, even painful to watch (39 lashes and the crucifixion), but retaining some humour and optimism throughout. Perhaps I need to revise my opinion of this show.

Reviewer – Stewart Adkins
Regional Representative – District 8
NODA East