

JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR

of the Attic Theatre &
Film Center

It's an odd—but welcome—experience to view this 1971 rock opera in a bare-bones staging. The original Broadway production and subsequent tours have thrived on the gaudy spectacle that became Andrew Lloyd Webber's trademark. Originating as a concept album, the sung-through show by Webber (music) and Tim Rice (lyrics) had a controversial premiere run, due to its cheeky irreverence, but in recent years, the piece has generally been perceived as a kinky curiosity. Director Derek Charles Livingston's concept suggests an Iraq War context. That isn't a startlingly new approach because the original production reflected the 1970s era of make-love-not-war hippies, and recent touring revivals have incorporated military imagery.

Depicting the last few days in the life of Christ, the narrative introduces

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the oppressed apostles—men and women of varying ages, some in military attire, some in civilian wear—who are exultant at the arrival of their savior in Jerusalem. But trouble is brewing in the form of the skeptical Judas (played by female actor Blanche Ramirez) and the ruthless high priest Caiaphas (cleverly characterized by John Szura as an ominous military leader sporting dark glasses). The action progresses to the Last Supper and the harrowing torture and Crucifixion.

In what seems like a nod to director John Doyle's techniques, Eric Jorgenson appears as an apostle and an onstage violinist. His sweet music greatly enhances musical director Richard Berent's effort, which also includes fine backstage musicians. Scott Charles is superb as the multifaceted Christ; his expressions of fear, compassion, anger, and other human emotions are eloquent and heart-rending, and he boasts a formidable singing voice. Ramirez is fiery and powerful as Jesus' morally conflicted betrayer. **Matthew Herrmann stands out as a passionate Simon Zealotes, and he sings beautifully.** Steve Owsley, who plays King Herod, is an accomplished actor-singer, but Livingston's revisionist slant on what is usually a high-camp character—here a bullying cowboy in a military uniform—dilutes the song's ironic comic potency. This entertaining revival is hampered somewhat by uneven singing, but the energy and immediacy of Livingston's staging and some splendid performances evoke surprisingly strong emotional resonance.

Presented by Attic Theatre Ensemble and Attic Studios at the Attic Theatre & Film Center, 5429 W. Washington Blvd., L.A. Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Mar. 21-Apr. 27. (323) 525-0600, ext. 2#. www.attictheatre.org.

Reviewed by Les Spindle