

Biggest story unfolds colorfully at Studio Theater

By CRAIG REYNOLDS

Review

Big stories demand very big things of the theater, and few stories are bigger than the last week in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

"Jesus Christ Superstar" by composer Andrew Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice is one telling of the story in oratorical style, and the Student Enterprise Theater of Oakland University has put this very big show into the very intimate space of the Studio Theater at Varner Hall.

Director Thomas Aston and choreographer Beth Taylor have done a highly creditable job of moving Apostles, Romans, townsfolk, priests, patricians and Jesus and Mary Magdalene around James Hatfield's multi-level setting

with precision, strength, and, best of all, visual coherence. The technical achievement in simply mounting a production of "Superstar" cannot be minimized.

Several of the Aston-Taylor staged scenes are truly outstanding. The Temple sequence with its vulgar mob of vendors, dancing girls, the lame, the halt, supercilious priests and sneering soldiers of the Roman occupation is a knockout.

But for any theatrical storytelling, and especially to tell this story of

"Superstar," big personalities with big voices are needed. These the Student Enterprise Theater simply does not have.

Even with the support of a decent sound system, the vocal size of the production remains quite small. The words of "Superstar" as sung by the Student Enterprise Theater company do not come across as strongly as the stage pictures, and the words are the main ingredient.

Nor have Aston and Taylor solved the stylistic problem of the oratorical style. Each song is set in its own little piece of time, bracketed by blackouts. While the company moves briskly from vignette to vignette, the general effect is still more quilllike than the smooth

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fabric one might expect of a single theatrical presentation.

Webber and Rice don't help matters much with a score that embraces every popular music style of the 20th century, but this conglomeration of styles itself enhances the attraction of "Superstar." Musically, there's something for

everyone, from music hall burlesque to major symphonic statements.

Digging believable characters out of this stylistic stew of words and music, laced as it is with the authors' Episcopalian uncertainties, is a challenge usually avoided in staging "Superstar," and it is avoided in the Student Enterprise Theater production.

It would be nice sometime to see a stage interpretation of "Superstar" with reasons demonstrated for the mob's sudden turning against Jesus. Judas' decision to turn in his leader to the hated authorities, for Jesus' continual Hamlet-like vacillation between being a leader of men and being a divine martyr for mankind.

In the meantime, the Student En-

terprise Theater production of "Superstar," as soft as it is in the vocal department, is a fine introduction to a work of considerable depth and complexity.

Contributing to the success of this "Superstar" are Gary DeVar as Jesus, Allen Spiller as Judas, Shayne Woldt as Mary Magdalene, and the notably strong performances of James Westerby as Caiaphas and Dan Derkacek as Pontius Pilate. Nancy M. Bright provides brisk and firm music direction.

James Hatfield also supplied a very good lighting palette, the excellent costumes by Anet Platt include a flash of real inspiration with the Roman bizarre masked conquerors decked out in gauzy effluences.

Top favorite show returns

The Ishangi family of West Africa will return for two Detroit Youththeater performances on Saturday, March 24, at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. in the Detroit Institute of Arts auditorium.

Entitled "Ishangi's Africa," the performances will combine rarely seen ritual dance, music played on authentic instruments indigenous to West Africa — some dating back 1,000 years — with narrative to explore the history and culture of Ghana, Senegal, Dahomey and Nigeria.

For 14 years, the Ishangi family has toured the Caribbean, Africa, Europe and the United States and has appeared on public educational television as well as the major networks in guest appearances.

FOR ALMOST a decade, the Ishangi family has been the most popular of Youththeater's "Show on the Road" series which brings professional performing arts programming to communities across the state. These Saturday performances for the public are part of the family's 32-performance calendar in Michigan this season, many of which were scheduled as long as two years ago.

The hour-long "Ishangi's Africa" program is especially designed for families with young people 6 years old and older. Children younger than 5 years of age will not be admitted to these performances. Immediately following the performance, the audiences will be invited to Youththeater's "Celebrity Party" to meet and speak with lead dancer Ishangi Razik.

In addition to its regular tickets, Detroit Youththeater also offers a group rate for children and adults in groups of 10 or more, and discount coupon books — which may be used in any combination for any Youththeater Saturday presentation.

For ticket information and a free Detroit Youththeater "Something Every Saturday" schedule of musicals, puppet shows, concerts, plays and special events each weekend through May, call the Detroit Institute of Arts ticket office at 832-2730.

Documentary on Hollywood

"Hollywood on Trial," a documentary focusing on the 1947 House Committee on Un-American Activities, will be shown by Detroit Film Theater on Friday, March 30.

Two showings are scheduled, at 7 and 9:30 p.m., in the Detroit Institute of Arts auditorium. Tickets are available in advance through the museum ticket office (832-2730) and at the door.

With special appearances by Zero Mostel, Otto Preminger, Ronald Reagan, Ring Lardner, Jr., Dalton Trumbo (one of the "Hollywood Ten") and many other film industry notables, the 1977 release examines the motivation of those who refused to testify at the hearings, those who cooperated fully, and the impact upon the Hollywood community.

On Saturday, March 31, at 7 and 9:30 p.m., Charles Laughton is teamed with Elsa Lanchester in "The Private Life of Henry VIII," a 1933 comedy for which Laughton became the first British actor to win an Academy Award.

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