



Resurrected On Broadway

Director Des McNuff and his trio of lead actors talk about the choices behind *Jesus Christ Superstar* on Broadway

Mounting a Broadway show always comes with unique challenges, and a famous, hotly-anticipated revival increases the stakes even more. Throw in religious fervor and the hoopla surrounding 2012, now seems to be the right time for *Jesus Christ Superstar* to rise again on the Great White Way.

Tony Award-winning director Des McNuff shares the beginnings of the *Superstar* revival from his position as the artist director of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario. "We have a truly extraordinary ensemble of actors up there." The three actors he chose to headline *Jesus Christ Superstar* had proven their chops in previous standout performances. "Paul Nolan (Jesus) played Tony in *West Side Story* for us in Orlando. Chilina Kennedy (Mary Magdalene) was Maria in *West Side Story* and Eva Peron in *Evita*. And Josh Young (Judas) played Che in *Evita* last year. So I felt like I really had the talent to do this show properly."

Choreographer Lisa Shriver was brought into the project at Stratford but had never worked on or seen a live performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. When she got the call, she viewed her lack of exposure to the iconic musical as "an advantage. I didn't have preconceived ideas about the show. I heard later from

people that *Superstar* isn't classically known as a dance show. It seemed to me that the music dictated movement, it's such an incredibly pulsing, electric show."

For McNuff, the integral core of the story was the humanity of its three lead characters, Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Judas. "*Jesus Christ Superstar*, at its very essence, is a love triangle and a secular story. It doesn't commit to Jesus being the son of God, but it does commit him to being a remarkable social, religious and political leader. So it works better, in my opinion, when there's a certain amount of intimacy in the story.

"As a theatre piece, it was ahead of its time. We're able to use contemporary theatre technology so we can do it more like it's a play. The sound systems and lighting we use today achieve that intimacy in a way that was difficult 40 years ago."

The production evolved from its pre-Broadway runs, but not in a way the audience would recognize.

"I think it's a mistake to, pardon the expression, 'tart up a show' when it comes to New York. It's important for a show to keep its artistic integrity. Our show has a lot of bells and whistles—LED technology, projections, a very elaborate lighting package, but there's also a fair bit of austerity because of the events leading up to Passover in Jerusalem in 33 A.D."

The lack of real estate backstage at the Neil Simon Theatre reversed set storage, which subsequently changed entrances, exits and onstage blocking, which in turn affected lighting and other technical issues. "The wing space is so limited stage right," Shriver explains. "Now the stage left side is where the bulk of our storage and off stage space is. So we've had to reverse the entrances and exits of stair units, and that's changed some of the blocking on stage, and the general choreography backstage. It's funny—choreography is never limited to stage steps. So much of it is logistics and to enable onstage entrances and exits to also help with off-stage chaos."

ONLINE BONUS

We'll tell you even more buzz from the creative team behind *Jesus Christ Superstar* online at:

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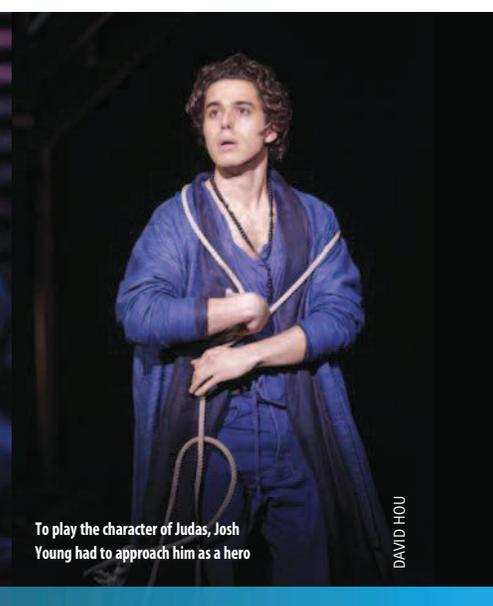


Chilina Kennedy as Mary Magdalene and Paul Nolan as Jesus in the Broadway revival of *Jesus Christ Superstar*



DAVID HOU

To play the character of Judas, Josh Young had to approach him as a hero



DAVID HOU

The Myth and the Man and the Woman

Playing three of the most well known figures in all of literature are Paul Nolan who plays Jesus, Chilina Kennedy as Mary Magdalene, and Josh Young who portrays Judas. With nearly 2,000 years of oral tradition and allegorical transliteration, the dramatic triangle of the three lead characters elicits as much controversy now as it might have then.

In preparing to play Jesus, Nolan recalls Judas' first line in *Superstar*: "Strip away the myths from the man." Nolan began his character study to play Jesus with the material Webber and Rice created.

"It is glaringly obvious to me it is about man not about a god," says Nolan. "*Superstar* is not a history play, so we have to take it at face value, and take it from there. Of course, the Bible and religious ideas inform some of it, but for me it was crucial to approach it as a man on earth and what would a man on earth be experiencing given these circumstances—he feels it is his mission to teach and accomplish something in his teaching, knowing his death date."

Josh Young, who plays Judas, also looked at the material at hand to find his character. "I think you have to approach him not as a villain but as a hero, as someone who really believes in what he is doing," Young reveals. "I approach him as someone who is trying to save his people and protect them from the Romans and the wrath of God."

Having done his own research into the gospels and ancient writings, Young found contradictory portrayals of Judas throughout the literature. "They all paint Judas in a different light. If you look at the four gospels christianity follows today and look at them in chronological order, in the oldest gospel in the Bible, he is not such a villain. But if you look at the newest gospel, it says he's possessed by the Devil." Anyone who has played the "telephone game" or "whisper down the lane" can attest to how stories change via word of mouth. "I think what happened was that the person who was telling the story vilified Judas more and more over time."

Though the Bible never says Mary Magdalene was a prostitute, she was slandered as such by religious leaders who feared people would follow her instead. Webber and Rice chose to cast Mary in that light as well when they wrote *Jesus Christ Superstar* in the late 1960s. Chilina Kennedy talks openly about how she approached this most famous woman, to play her as a real character and not a stereotype.

"That's something I deal with all the time," she laughs. "She's always portrayed as the penitent prostitute or as the wife of Jesus, recently, with all the new information coming out and the Gospel of Mary. In the show, she is painted as a prostitute, but I try to find a balance between the two images of Mary: the strong woman who made a lot of money and financed Jesus' operation and the other side of things."

As for Mary Magdalene, Kennedy looks at the bright side of playing a strong female character, both allegorically and theatrically. "The fact that she could be a positive role model for people who have 'sinned' and then have redemption after that is a great thing to teach anyone who has gone astray and wanted to get back on a cleaner path.

"It's a very controversial subject," Kennedy admits. "Des told me at the beginning of the run, 'This is a theatre piece. You've got to make choices that are strong for our storytelling regardless of what you believe. We're all very passionate about our points of view, and we've got to drop our biases at the door.' I thought that was a great thing to say so I could incorporate all the things I believe, and it just makes for a stronger character on the stage. It enhances the relationship and love triangle between her, Jesus, and Judas. I feel like whoever Mary is in the show also reflects on Jesus and Judas. It says something about Jesus—that he would choose a strong woman to be with as a partner."

In the Air

"There's something in the air," according to McAnuff. "When you choose a topic as an artist, there's almost an inevitability that others will pick up on the fact that there's something in the air as well.

"As we went into rehearsal for this, the Arab Spring broke out. So we were studying the history of Jerusalem, the history of Judaism, and the birth of Christianity at the same time all these revolutions were happening in various parts of the Arab world in the Middle East. It was humbling," McAnuff explains. "We had taken up interest in this subject at the same time others were risking their lives and changing their lives to pursue goals that are ancient and universal."

The aspect of art imitating life, and vice versa, is not lost on McAnuff. "Religion and politics are always with us, so it's always going to be pertinent. I think it happens to be particularly pertinent at the moment, so of course other theatre artists will be inspired as well. That's the way of art in the world." 