

ENTERTAINMENT

One spectacular moment after another

Jesus Christ Superstar a breathtaking experience

It was hard to imagine how the Sunshine Festival Theatre Company would top last summer's successful mega-musical *Cats*, but *Jesus Christ Superstar* is spectacular.

Absolutely amazing. They just keep raising the bar higher and

higher, and what an incredible ride to the top. *Jesus Christ Superstar* is one artistically inspired moment after the next, a thrilling, breathtaking theatrical experience you will never forget.

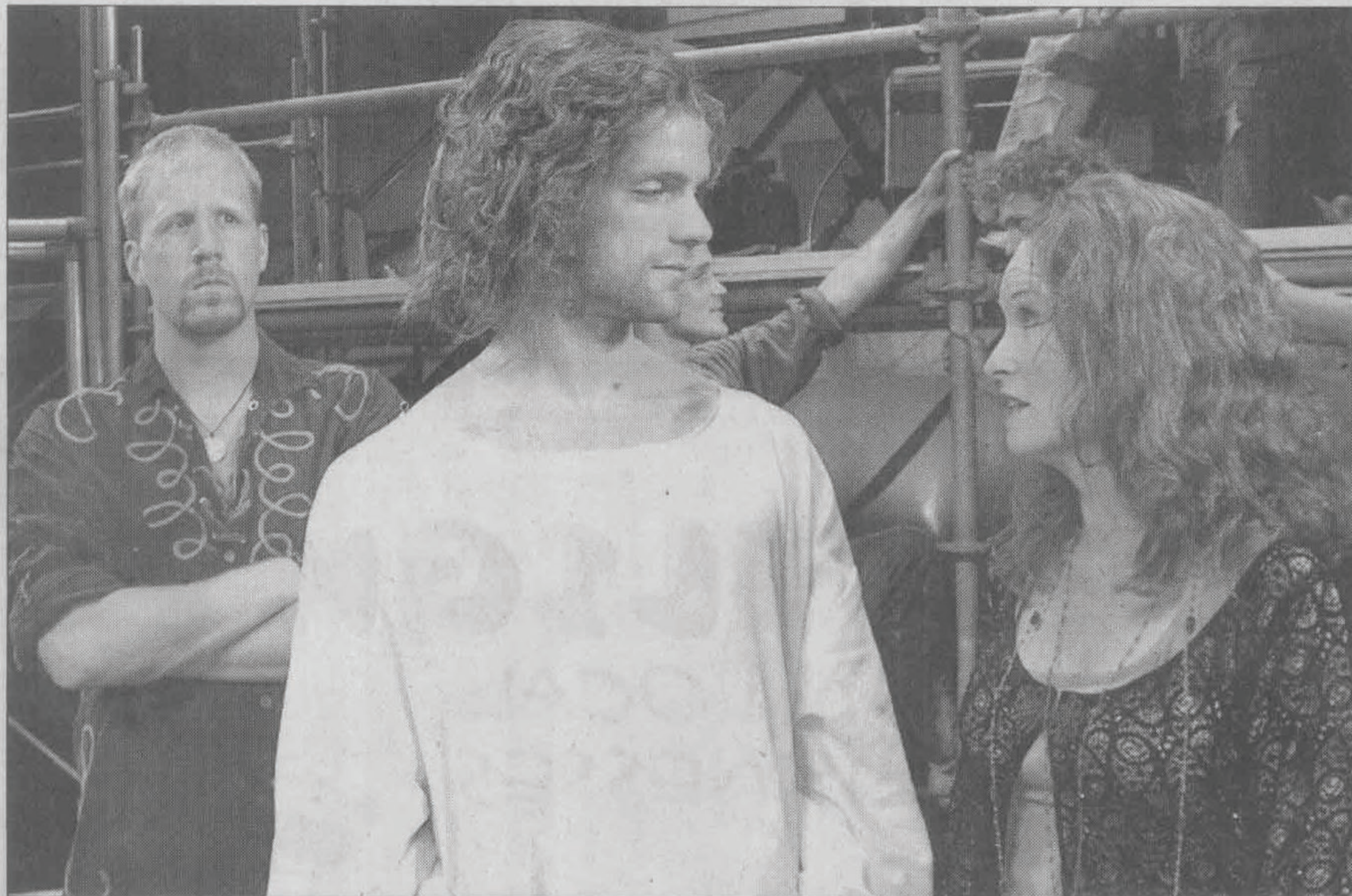
After talking with director

Dave Campbell during rehearsals, I already knew a few tricks he had planned with this production, but nothing could have prepared me for the magic that takes place on stage.

From the moment it begins to the final exultant number of this classic Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice musical, you are held captive by this amazing production. The familiar story of Christ's last seven days on Earth is brought passionately to life through stunning song and dance numbers, gorgeous costumes, energetic performances, breathtaking acrobatics, artistic lighting and an absolutely inspired set.

At first glance, the set seems startlingly bare. A very modern, cold, steel scaffolding set fills the stage with the five-piece band, headed by musical director Lona Davis, caged front and centre. A white curtain hangs limply from the bottom bars. As the house lights go down and the first strains of an electric guitar pierce the air, the cast begins to run down the aisles from behind, a canopy of cloth flying over the audience's heads. And so the magic begins.

Campbell has a most engaging Saviour in Paul Nolan. Nolan's portrayal of Jesus as a man — complete with doubts and fears — is sensitive, thoughtful and very believable. Likewise, Matt Campbell's tor-



Jennifer Jaensch photo

Cast members from the Sunshine Festival Theatre Company production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

mented Judas gives a powerful new perspective to this age-old tale. Rounding out the trio of lead characters is Janet Martin, who is a most sympathetic Mary Magdalene.

The level of performance from all three of these actors is pure perfection — they are vocally powerful, capable and commanding, their characters compelling and real, allowing us to relate to the man and not simply the myth. There is an engrossing drama played out by very real characters, and all through the power of Webber and Rice's incredible music. The dramatic tension is so thick at times, the audience remains hushed when the performance deserves accolades.

The entire cast maintains this level of excellence, whether it is Christ's love-and-peace, '70s flower children-like followers, or a jeering mob pushing for Christ's crucifixion.

Janet Wagner's awesome choreography gives the cast ample opportunity to dazzle with energetic dance routines that fill every inch of space, keeping your head simply whirling in appreciation and aston-

ishment at the grace and skill of these performers.

Special mention must be made of the four tormentors: Christine Azoli, Christie Bromley, Michelle Galati and Orillia's own Brittany Tinslay.

Other standout performances that deserve special recognition are many. You'll remember Kelly Robertson as Gus/Growltiger in last year's *Cats* — just one of many operatic roles — his experience evident in his commanding performance as Pilate. Michel LaFleche is a knockout Simon and Ray Hogg is a deliciously dark and dangerous Ciaphas.

Alexandre Beaulieu is simply delightful as Herod — this is definitely one of the show's lighter moments and a real surprise. In what feels like a *Mama-Mia* inspired scene, Herod and his crew are dressed in shades of neon green swimwear (look for Ray Hogg in his bikini). Sherri McFarlane 'swimming' in a sea of blue fabric waves is brilliant.

Whether it is blue shimmering water or lush green hanging leaves, Tim Webb's inspired use of rich and

vibrant fabrics to create the scenes and moods in this production is magical. The pop-up tents in the marketplace temple are both clever and gorgeous.

Foregoing the expected heavy wooden cross in favour of a long, white cloth is beautiful. Campbell's decision to leave out the blood and gore, and focus instead on the struggle and sacrifice, is quite simply genius. During both Christ's flogging and crucifixion, Robert Allan uses his acrobatic finesse to climb, twist, turn, plummet and ultimately, hang limp in the folds of fabric behind a kneeling Jesus. This scene is the most beautiful, moving and breathtaking moment in the production.

Artistic lighting design from Sandra Marcroft completes the theatrical experience. The dark red glow behind the priests is a chilling and ominous contrast to the flowing

white tents below as Mary sings Jesus to sleep with the promise that everything is going to be all right.

The icing on the cake is the gorgeous costumes in this show, most notably in the final number, *Jesus Christ Superstar*. These are the same costumes used by Theatre Aquarius in its 2003 production and they really are something.

The Soul Sistah outfits, complete with massive white afro wigs and lace-up go-go boots, are so much fun. Be sure to notice the army fatigues Pilate's soldiers are wearing under their Roman capes — another powerful nod to the social-political influences that gave birth to this classic 1970s rock opera.

Jesus Christ Superstar is one spectacular moment after the next thanks to Campbell and the team of superstars he has assembled, both on stage and off. *Superstar* is a must-see — especially if we want to continue to see this calibre of musical theatre in Orillia.

Jesus Christ Superstar continues in the Orillia Opera House until July 30. But don't put off going. Once you see it, you're going to want to see it again.

For tickets, call 325-2074 or 326-8011.

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