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PO Box 738
MODBURY SA 5092

info@theatreguide.com.au
ABN : 93 297 960 525

JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR

South Coast Choral and Arts Society

Victor Harbor Town Hall

Until 23rd May 2015

Review by Linda Edwards

If you think you need to be in the city to see a show of exceptionally high standard, think again. Victor Harbor's South Coast Choral and Arts Society (SCCAS) has presented a wide array of high-standard musicals and plays over the years, and their latest offering, the rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar", is a fine example.

Director JJ Geelen has successfully brought this 1970s Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice classic smack up to date and accessible for 2015 audiences, and a cast of seasoned and newer performers join together to make the show one to remember. Geelen wisely ignores stereotypes such as a long-haired Jesus and a crowd of entirely young and hip followers, and there are nice touches such as the younger followers taking to their mobile phones to find out what is happening in the song 'What's the Buzz?' Jesus, about to be executed in a most horrible way, wears the same costume we have come to associate today with barbaric executions. These and other choices bring this timeless story to life in a fresh, new way.

The cast is led admirably by Robert Bell who has acted to acclaim in productions at St. Jude's, Theatre Guild, and elsewhere, but this is only his second musical. It won't be his last. His portrayal of Jesus is impressive, and his strong character work and commanding voice carry the part well. The scene after the Last Supper is particularly powerful. Bell is well matched by Penny Smith in the equally challenging role of Judas Iscariot. Her performances in 'Damned for all Time/Blood Money' and her death scene are heart-wrenching and intense. Both main roles require sensitivity, believability, strength, and vulnerability, and they both successfully deliver them all.

Zoe Tammita is a delight as Mary Magdalene and she brings warmth and a beautiful, rich voice to the part. Kim Bell is perfect as Pilate. She is a professional singer with many years of experience, and it shows. Her beautifully deep voice and perfect diction place her songs among the highlights. Experience is also evident in Richard Greig's hoot of a performance as Herod, with just a hint of that other king, Elvis. His song is a real treat.

Alexander Wright is imposing as Caiaphas, but the lowest of the low notes seem to be just beyond his range and cause him to struggle a little. Jenny Penny does a fine job as the other high priest, Annas.

It is always good to see a live band or orchestra, and the work of the fifteen members of the SCCAS rock orchestra enhances the experience without being overpowering. The guitar solos by Dylan Rufus are superb, and the choice of having him visible instead of hiding behind the screen is a good one.

The costumes specially created for the show are appropriate and also fun, notably those for the Herod scene. The stage at the Victor Town Hall is massive and the simple multi-level set designed by Geelen and constructed by John Williams and Alan Theisinger works well in the space. The design of the cross is apt, and towering in place at the front of the stage, it dominates the crucifixion scene and brings the horror of the event to the audience in a compelling way.