

INSIDE THE *JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR* Q&A PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION

[INTRODUCTION]

Welcome to the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre Podcast. Following two sell-out seasons at Regent's Park, our multi-award winning production of Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* is back, playing just 60 performances at the Barbican. In this episode, we take you inside the post-show Q&A. WhatsOnStage's Alun Hood chairs the discussion and we hear from Director Timothy Sheader, as well as cast members Ricardo Afonso who plays Judas, Robert Tripolino (Jesus), Sallay Garnett (Mary), Matt Cardle (Pilate), Nathan Amzi (Annas) and Cavin Cornwall who plays Caiaphas. This Q&A was recorded live at the Barbican. As this was open to audience members, some questions are not mic-ed.

Applause

[ALUN HOOD]

First of all, thank you for staying. We're going to crack on; we've got cast members coming on now.

Applause

Ok, well I'm going to get the ball rolling and, Timothy, I want to ask you first of all: I've seen many productions of this show, but this is – I think – the most dramatic one I've ever seen, but also, the one that most honours the fact that it originated as a record album. And I'd just like to ask you how you initially approached directing this show?

[TIMOTHY SHEADER]

Yeah, hello. I had never seen *Jesus Christ Superstar*, so I was coming to it afresh, only having listened to the album. And it started really with Tom Deering – who's the Music Director – and I sitting down and listening to various versions, starting with the original brown album, going all the way up to the version at the O2 a couple of years ago. And just identifying the differences in those versions, and trying to understand-- And also being sent the script and we'd enquired about doing the rights for this show at Regent's Park for a long time, and it took a long time to negotiate them, and when we got them and I read the script, I slightly panicked and turned to my partner at work and said, *oh I'm not sure I want to do it anymore*. *Laughter* Because there wasn't really a script, there was just – kind of – this list of songs and that was quite daunting. But then when we went back to the album and listened to the album and very quickly we just understood that's what we wanted to do, we wanted to put the album on stage, and we wanted – crucially I think – to make no distinction between musicians – those that play instruments – and those that are vocalists. And that it wouldn't just be some actors at the front and a band at the back – or musos at the back – but somehow we would all be part of a band together. And I guess this became very important very quickly.

[ALUN HOOD]

Is it different directing it indoors from outdoors?

[TIMOTHY SHEADER]

That is a really good question. Still discovering that really... Yes, because there's no daylight at the beginning. Things like Jesus on the cross, when that's outside with the trees and the open sky, that's very different. Yeah, it is different because I think it felt it had more of a festival vibe about it outside because it was louder and – kind of – slightly bigger, and you could see the sky and the lights were shooting up into the sky. So, it's discovering how to put it inside and contained in walls without losing the DNA of the production, which I'm still discovering, to be honest. I watched the show tonight – having not seen it for 10 days – and had some quite big thoughts about that.

[ALUN HOOD]

Cavin – I wanted to ask you actually, because – you did the show in Regent's Park in the first run, is that right?

[CAVIN CORNWALL]

Yes, that's correct.

[ALUN HOOD]

So how do you feel in term of performing it? Do you notice a huge difference?

[CAVIN CORNWALL]

Yes, there's a vast difference between Regent's Park and then doing it indoors. From a technical standpoint, obviously, we're indoors we're – kind of – brought more into an intimate space. That I really like – I love this particular space because it feels much more intimate. But, as Tim rightly said, it's much more of a concert feel when you're outside.

[ALUN HOOD]

The gentleman down here's just asking about the risk of putting together the singing, the acting and the playing of the instruments. Sorry, Robert.

[ROBERT TRIPOLINO]

There's definitely that momentum in feeling a natural anxiety and being told you're going to be singing this number eight shows a week to an audience that know the number – most likely – and know what to expect from that number. And – I think – sure, at the very beginning, that definitely sparked a lot of natural pressure to be like, *ok you can do this*. But the number lends itself to – like you were saying throwing your whole life at it – there's only one way to do that song, and you learn that through Tim and through this version as well in particular, with a guitar in my hand. And it's quite an incredible experience, actually, to be able to figure out how to throw yourself into that. Because at first I was like, *this number is a beast*, and now I really enjoy singing it every night and it makes me-- There's something, coming off stage after that number, there's a release that feels quite nice and an achievement as well, of course... if you like it. And so, definitely, there is that – kind of – pressure but that – kind of – fuels the number anyway. I mean, as an actor you use what's given to you and if I'm feeling anxious – I mean, they're all natural things to be feeling in

that moment anyway for this number and so it tends to be on side no matter what which makes the song hard to fail if you do put everything in. There's only – kind of – one way to do it so I hope that answers your question.

[ALUN HOOD]

Gentleman there.

[AUDIENCE MEMBER]

My question is about how you created the visual vocabulary that you use throughout the show; from the microphone cords, the microphone stands and the glitter and all of that metallic paint and everything. I've never seen anything like it so I wondered if you could speak about how you created that vision?

[TIMOTHY SHEADER]

Yeah. The microphones came first and so we wanted it to feel like a staging of the album or gig-theatre – I guess – and these felt really important and continue to feel very important. And we did a bit more work about these microphones this time around, about the passing of them, the struggle to get it and to be heard. And that came very naturally in the design process that this would carry-- I guess, you sit down as a director and designer and think, *what are the big building blocks needed?* And his suicide is one of the first to address, and that very quickly became the idea of his voice being taken from him and losing the microphone; so the extension of that then was the cross would be a speaker stand and that we would hang his microphone off the side of that. And then you just start to riff and think how that might permeate the show and that he would be bound with the mic leads and they would be – you know – struggling to keep this sound. The gold – which I think has become the biggest emblem of the show – started with, *"he's a man, he's just a man"*. And people have said to me that what they enjoy about this piece of theatre – *Jesus Christ Superstar* – is that they can see Jesus Christ as a man rather than a prophet or a religious icon. So the journey of the gold was from *"he's a man, he's just a man"*, to him becoming a man that is covered in gold that we might wear around our necks on a little cross, or that we might worship a gold man on a gold cross in front of us. So we started from, *this thing would light up gold*, and then Tom Scutt, the designer, very brilliantly came up with this idea very early on of throwing glitter for the lashes – so that we would see this deification. Tom got slightly obsessed with gold and adds more gold every time we do it *laughter*, so there's now all this gold falling down from the ceiling because we've got a ceiling to drop gold.

Judas' hands came pretty much after that and-- We're going to do the show in America in a few weeks and the producers wanted to try and do it without an interval – which I think's quite interesting – but I'm not quite sure how to do the Judas' hands going into the silver paint and then he has to do the Last Supper with silver paint dripping everywhere, so I'm just trying to solve that at the moment. I share that with you because we don't want to cut the silver paint because that felt-- *agreement from the audience* that was a very early decision. So, yeah, that's it really, apart from the fact that Tom does literally keep throwing gold at it.

[ALUN HOOD]

Do you feel more of a connection to the band because they're on stage?

[RICARDO AFONSO]

Yes, we do. Absolutely. It makes the vision that Tim and the creative team had – of being born out of the album, makes it – more easy for us being a part of it and they're just communicating with us, and us with them. So, definitely.

[NATHAN AMZI]

Having also done a lot of musical theatre, all of us, a lot of the time what happens is, in a rehearsal room, is you have a rehearsal piano for all of the rehearsals and then you come and you do a sitzprobe – the cast hear the band for the first time, you're like, *oh this is awesome* – and then you move on. But then I think – like we were talking about before – the music being so very important in this, we were lucky enough to have the band in rehearsal. So we started to gel then and then we were like a band and we had little rules like – you know – don't record the music on your Dictaphone to figure out what your harmony is, because you wouldn't do that if you were in a band, you'd just all get together and jam. So you'd just learn it so it's in your blood.

[ALUN HOOD]

Sallay, can I ask you. Just beautiful performance, really exquisite *applause*. I was just wondering – how do you approach the role because she... herself she's quite iconic, Mary Magdalene, and obviously – you know – you're a wonderful singer/songwriter, but how did you approach it as an actress?

[SALLAY GARNETT]

I took two approaches. I researched the be-Jesus out of Mary Magdalene and looked at every possible version of her story; and the most interesting thing about what we know about Mary Magdalene is that, she didn't tell her story. Much in the way that the Bible is a collection of people talking about Jesus, and they're all saying, *this is what he said*, the same can be said of Mary Magdalene; that there's nothing in her hand that says, *this is who I am*. And as a result, she's a very enigmatic, mysterious character and yet very inspiring for people. There's been so many beautiful renaissance paintings about her.

The concept of her as a whore is a lie that was – kind of – invented in the 16th Century. And that was interesting because two years before this musical was written, the Vatican reneged on that; they actually printed a paper saying, *we actually made that up in 16-whatever, sorry guys *laughter* we know it's been several hundred years but we hope you'll forgive us*. Right? Jesus is into forgiveness, yes? And then this musical was written and I was like, *what an amazing cross-over point*, and around that same time was a huge movement in Civil Rights, Feminism. So I was looking at it from a kind of character that is enigmatic to all of us but just represents femininity and how it's been treated throughout the ages. And then, on the other hand, there was just the 70s soul singer and singer/songwriter, Joni Mitchell, Joan Baez, Carole King – and I love all of those women anyway and listen to their music anyway – so I just got to binge on what they making at the time, and watch videos of them performing and the kind of elegance and yet strength and power that they express every night, and they were in with some of the greatest male songwriters of the time. So, I think my Mary is still a bit enigmatic because she is an enigmatic character, but the beauty of the music in this show is that those songs allow all of those qualities – the

Femininity, the confusion – I mean, her song is called, *I Don't Know* – and that kind of says it all, *I Don't Know How to Love Him*. And so, I just let the music do the talking and hopefully that depth and mystery comes through.

[ALUN HOOD]

It certainly does. It's wonderful. *Applause*

I think we have time – maybe – for one or two more questions.

Matt, how do you feel playing an angry character?

[MATT CARDLE]

Do you know what? I was very glad of the challenge initially. I didn't quite realise to what extent it was going to take me when we started this procedure of going from rehearsal all the way through to opening night – because I'd never done that before, I'd only ever joined in and seen other people's versions of things. I'm angry about a lot of stuff – if I'm honest – so joining that with the genuine frustration – and Rob, such a beautiful portrayal of such a frail, broken man at the end of it looking so bloodied – I think it's very easy to feel like killing him might not have been the right thing to do. *Laughter* So there's some frustration for you there. And just some deep seated anger that you can channel because – let's face it – there's things that wind us all up. But, no. the challenge was great and, obviously, Tim and Joe [Jocelyn Cox, Associate Director], we've worked for weeks on this character and it's very very different from anything I've done before but I'm relishing that opportunity and that challenge.

[ALUN HOOD]

Ricardo, what's the hardest song to sing?

[RICARDO AFONSO]

The hardest song to sing... all of them. *Laughter* In my case I find them all a challenge, all of them. And I try to work from the beginning of the show and I immerse myself song by song, number by number, scene by scene. That's it; there's no bigger secret. If I start thinking ahead, about *Superstar* while I'm starting to sing *Heaven on Their Minds*, I'll have a nervous breakdown. *Laughter* So I'll have to take it step by step, achievement by achievement, scene by scene, reacting and acting with my fellow actors on stage and that's it. That's my trick.

[ROBERT TRIPOLINO]

I think we do ultimately – just to follow up on that quickly – we do feed off each other in this show, and I think that's a very important element for all of us from beginning to end. And that is a big ingredient for us – kind of, like you said – taking it bit by bit. And I think we do feed off each other quite closely, and that helps us get through it. Because otherwise – like Ricardo just said – every song is so hard, really. It's so high or so intimate or so much is happening, it's like a feast for you guys but for us, we just have to take it as it comes.

[CAVIN CORNWALL]

There's something else as well. This show is – again, because I've done quite a few versions of the show, this show is – so technically demanding, the support you get from your fellow actors is very very important. Our warm ups, everything is constructed for this. It's like an

oil tanker, very very hard to move. Once you get it going, it gets going and it builds up speed and gets to its final destination that's what it – kind of – feels like with this. That our warm ups start all geared towards that and the support that we get from each other is very very important with that. That makes this a lot easier. Again, going into the style of this production, we're acting without acting. It's very very difficult you ask an actor not to act.

We're – kind of – vessels for the music and with our creative team and guidance from Tim – which is exceptional – he's enabled us to do that. But you can quickly feel that you're disabled in some way, if you think about the whole big project of *Jesus Christ Superstar* as a whole. It can disable you and be very very disorientating and just huge. But as Ricardo rightly said, one act at a time, one step at a time, with the support of our fellow colleagues, makes this an easier journey and when it starts, your turn around and it's the end of Act one and you think, *wow that came around very very quickly*. If you thought of it in any other way, it would be a huge mountain to climb, and a very very difficult demanding show. Which would be very very stressful to you as an individual, as an actor and vocally, because some of these songs are very very difficult, particularly for Judas and Jesus.

[ALUN HOOD]

Well, I'm afraid that's all we've got time for. I'd just like to thank you all for staying and wish you all the very best for the rest of the run.

Applause & cheers

[End Note]

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Jesus Christ Superstar plays at the Barbican until 24 August. For more details, photos and videos, as well as tickets, head to jcsuperstar.co.uk