

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot

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By Les Spindle

This clever seriocomedy by up-and-coming playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis (*In Arabia, We'd All Be Kings*) is a loopy fantasia that takes place in Purgatory, where Jesus Christ's betrayer, Judas Iscariot, is prosecuted for his infamous crimes. Among those testifying are Biblical characters such as Mary Magdalene (Deborah Puette) and Pontius Pilate (the sublime Terrell Tilford), as well as colorful historical figures, such as Sigmund Freud (Rick D. Wasserman). The premise is ingenious, but the nearly three-hour work overreaches. The indulgent script cries out for serious pruning and stronger focus. Nonetheless, this superbly acted rendition by the Black Dahlia company offers considerable rewards, capitalizing on Guirgis' slyly irreverent humor and incisive exploration of heady themes.

Would an all-forgiving God allow Judas to be condemned to hell for eternity? Pondering questions of mercy and forgiveness, free will and culpability, Guirgis grapples with complex moral and philosophical issues without providing tidy resolutions. Director Matt Shakman's versatile cast creates a memorable gallery of colorful characters. The timelessness of the play's setting is best exemplified by the flip contemporary sarcasm and salty language of Saint Monica (hilariously played by Chane't Johnson), an aggressive intermediary in convincing the blustery judge (the wickedly funny Robert Machray) to hear the case. Butting heads are razzle-dazzle prosecutor El Fayoumy (the amusing but sometimes unintelligible Jay Harik) and ball-busting defense attorney Cunningham (the superb Susan Pourfar). As Judas, Daniel Jay Shore gives a splendid portrayal -- seen in a near-catatonic state while imprisoned, yet coming to life in flashback scenes. Shore's adept characterization supports the moral quandaries at the heart of the play. David Clennon is appropriately smarmy as Satan, wearing black leather pants and speaking with a Jack Nicholson cockiness. Joshua Wolf Coleman gives a moving performance as Jesus, and Rob Nagle excels in a profound climactic monologue as a jury member with his own cross to bear. The large ensemble -- some playing multiple roles -- offers solid support.

Staging the piece in a church adds greatly to the play's ambiance and themes. Less is more in the tasteful design elements, notably Denny Dugally's set, Mike Durst's lighting, Joel Spence's sound, E.B. Brooks' costumes, and Jen P. Harris' remarkable graphics.

Black Dahlia Theatre at the Lutheran Church of the Master, 10931 Santa Monica Blvd.