

Jesus Christ and other luminaries

Norman Jewison's film, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, is still playing at the Odeon. It is in every sense a right rare film. Jewison's film has exceeded the expectations of a great many people. Why this should be so is difficult to understand.

Jewison has an enviable track record as a director. All of his previous outings, with the possible exception of *The Thomas Crown Affair*, have met with success, if not amongst the critics, certainly at the box office. *Fiddler on the Roof* being one example.

That was one occasion where the public defied the critics and flocked to the box office in droves.

On this occasion Jewison has turned Rice and Webber's rock opera into a beguiling and dazzling piece of cinema. The movie is a virtuostic display of a vision of the director as superstar. It is important to note, though, that Jewison's talents are more than ably abetted and supported by the cinematography of Douglas Slocombe.

Jesus Christ Superstar is a marvelous amalgamation of cinema, rock, opera and theatre: a unique hybrid which retains all

the good features of each of these art forms without being inundated by ostentatious overkill in any one facet.

The last days of Christ are examined under a very contemporary microscope. We are invited to witness an enactment of the story as performed by a troupe of travelling players. While this device is certainly reminiscent of the framing device Sir Laurence Olivier used in his film of Henry V, as *Time Magazine* reminds us, there is also something very medieval about Jewison's treatment of the story.

Just as the medieval trade guilds kept the mythology alive in their time by availing themselves of all the mechanics and technology at hand, so does Jewison re-examine the myth with the camera's eye and all the contemporary heavy-weight technology at his hand.

He wears his theatrical tricks on his sleeve. Never are we allowed to lose sight of Christ as a man. He never disappears behind a mask of superficiality, never does he become a vision of sacrosanct holiness.

Palace guards carry sub-machine guns and wear purple singlets silk-screened with Pilate's likeness. The Pharisees hold court on an aluminum scaffolding erected on top of a Roman ruin. Herod wears campy sneakers and yellow shades.

The myth is still very much alive today as such re-examination proves. Nonetheless, these contemporary trappings are only decorations for this particular version for Christ's last days.

Jewison focuses on the rock opera aspect of the story, for it is the rock opera as an event that is the central experience in *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

What is a rock opera? Think of an opera as a play that is sung to the accompaniment of music. This time the music is rock, very solid and very loud.

Whether or not it is good rock I will leave to the musicians to decide. Whether or not it is good opera I care not because it is exciting, at times even moving.

That it is theatrical is beyond question. The essential magic and artistry of the theatre is constantly called upon to alter our perspectives on the matter at hand.

It is exciting cinema if for no other reason than that it is daring. Jewison uses the cinematic medium in an obvious manner, trotting out a seemingly endless bag of tricks which are perfectly complimented by the technical wizardry of Slocombe's art.

If a moment is beautiful, we see it at close range; we see it distorted and in perspective; we see a moment as Leonardo saw it and as Jewison saw Leonardo seeing it. The constant barrage of alternatives keeps the question, "Who are you, what are you," constantly happening.

There is and will be a great deal of controversy and discussion about the subject material. Well and good.

The material asks a lot of questions that need asking. Rabbis will say the movie is anti-semitic and bishops will say the movie is sacrilegious. Humbug—let them fight it out on the religious pages of the newspapers.

No myth is so sacrosanct that it can afford to remain free from constant re-examination without losing its meaning. If the story here focuses on Jesus Christ as a man rather than on Jesus Christ as a legend, fine. That's what this version of our mythology is about.

If the movie is going to work, we have to look at it for what it is. It is a rock opera, not a vacation school Bible story.

If *Jesus Christ Superstar* has a central flaw it is, as might well be expected, the characterization of Christ. The characterization of Christ in your mind you, not the interpretation.

There's bound to be some quibbling when one takes a legendary figure, central to our society, reduces him to a mere man and then presents him robed in the raiments of contemporary stardom.

If the figure of Christ lacks power it isn't really Ted Neely's fault since he certainly fulfills the demands of the script. He is in many ways a full-bodied personification of all those Sunday school portraits of Christ.

Haunting visions of his face are lingered over just a little too often, fading out sentimentally against the dazzling skies.

Neely doesn't exactly suffer from overexposure in the script. His presence is as carefully limited and controlled as it would be in the hands of any astute publicity agent.

His Christ is a rebel given to outbursts of fury and indictments, dumbfounding parables and anguished doubt. It is a beguiling portrayal but not always constantly maintained.

Judas, as played by Carl Anderson, has an amazing power. His performance overshadows that of Christ in the confrontation scenes and almost succeeds in bringing Christ down to earth.

Anderson's vitality is amazing in its ability to transcend the screen, and the agony of his Judas is convincing enough to open up the Christ story as it is explored in this version and give it a very strong and much-needed alternative perspective.

The rest of the cast shares an embarrassment of talent in an appealing way. Yvonne Elliman is particularly moving as Mary, and Joshua Mostel is a captivating drag as Herod.

His campy scene hammers home the hedonistic nature of a Roman Empire more fascinated by the possibilities inherent in changing water into wine than changing lepers into tax-paying whole men.

This film has many superb moments and some very moving scenes and not a few quite stunning images, some artificially contrived and others plucked from nature: Always they have impact.

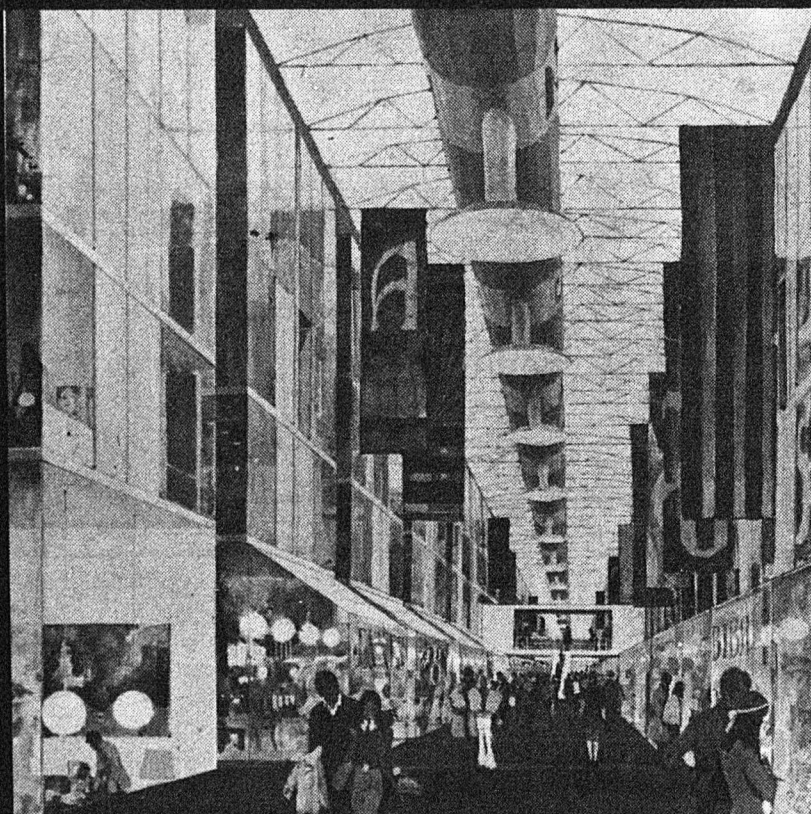
Jesus Christ Superstar is a unique experiment in cinema art. One might ultimately decide that it is only a commercial exercise in capitalizing on a myth but it is full of possibilities for any audience.

It is a family movie which is unusual in itself these days, but it should do something to or for your mind. Try it.

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