

JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR

A Proposal for Staging

By Gibson DelGiudice

Copyright © July 25, 2016
Revised August 2017

I. ARTIST STATEMENT

The Show

Since the release of the "Brown Album"¹, *Jesus Christ Superstar* – or *JCS*, as its die-hard fans call it – has formed a worldwide reputation with its phenomenal stage and film success. This passionate tale of politics, love, and betrayal has bridged the gap of many generations through language and music. Tim Rice's dramatically compelling lyrics and Andrew Lloyd Webber's emotional melodies vibrantly bring to life the story of Christ's passion.

My Background with the Show

This classic rock opera was my first musical theater experience. I discovered it in prepubescence, and have been enamored with the genre ever since. I grew up trying to imitate Carl Anderson and Ted Neeley, the stars of the 1973 film version, and went on to become obsessed with the show, to the point of doing untold amounts of research about the subject matter. Over the years, I've additionally been an avid collector of *JCS*-related memorabilia², and have, at last count, attended eleven live performances of the show³. I also help administrate [the number one fan community for JCS on the Internet](#).

As well as having had the unparalleled fortune of experiencing the show from multiple viewpoints, which has given me unique insight into the inner workings of *JCS*, my love of the show – and the love of show biz in general which sprang from it – caused me to collaborate in my adult life with a New York City producer/auteur on a variety of major media projects for both stage and screen. So without *JCS*, it's safe to say I might not have had the career I have (and enjoy) now.

It should thus come as no surprise that over the years, I've had plenty of time to build up a collection of musings and notes on *JCS*, ideas for staging that have so far only been mounted in the theater of my mind's eye and may never emerge into public view, though there's always a possibility, especially hooked up as I am now connection-wise. It finally felt like the right time to put pen to paper recently, as my ideas for *JCS* crystallized into a semi-definitive (for the moment) format.

¹ The American nickname for the original 1970 two record edition.

² Among my memorabilia: several audio and visual recordings of many productions, including the 1973 and 2000 films; drafts of the screenplay for the 1973 film; clothing and accessories, and so forth.

³ Two high school productions, two separate performances of one major regional production (one of which featured Carl Anderson, the film's Judas, as Pilate), the closing performance of the 2000 Broadway revival, two performances of the national tour that followed (one of which featured Anderson as Judas and Barry Dennen – Pilate on the original album, Broadway, and in the 1973 film – as Herod), and four performances of a national tour billed as Ted Neeley's "farewell" engagement as Jesus.

II. PLAY ANALYSIS

I've been analyzing *JCS* far longer than I've wanted to direct it. It's important to note as well that I've been doing so from the perspective of an American fan, so naturally my analysis will reflect how Americans feel about *JCS* as opposed to how it's received elsewhere, in places where the album never quite took off and it was best known as a stage show or film.

In America, the album is an icon right up there with *Sgt. Pepper* (such classics as "Heaven on Their Minds," "Everything's Alright," "I Don't Know How to Love Him," and "Superstar" racked up frequent radio airplay), and the show's earliest live success came in the form of a concert tour, not a theatrical run. Unique to most drama, *JCS* was not first conceived as something that would be acted out, but purely as a musical experience. And for daring to recount the "Greatest Story Ever Told" in rock and roll – the earthiest, most democratic, most populist language of all – it rocked the world, prompting boycotts, picketing, bomb threats, and letter writing campaigns from Christians all over America. Stateside audiences for *JCS* have always preferred the original treatment, and the most successful productions here have strongly emphasized its roots, often by including original cast members who, while they may be of advancing age, don't need to be taught how it worked the first time around. However, for all they get right, they get some stuff wrong; American fans cherish the show for different reasons than many international fans do.

In the early 1970's, when *JCS* premiered, American youth felt mainstream religions had reduced religious experience, the act of living through faith, to nothing more than symbols and metaphors, subverting and short-circuiting the personal religious experience itself. They believed mainstream religious traditions and rituals got in the way of true faith and the search for ultimate truths. Church attendance decreased nationwide as more Americans moved away from organized religion toward more personal spirituality and philosophy. America co-opted *JCS* as a response to this crisis of faith, which may be the cause of productions over the years that made it seem less controversial by focusing primarily on the religious aspects, as rock, and lightly (by today's standards) irreverent takes on epic subjects, became the new norm.

JCS, at its heart, isn't a religious story (as Tim Rice has said in many interviews), nor is it a story about Christ's suffering or the nature of his divinity. This is a rebellious, dark, contemporary take, told from Judas' point of view, about Jesus' role as a subversive political activist and challenger of the religious/ political status quo, and the brutal and terrified response of the authorities, with clear parallels to the 1960's hippie movements. More than that, for all of the work's powerful qualities, it was a youthful look at an age-old story, a raw, fun rock opera by two twenty-somethings. There was an informal "let's put on a show" atmosphere to the earliest productions⁴, even those that had all the glitz and glamour and special effects that the initial concert tour(s) lacked.

⁴ A favorite example is the final chorus of "The Last Supper" on the original concept recording, which sounds as though method acting was taken to the extreme and the "apostles" cut the vocal after slinging back a few pints at closing time.

That atmosphere and rawness have disappeared from later productions guided by Andrew Lloyd Webber and The Really Useful Group. The creators, with their accumulated age and sophistication, and the benefit of experience, have taken a second look at *JCS* and changed things to gear it more toward a traditional theater crowd. Newer productions spearheaded by Webber with massive promotional efforts as “his vision” of the show, such as the Gale Edwards revival or the recent arena tour⁵, apologize for the work’s youthfulness and try to pave over its cracks, resulting in a highly polished bore – pretentious, ponderous, self-serious – that treats *JCS* like it’s Shakespeare or Greek tragedy.

In the words of Judas in the title song, “don’t you get me wrong” – it’s important not to play the show for laughs or take the mick out of it. The work must be treated respectfully. But one can give it punky and irreverent edge, tell the story without creating too Christian an environment, and still service the material properly; the original album and subsequent early productions are proof that this is possible.

Ars Pro Concreta

⁵ This is especially odd with regard to the latter, which claimed to be more like a concert than theater.

III. VISION

The Venue

My overall impulse is to return *JCS* to its rock roots, and that begins by toning down its theatrical side – for starters, not performing it at a theater. There will be no proscenium arch or expectations of a cultured evening. It will appear in a place that is deliberately un-theatrical; in short, a nightclub or other live music venue, preferably one with approximately 500-700 seats.⁶ This would lend the show the atmosphere in which it historically thrives in the U.S. – less theatrical and more concert-like. The audience participation and natural levity that one finds in a club venue would augment the piece's vitality and thrill, and precedent has been established by such previous successes as Anthony Von Eckstein's Eighties concert production(s) of *JCS* in California and Boston Rock Opera's early Nineties production(s) of *JCS*.⁷

Dramaturgy

My production would incorporate "Then We Are Decided," a number added to the 1973 film for the Jewish High Priests, Caiaphas and Annas. It does much to particularize their characters and motivations, and helps dispel the Jewish community's complaints that the priests (essentially one-note authority figure caricatures before adding this song) evoked the old "Christ-killer" stereotype live and on the album. It has seldom appeared in U.S. productions (though it's appeared in a fair few in Europe), which is, in my biased opinion, a shame. However, it would occupy a new place in the story relative to its slot in previous productions.

One problem with using it in the stage show is that its film position doesn't work as well live. On film, it's easy to cut away from "Strange Thing, Mystifying" ("they only need a small excuse / to put us all away") and increase tension by showing the authorities are already thinking of dealing with the problem (e.g., Judas' foreboding is not unfounded). On stage, however, interrupting the scene that includes "What's The Buzz," "Strange Thing, Mystifying," and "Everything's Alright" with "Then We Are Decided" ruins the flow of rising tension. Putting it after "Everything's Alright" and before "This Jesus Must Die," as some productions do, works on paper, but in practice, this becomes an overlong scene belaboring the point of why the priests feel they must deal harshly with Jesus – two consecutive songs covering the same points, first with Caiaphas trying to convince Annas to back him up, and then both reading in the council. It dwells too long on the subject, and it doesn't help the show's balance.

Inspired by the suggestion of a close friend and fellow fan, Adam Knowles, and by the similar choice of a production that ran annually in Pittsburgh for 25 years, I've decided

⁶ Some even seat as many as a thousand people in the more upscale NYC or other major metropolitan clubs.

⁷ In fact, a useful resource – and example, in terms of tone, quality, ideas, etc. – is the recently surfaced pro-shot of BRO's 1994 production with Extreme lead singer Gary Cherone as Jesus, which was staged in the basement of one of Boston's best rock and roll joints, [the Middle East Restaurant and Nightclub](#), popularly known as "Downstairs at the Middle East." Act I can be viewed [here](#) and Act II [here](#).

– if only in rehearsal, should my idea not work as well in practice as on paper – to attempt “Then We Are Decided” as a prologue prior to the start of the show proper with the “Overture,” sort of like a teaser before a TV show’s opening credits, or the long shot that sets up the film *Psycho*, gradually pushing in closer to its target:

- The authority figures are established, enough exposition is provided to introduce Jesus and his position relative to them, and they decide to do away with him; the die is cast.⁸
- Then we draw nearer, taking in Judas’ position from within Jesus’ camp on how things are going (and incidentally providing additional information about Jesus’ growing ministry, his doubts about Jesus’ approach, and his relationship with Jesus)...
- ...before we finally arrive at Jesus and measure him up to his reputation which precedes him.

Another possibility I’d explore is re-positioning “Could We Start Again Please?” to follow “Peter’s Denial,” as in the 1992 Australian production. While I understand the purpose of the original placement (i.e., to ease mood whiplash from Herod’s big number to Judas’ dramatic suicide), the song’s always been hurt, in my opinion, by its spot in the show. Musicians I’ve spoken with who’ve played JCS dislike it because Herod has just finished on an up-tempo note, greeted by laughs and applause from the audience, which one then follows by slumping into a comparatively boring ballad that the crowd don’t reorient themselves quickly enough to process. Moving the song could help it register better, and at least the new placement is organic to the moment (i.e., Mary and Peter are already there, hesitant, scared, confused, wishing they could turn back the clock), instead of cutting back to them randomly. Granted, I’m less certain about committing to it, if only because the lyrics really work better on paper later in the story (“I’ve been living to see you...” doesn’t make sense when Jesus has only just been arrested, for example), but anything’s worth trying in rehearsal, and it may still make “dramatic sense” if the scenes preceding – the Last Supper, Jesus’ arrest, the turn of events at Caiaphas’ house, Peter’s denial – are staged as occurring so forcefully, and in such a whirlwind, as to completely disorient Mary and Peter, making the song’s sentiment appear less forced.

Lastly, inspired by the thoughts of another close friend and fellow fan, Jonny Gomes, I would treat the Soul Girls’ part in “Superstar” differently than in past productions. The immensely vital pleasure of this rock number has long outweighed the message of the lyric, namely the insistence of the demand that Jesus declare himself. This is a snide, sarcastic, angry, “I-Told-You-So” song in which a delirious Jesus is taunted by a hallucination of Judas asking how he could let everything get so out of hand and whether he really is who he says he is. It represents Judas’ point of view, the idea that Jesus had become a shallow, hyped personality whose superstardom and baggage became more important than the philosophical message he wanted to convey. This song became a rallying cry for youth all over America and Europe because it asked the

⁸ To emphasize this, and make the move from song to score more seamless, I’d cut the instrumental coda after Annas’ final line, and go directly into the ominous synth hum that opens the overture, accompanied by staging that signals the transition into the show proper. (*More on this momentarily.*)

same questions they had about religion; it probed answers and made comparisons. With that in mind, my idea is to take the lyrics seriously and make them diegetic to the scene, with those singing the Soul Girls' parts representative of those who mocked and doubted Christ on the road to Golgotha, as recorded in religious tradition. (At one point, I also thought about using this interpretation in casting, about which more below.)

Having covered structural changes and ideas about the show a director might contribute in dramaturgical terms, it's important not to neglect other duties on that count. Their main job on *JCS*, in my opinion, would be to reconcile today with yesterday. It's not just Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's revisions that sap the "rock" out of the rock opera; it's also the current mindset. *JCS* lost its controversial bend over the past few decades for a variety of reasons.

To name one, rock and roll – at least in its classic form – is positively mainstream, and usually regarded as the music of adults; rock forming the basis of the score is no longer quite the ballsy choice it was at the time.⁹ For another, people are more willing today, partially thanks to *JCS*' influence, to view Jesus as more "down to earth" and less "ethereal figure in a stained glass window." Fundamentalist Christianity, for its part, has since weathered much more controversial (and, in its view, blasphemous) depictions of Jesus' life (or elements thereof), such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* or *The Da Vinci Code*; by comparison, *JCS* is considered small potatoes, or even, in some cases (particularly in the more liberal factions of the church), to be family-friendly entertainment, or at least tolerable as a gateway drug for non-believers to get curious about J.C.

Ergo, new productions will never be informed by the same rebellious sentiment, impulses, or spirit as those which influenced and fueled the original in its heyday. However, I think it's possible to, at the very least, give the cast an idea how iconoclastic *JCS* is/was.

Many directors choose to encourage their cast to do research on the piece they're performing during the first few days of rehearsal. This can mean anything from going back to the source material for more about characterization and historical detail, to making a more general investigation into the period in which the story is set, to exploring relevant pieces of background info. This is useful in several ways; among them, it helps inform the cast about the show, it forces them to immerse themselves in the project from the start, and once they begin to feel that they have something to contribute, they'll usually start to get more involved with the piece. Sometimes this research phase involves group activities not particularly limited to discussion. There's more than one way to help familiarize actors with their show's subject.

As it's helpful, since theater is equally a visual art as an intellectual one, to show rather than tell, and in today's world, all the reading ever, especially for American actors, may not be enough, I'd solve it with a two-part Jesus movie marathon, perhaps over the course of a few weeks. Week one would be devoted to the typical Hollywood epic treatment, the type of films where Jesus comes into a room glowing in the dark, with a

⁹ For reference as to impact, imagine the uproar if the Catholic Church began allowing gangsta rap as part of the liturgy.

command of the Queen's English, and everyone turns to look at him.¹⁰ By contrast, week two would be devoted to "the outlaws," to show them what kind of story we're telling.¹¹ The vastly different treatment of the subject matter would all give valuable insights into the story of Christ's life and the way Webber and Rice are trying to tell it, and provide lots of food for thought and topics of discussion.

Music and Lyrics

Above, I briefly referred to new productions of *JCS* which lost the tone and feel of the original recording and early presentations, likely due to the interference of the show's creators. Andrew Lloyd Webber in particular is notorious for having very specific ideas about how the score should sound (perhaps understandably so, considering how often early productions were beyond his control), and for the first West End revival in 1996, he (and frequent co-orchestrator David Cullen) touched up – sometimes re-envisioned – the old charts. For his part, Tim Rice changed a few lyrics to clarify thought, offer variety, or achieve a better rhyme. Not all of this met with audience acceptance; Rice records some reactions in his autobiography: "Indeed one or two *JCS* fans complained to me about the changes; for example I altered a priest's line from 'One thing I'll say for him Jesus is cool' to 'Infantile sermons the multitude drools' in order to rhyme with 'Miracle wonder man, hero of fools,' and received a letter from a young friend of my son suggesting the entire flavor of that scene, if not the first act, had been lost."

Thankfully, for a long time, these changes were not reflected in the licensed version. Before 2001, *JCS* was licensed in North America by Music Theatre International. Following the Broadway revival, Webber transferred *JCS* (and his entire catalogue, including other shows previously licensed by MTI) to R&H Theatricals. In both instances, the materials reflected an old, handwritten 18- to 22-piece orchestration prepared following the original Broadway run and used for the show's early national tours. (Overseas, an orchestral concert score was available from Chester Novello for any production desiring a fuller instrumental make-up.)

Though unconfirmed by any factual knowledge on my part, I believe Webber was displeased with the continued use of early materials that didn't reflect his "definitive" vision on American shores, something he was able to curtail overseas by creating Really Useful's licensing arm, Stage A Musical, and carefully choosing its satellites. As of January 2017, Webber rectified this by forming The Musical Company, which now represents his catalogue throughout most of the known world. Today, all that's available to amateur presenters are three variations – 5-piece, 11-piece, and 35-piece – on what have been labeled the "1998 UK tour" orchestrations, a descriptor covering all the revised productions from the 1996 West End revival through the recent 2012 arena tour. (Most of Rice's new lyrics, on the other hand, have been discarded.)

¹⁰ Examples include *King of Kings* (both 1927 and 1961), *Ben-Hur*, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross*, *Quo Vadis*, *The Robe*, and the *Jesus of Nazareth* TV miniseries (both 1956 and 1977).

¹¹ Examples include Pasolini's *Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Scorsese's *Last Temptation*, Arcand's *Jesus of Montreal* (especially the sequences with the rewritten modernistic passion play), and Dennis Potter's *Son of Man*.

Personally, I prefer the old stuff, and I'd like to return to it. When queried on the subject, I've often quoted Stephen Sondheim when asked whether he made any changes for the late Nineties premiere of his till-then-unproduced first musical *Saturday Night*: "You don't touch up a baby picture – you're a baby!" Tim Rice seems to agree, having written of the revised lyrics in his autobiography that "sometimes technique is less important than a visceral approach." True, the concept album (you can listen to it [here](#) courtesy of Spotify) has imperfect notes, rough moments, the orchestration's a little primitive; it doesn't have the acrylic slickness and polish that marks Webber's later work, especially *JCS* revivals. There's rawness like you might find in the best classic rock albums. And not all of the later material that expanded and further clarified the piece (*i.e.*, the extension of "*Trial by Pilate*," the addition of such songs as "*Then We Are Decided*" and "*Could We Start Again Please*") is present. But it has passion and drama, in spades, to say nothing of some of the best rock vocals and instrumentation of any album of the era. It set the standard, and too many new productions depart from it to no discernible profit.

However, there are some realities a director can't dismiss, and one of them is that a licensed show can't be changed without permission of the rights holders, especially an Andrew Lloyd Webber show. Plus, in all honesty, I can complain all day about the changes Webber made to his orchestrations, but frankly they aren't different in a meaningful fashion except to nitpicking super-fans like me. In large part, I can live with them.

That said, aside from the concept album being a starting baseline from which to take all initial cues, there are a few pieces of miscellanea, errata, etc., that I could – and would – change, or draw inspiration from, if I were forced to use these orchestrations in my production of *JCS*. All of this follows in show order below.

THEN WE ARE DECIDED

- Sample recording [here](#) if you've never heard it.
- If used, will be inserted before **OVERTURE**. CUT bars 79-83; immediately start bar 1 beat 1 of **OVERTURE** after the brief pause signified in 78.

OVERTURE

- There is a huge electronic "thud" (for lack of a better term) that opens the track on the [2010 Hungarian cast recording](#). I want to replicate that sound.

HEAVEN ON THEIR MINDS

- From 0:40-0:42 on the [1975 original Spanish cast recording](#), there's a fun drum fill which makes that moment feel appropriately big, bold, and dramatic. I want to include it.
- ADD bars 84-89 from handwritten score before 103 in licensed score, and second system of vocals at 88-89 to replace 107-109. These reflect a variation on vocal ad-libs from the concept album.
- In 114, CUT accompaniment marked "Dict. (after voice)"; instead, start bar 1 beat 1 of **WHAT'S THE BUZZ** under Judas' final note in 114, establishing frequent motif of Judas' feelings being dismissed by those around him.

WHAT'S THE BUZZ

- Speaking of bar 1 beat 1... I'd add [this fan-made intro](#) (inspired by the Seventies "AXIS" studio cast recording) before it. It's a unique addition without glaringly standing out.

EVERYTHING'S ALRIGHT

- The [1973 film soundtrack recording](#) incorporates lightly rattled tambourine (or other percussion) and chime, starting at bar 9 and repeating on the first beat of every bar of that verse, the chime ending at bar 17 beat 1. I want to include it.
- ADD segments of backup from Apostles' Women echoing Mary's line in bars 11, 26, and 90 ("sleep" at 11, "sweet" at 26 and 90) from Louis St. Louis' *Jesus Christ Superstar GOSPEL* arrangement (ref. bars 44, 82, and 119 in his score); a simple variation that doesn't wreak havoc, while giving the background chorus more to do vocally.
- At bar 83 beat 1, ADD a cymbal crash heard on the concept album and 1971 original Broadway cast recording, but not in most other productions (which either retain triangle and strings, or replace the cue with woodwinds). Without it, the impact of Mary's entry following Jesus' verse is lessened.

THIS JESUS MUST DIE

- Piano and woodwind intro from 1973 film (sample recording [here](#)) exists as handwritten insert in original London production score. ADD this before bar 1.

HOSANNA

- Aside from performing the lyrics in the score and taking into account the notes below, the [1996 studio cast recording](#) is the example to follow.
- In bars 1, 18, 34, and 50, ADD a slight echo effect in the choruses (i.e., "Ho – hosanna hey – heysanna," etc.) from Louis St. Louis' *Jesus Christ Superstar GOSPEL* arrangement (ref. bars 5 and 7 in that score for easy examples, but recurs throughout; in our version all key changes remain as written) – girls start phrase, and echo is given to boys. It's another variation that adds flavor without detracting from the dish.
- PLAY through bar 56 beat 7; CUT 57-58, PLAY 59-end. This was added to make more of Jesus' moment of triumph and prolong the scene's choreographic possibilities, but the ending as licensed wears out its welcome. A shorter take on the same is perfectly fine.

SIMON ZEALOTES

- After bar 16, the [1972 original London cast recording](#) is the example to follow.

THE TEMPLE

- Barring the following note, the [1996 studio cast recording](#) is the example to follow.
- ADD bars 105-106 (marked "End of Temple Scene") from Chester Novello score to replace beat 3 of bar 58 in licensed score, and 107-110 (marked "Alternate End to Temple Scene") starting under bar 116 beat 1 and playing to finish. These two endings don't appear in the licensed version (and rarely appeared in the

show itself), but having found two logical spots for them to occur within the number, I would restore both.

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO LOVE HIM

- Aside from the notes below, the [1972 original London cast recording](#) is the example to follow. (Also, take special note of the synth sound and the triplet guitar part in the final verse from the [1996 studio cast recording](#).)
- As in previous productions and recordings, Mary's vocal at bars 57-59 is tacet.
- At bar 60 beat 1, ADD a cymbal crash that some versions keep, while others lose it and rely on the brass to "punch in."

DAMNED FOR ALL TIME

- CUT bars 146-149. As the repeat symbol from 144-145 – and comparison with other scores – attests, this *must* be poor music editing, as I've never heard this "Well done Judas / Good old Judas" segment sung *ten times* in any production I've ever seen.

Entr'acte

- This production may be performed sans intermission, but whether or not there is one, an informal entr'acte (sample recording [here](#)) has been added to most Webber-supervised productions post-1996, usually performed first as closing bars of **DAMNED FOR ALL TIME/BLOOD MONEY** and then repeated as opening bars of **THE LAST SUPPER**. We'd utilize it as transition music. ADD either bars 148-154 of **DAMNED FOR ALL TIME/BLOOD MONEY** or bars 1-7 of **THE LAST SUPPER** from "Jesus Christ Superstar USA" orchestral score (they're identical) before bars 1-2 of **THE LAST SUPPER** in licensed score.

THE LAST SUPPER

- RE-POSITION boys' vocal line from bars 13-14, which occurs too early in the song. As per previous productions and recordings, this will instead appear as written at 157 replacing quarter rest, and at 165 replacing the half-rest, with the text "if I tried."
- See the [1992 20th anniversary London cast recording](#) (specifically the "Argument" segment) for the against-type (*usually played drunk*) performance of the apostles' final verse, the beautiful piano and stirring vocals in stark contrast to the dire situation. I want to at least try this.

GETHSEMANE

- PLAY through bar 120, CUT 121-123, and PLAY 124-end (the last sans Jesus' vocals). 121-123 reflects an unnecessary added "tag" that is frankly ineffective unless this song closes Act I, as it does in some UK productions. (Minor note: bars 127-130 are actually treated – live and on most recordings – as the first bars of **THE ARREST**, regardless of where intermission falls.)
- ADD rock instruments back into "Alright, I'll die..." section (75-82) leading up to the 5/8 instrumental break. See Chester Novello or handwritten scores for reference as to exact (-ish) notation, but can be heard on most recordings prior to 1996 as well.

- Text from bar 109 beat 4 to bar 112 beat 1 should be “is hard, but you hold every card.”

PILATE AND CHRIST

- The [1973 film soundtrack recording](#) plays the opening bars far more quietly than the original album, a more distant sound which gives a gorgeous contrast to the arrangement becoming loud and vibrant with Pilate's entrance. I'd like to give this a try.

KING HEROD'S SONG

- The [1996 studio cast recording](#) is the example to follow; it fits best with the show's overall arrangement.

COULD WE START AGAIN PLEASE?

- ADD humming of single note by ensemble from handwritten score to bars 1-2 of licensed score, and continue humming beneath soloists at any point when Groups 1-4 are not singing, as on [1971 original Broadway cast recording](#), where it is used to ethereal, haunting effect. Anybody not in the group making its entrance musically will hum under those groups coming to the fore as well (i.e., all groups except Group 1 hum under Group 1 coming in, and so forth), stopping at 41 through the end where all groups sing as one.

JUDAS'S DEATH

- Aside from the note below (and dropping the choir from the “...murdered me...” section as in licensed score), the [1972 original French cast recording](#) is the example to follow. Take special note of the string arrangement, the gentle electric guitar before the “I don't know how...” section, and the actor's screams; a great combination of orchestration and performance.
- CUT bar 115; “So long Judas” should be the last text before the cue to segue.

TRIAL BY PILATE (39 LASHES) and SUPERSTAR

- These are banded as one track on the 1972 original London cast recording, and in each case, [this track](#) is the example to follow.

CRUCIFIXION

- This sequence was the only one that Webber completely reinvented from its original arrangement in the revival. It's not hard to see why. On the original album and in most productions before the revival, it was a slice of Seventies experimental rock not unlike what Brian Wilson was trying to do with the then-unreleased *Smile* at the time: strange, atonal vocal clusters with background sounds representing Christ's bodily functions during his crucifixion (i.e., the drums are his heartbeat, etc.) which then came to a sudden halt when Jesus died. It's very strange, incredibly avant-garde music, it's not really organic to the rest of the score, and much of it in the original handwritten score was left up to improvisation, with a note to adhere as closely to the concept recording as possible in performance.
- In productions post-1996, as recorded in the commonly circulated 1998 UK tour score, Webber stripped that out completely except for some of the original

choral melodies and a blast from the horn section to answer Jesus' final words, with most of Jesus' lines delivered in what is otherwise silence. The problem is, that's not very distinctive, and if the actor playing Jesus is having trouble convincingly enacting suffering on the cross, it's just going to be very quiet and very awkward. The current licensed score restores the concept album underpinnings of the sequence, with more detail to enable a more accurate reproduction, but I can't help feeling there must be a middle ground, especially in a nightclub setting with a concert aesthetic.

- My thought: follow length of 1998 UK tour arrangement while incorporating concept album underpinnings as possible. *(1973 film is a good frame of reference for shorter version with original sound; it kept the concept album's version of events and arrangements, but vastly compressed the sequence in length.)*

JOHN 19:41

- On the [1973 film soundtrack recording](#), the organ part is eliminated in the final bars, leaving just the flute. I'd like to make the same choice.

CURTAIN CALLS

- The 1998 UK tour score includes three curtain calls, involving snatches of "Superstar," "Hosanna," and "Superstar" again. For the purposes of the following notes, assume they're our curtain calls as well.
- Replace bars 1-4 of **25A** with subdued accompaniment and slow "Jesus Christ... sacrificed" refrain as in "Jesus Christ Superstar USA" score.
- All of Judas' vocals in **25A** are tacet.
- All vocals period are tacet in both **25B** and **25C**.

In addition to the above, there are other possibilities to contend with in editing terms. In a more concert-like atmosphere, cuts within many of the numbers may prove advisable to avoid unnecessary repetition without exciting stage imagery to camouflage it. Some suggestions, mainly based on the 1973 film unless otherwise stated, follow in show order below.

OVERTURE

- Starting with **THEN WE ARE DECIDED**, at least unless or until it's determined whether or not that works, means one doesn't want to dwell too long on what follows before getting back to the story, or the audience will get restless. As such, I'd instruct as follows: PLAY to bar 70, CUT 71-86, PLAY 87-end. Ted Neeley's U.S. "farewell" production (2006-10) made the same cut with zero harm done to the action at hand.

EVERYTHING'S ALRIGHT

- Following a cut suggested by the 1973 film and the aforementioned "farewell" tour: PLAY to bar 55, CUT 56-62, and PLAY 63-end (Apostles' Women start their "Everything's alright yes" as in 63 under Mary's in 55, and continue on to what used to be 64).

THE TEMPLE

- CUT bars 1-2, 5-6, 11-12, and 39-44.

DAMNED FOR ALL TIME

- CUT bars 29-32, 36-39, the repeated solo from 81-84 (follow the film in playing the accompaniment from 77-80 a second time instead), and the cut stated above correcting poor music prep.

THE LAST SUPPER

- Another mix of cuts from the 1973 film and the “farewell” tour: PLAY through bar 76, CUT 77-80, PLAY 81-122, CUT 123-125 (the tour did this, and I liked Judas interrupting the apostles’ quiet shock), PLAY 126-153, CUT 154-161, and PLAY 162-end. In the event these cuts are made, the alternate instruction about the boys’ vocal line at 13-14 is as follows: repeat it in two other places, both using the text “if I tried” – at 29-30 and replacing the half-rest in 165.

Casting

Anyone who knows how much I stan Ted Neeley knows I’ll defend a good performer no matter their age, but I feel *JCS* is often cast far too old, not just in terms of Jesus, but all the leads, and even ensemble. Youth should be a key component in casting, because of youthful performers’ natural energy and vitality, and because it reflects the reality of “Roman occupied Jerusalem and environs,” as the show’s setting is described – from what we know of Jewish society at the time, a boy would have been learning his trade by age 10, engaged at 13 (girls would typically be 12), and married by 14 (girls, 13); precocious and unconscionable by today’s standards, no doubt, but nonetheless the reality. With this in mind, I’d seek out a younger cast, with average age of 17-25, while capping authority figures (Herod, Pilate, priests) at around 45.

On another note, casting would place a strong emphasis on singers with a more earthy sound and strong rock/folk/soul/gospel leanings, as opposed to Broadway types; the kind of singers who have less training and experience and thus are more willing to “rock out” in the roles, and to play with the score a little bit.¹² People like *JCS* because it’s a rock opera – Ian Gillan on the original album was, for many, the definitive Jesus because of that distinctive sound. It loses a lot when the leads sing like they’re in *The Sound of Music*, as they’ve done in many post-1996, Webber-sanctioned productions. This piece should be much closer to the garage than to the grand.

Further, I’d strip down cast size severely. In a nightclub setting, there’s no room for the Cecil B. DeMille treatment. I can make this work with just fourteen strong voices, breaking down as follows, in order of appearance (an asterisk signifies that the performer doubles as ensemble in scenes where they’re not needed as a lead):

- CAIAPHAS, HIGH PRIEST*
- ANNAS*
- JUDAS ISCARIOT

¹² *JCS* is notoriously at its best when it’s fierce but not necessarily the notes on the page.

- JESUS CHRIST
- MARY MAGDALENE
- PRIEST / KING HEROD*
- SIMON ZEALOTES / PETER*
- PONTIUS PILATE*
- 3 ENSEMBLE MEN
- 3 ENSEMBLE WOMEN

Strong voices are especially important when it comes to casting Jesus and Judas, and not just because they're two of the most demanding tenor roles in musical history. I'd cast them with a view toward the two performers swapping roles (a set amount of performances of each pair during the week), allowing them to play both sides of that remarkable relationship, and to give the cast and audience two equally valid ways to see these two powerful characters.

This unique double casting would also serve the purpose of being a neat ticket sales gimmick: as far as the public knows, the choice of who plays what would be down to a nightly coin toss, worked into the staging of "Then We Are Decided" as prologue. Annas plays with a coin in his hand throughout the number as he weighs Caiaphas' words (acting teachers will be the first to tell you it's important to have something to do with your hands), and then at the close of the song, just before it goes into the overture, when Caiaphas asks "Then we are decided?" Annas absently flips the coin, and steals a glance at the result before responding "Then we are decided." The big reveal of who is Jesus and who is Judas would come after that with the climax of the overture and the opening of "Heaven on Their Minds."¹³

Additionally, when considering doubling roles to cut costs (for example, condensing Priests I-III into one figure, doubled with the performer playing King Herod); I paid special attention to the roles of Simon Zealotes and Peter. Simon's sole major appearance is in Act I, and Peter's few major appearances are in Act II, both without set-up or real follow-through. Taking my cue from the recent European tour (again featuring Ted Neeley), I'd cast one actor to play both roles, billed separately but essentially a single character. It cuts costs, creates one useful arc out of two thankless ones without changing a word or a note, and as long as there are twelve bodies (and one Jesus) around the table come Act II, those in the audience versed in the source can simply infer that Simon became Peter over the show's course, just like the notoriously temperamental Peter was originally called Simon in the Bible.

Further, part of not treating *JCS* like traditional theater is experimenting with new ideas, especially in casting. I owe this particular concept to Tumblr user [griffinmackleroy](#), who posted [an idea](#) in April 2016 that really spoke to me:

¹³ At this point, you might ask, "What if the pair that wins has already done their allotted shows that week?" The audience can't see the coin when it lands, so if a pairing that already did its share comes up the winner, the alternate pairing goes on, audience none the wiser. If "Then We Are Decided" is cut/re-positioned, the moment will simply be publicized – and staged – as the big overture reveal instead.

Reasons why I want Mary Magdalene to be played as a trans woman of color in Jesus Christ Superstar:

- 1) Judas saying that Jesus should not associate with "women of her kind" - SUCH A PARALLEL TO THE GAY LIBERATION MOVEMENT. Gay men and lesbians didn't want to associate with trans women for fear it would ruin their image and hold them back.
- 2) She's implied to be a sex worker, or at least some undesirable profession, reflective of the fact that many trans women were, and still are, forced into committing survival crimes because they couldn't find legal employment.
- 3) Despite people like Judas shit-talking her, she's resilient as hell and nurturing to Jesus and his other followers like Peter. This reminds me of trans POC activists like Miss Major and House leaders in the ball scene who, despite dealing with a lot of shit themselves, make a commitment to taking care of other queer people and maintaining a strong family-like support network for those who are suffering.
- 4) Trans women of color have always played a huge role in liberation movements. Since **Superstar** is often directed to depict modern-day activism, or is at least a parallel to modern movements, it makes sense to include trans characters.
- 5) We need more trans characters in theatre in general.
- 6) IT WOULD BE REALLY GOOD OKAY??????????

From the very beginning, the best JCS productions have been noteworthy because they took risks and made statements that (sometimes eerily) paralleled the political climate of the day. One could easily argue that big risks are what JCS is all about, and this casting possibility continues in that tradition. (The fact that [a recent all-female production cast genderfluid Glee star Alex Newell as Mary](#) proves this idea clearly has potential.)

However, I'll add that it wouldn't be okay for a cis male actor to do the role and "play it trans."¹⁴ The representation of trans people in theater to date has been disappointing. Generally, when trans characters exist, they're not written or played by trans people. Shows that do this steal the trans narrative to appear progressive, rather than letting trans people tell their own stories. If Mary will be explored as a trans woman, then a trans woman should play the part.

¹⁴ A Massachusetts production of JCS, for example, recently made the decision to portray Mary as trans – again, this idea has legs for so many to reach the same conclusion – but cast a cis male in the role.

Judas' Tormentors (Larger Cast Only)

On another non-traditional casting note, I once played with an idea that would work best with a larger group than I suggest here. I include it in the interest of completeness. Before I explain my idea, however, I must first offer some exposition.

Early productions of *JCS* struggled with the balance between humanizing Judas and avoiding pissing off the staunchly Christian part of their audience. For the original Broadway production, its director Tom O'Horgan chose to address this by literally portraying his motivation; he conceived of "Tormentors" who represented Judas' conscience. They hounded him rather like furies, and a script from when MTI licensed the show suggests there was "interpretive dance" involved, setting them up symbolically as inescapable forces. They drove him to betray Jesus and formed the noose for his untimely end; per press photos, they also restrained Jesus during the thirty-nine lashes, which suggests they weren't strictly limited to influencing Judas.

Other productions followed suit, especially the Neeley/Anderson Nineties reunion tour, which was more explicit as to what role they filled. The characters (at times implied to be voices in his head) were credited as "Temptresses," three female non-singing dancers in red who seemingly cast a spell on Judas during the Overture, but, aside from directly evil identification, they otherwise served a similar function to the traditional Tormentors; these were distinguished from the Soul Girls, who were separate figures entirely. The later Boston Rock Opera productions (1996 and 2000) did something similar but with a less biased push, casting their non-singing dancers as the Three Fates (Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos) from Greek mythology; they appeared throughout the show, handing Judas the noose and Pilate the bowl in which he washed his hands, among other things. On balance, I prefer BRO's interpretation: if one includes the Tormentors, let them symbolize the unseen forces – or motivations, or twists of fate – that led these characters to do what they did, without a specifically religious angle.¹⁵

When I initially conceived this, I wanted to feature a local gospel choir I sing with called RPM Voices of Rhode Island. (Tremendous source of talent, highly recommend catching one of their shows; you don't have to be religious to enjoy the music.) Thanks to my notion about treating the Soul Girls' lines diegetically, I had an unconventional idea for casting three older female vocalists in the choir with unusually extensive ranges.

It occurred to me that they could sing low enough to play the three high priests who appear with Caiaphas and Annas; they'd be costumed as matronly "meddling church lady" types, the old-fashioned crowd that isn't down with the new kid and his ideas. I didn't think it was revolutionary, but it'd be an interesting spin on otherwise thankless

¹⁵ If this sounds rather like "The Bullet" as personification of fate in *Hamilton*, you're not wrong. Depending on the production the Tormentors played a slightly more passive role, but it's very similar. In spite of how many people have knocked Tom O'Horgan's work over the years, a lot of what we see on Broadway today, especially in contemporary musicals like *Rent*, *Spring Awakening*, and arguably *Hamilton*, wouldn't have been possible without O'Horgan's direction on shows like *Hair* and *JCS*. I see moments ripped straight from his playbook blocking- and choreography-wise all the time.

parts. Reminded of Jonny's idea, however, I realized how interesting it would be if the "priests" (who could also sing high enough to do so) took the Soul Girls' lines. Jesus is delirious from being beaten, his detractors are mocking him as he goes to meet his maker... of course he'd hallucinate Judas singing an I-Told-You-So song! It'd make "Superstar" feel less like it comes from nowhere, as it sometimes seems to do.

Doubling the priests with the Soul Girls was strange enough, but then my brain went even further. Well, they're already playing dual roles... what if I just put them throughout the show, á la BRO? They'd be credited as Judas' Tormentors / Priests / Soul Girls (character list still includes Tormentors, so within the letter of the contract), but directorially, without changing anything, they'd move through the show, filling specific roles in certain scenes, and it'd be left to the audience whether they're actual characters in the room or represent something deeper like the Fates. It was avant-garde and off-the-wall; all things I think make *JCS* great.

Much later, I settled on doing it with as small a cast as possible, which meant combining the lines of Priests I-III for one performer and double-casting them with Herod. Fewer bodies on stage, less performers to pay... it's more practical from a producing standpoint. But I admit to still liking this idea a lot. It's unusual, and, in my opinion, the best productions of *JCS* always have something unusual about them.

General Staging Ideas

Because of its lack of a spoken book, *JCS* has frequently proven problematic to directors in its long history of theatrical staging. As the show was recorded in the studio before it was staged, it was originally written for the ears, not the eyes, and some of the score is very difficult to stage adequately, especially for audiences used to the skillful storytelling of modern pop operas like *Les Misérables*, *Rent*, and others. The structure of *JCS* can feel disjointed, almost like a series of music videos, rather than one coherent narrative.

Tom O'Horgan tried to sandpaper over the cracks with dazzling imagery in the original Broadway run, but met with much criticism from reviewers and audiences alike for this approach. In his *New York Times* review, Walter Kerr spoke for many when he said, "All that had to be done with it was to put it on a stage baldly – baldness is very much of its essence – and, after establishing a few simple traffic directions, let it sing for itself."

Apparently the creators were inclined to agree. To quote a note in a script supplied in the days when *JCS* was licensed by MTI, "There are as many ways to stage [*JCS*] as there are directors and designers willing to bring their own creative inventiveness to it. However, the ultimate success of the production rests on the musical and lyrical content. In the end, it must be the music and lyrics which create the mood, tell the story, and make [*JCS*] the unforgettable theatrical experience it is."

With that in mind, I concluded that the human truths of *JCS*, originally created as an oratorio, become even more evident when performed in concert. Beyond that script's suggestion that "the simplicity of a platformed stage consisting of several levels and relying on lighting to indicate place and changing scenes can foster as favorable an atmosphere as the most lavish treatment," our *JCS* – very spare and barebones, with

an overall emphasis on music, lighting, and sound – will include no sets, costumes, or props to distract from the powerful vocal and acting performances or the raw emotion the audience will experience from our cast. Choreography will only be employed for major dance numbers (of which there are surprisingly few, mostly in the first act).

It's worth noting, however, that, in keeping with my directorial sensibilities, this won't be treated as a bunch of hooting, hollering rockers having a good time at *JCS'* expense; it isn't The Who getting up to perform the big radio hits that happened to be from *Tommy*, as easy as a similarly constructed *JCS* would be to throw together under those conditions. I would go for something more involved like what Jim Sharman did with the original London production, keeping the concert-style staging of some numbers delivered directly to the audience, but carefully blotted with blocking to maintain milieu.

Additionally, in the sound department, I would strive to create an immersive experience reminiscent of SurroundSound, providing the sense of time and place which a concert doesn't immediately approximate. A friend recently attended a community singalong of *JCS* in Kentucky in which the band was spread out between the four corners of the room. Inspiring in terms of involving the audience and surrounding it with the story, but it might prove untenable in practice in a production involving a conductor where everyone needs to clearly see the cues being given. The next best solution is immersive sound, perhaps incorporating elements akin to a sonic radio-play (e.g., footsteps on gravel, lambs in the background, voices, etc.).

While I'm on that subject, sound will be key in a production that focuses more on score than staging. With *JCS*, the engineers working the master panel at the rear always seem to crank the show up to 11, thinking all they need to do is throw levels into the red because it's largely rock. That hasn't always served the show well; given the lack of dialogue to tell the story, the lyrics must be heard clearly and distinctly in *JCS*, or one misses everything. Thus it's important that voices and instrumentation be carefully balanced by the engineer and the key to that is microphone placement. For best results, I'd go for one mic in the hair on everybody, chest mics for all solo singers and standard floor mics for the chorus, which could sometimes be used in solo exchanges for a specific effect. (Naturally this would call for top shelf sound equipment.)

And then there's the matter of potential audience involvement. Anyone who's followed North America's fascination with *JCS* over the years knows the album, show, and film have never really gone out of style; they've merely been appreciated in different ways. Recently, this appreciation has taken on an increasingly participatory – and more concert-reminiscent than theatrical – aspect:

- The [Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence](#) have sponsored an annual singalong screening of the 1973 film in San Francisco since 2011 which seems to have inspired...
- ...the long-running "40th anniversary" screening tour, noted for its guest appearances by original cast members and audience talkbacks. This tour in particular inspired increasing shades of *Rocky Horror* level audience participation, including one chap who showed up in film-accurate Roman

soldier cosplay at a Chicago screening. (Inspired by this, the tour now boasts a "singalong" and "costume contest" as part of the show.)

- [Motherlodge Live Arts Exchange](#) in Kentucky has presented a politically motivated "community sing"/concert of *JCS* statewide (mentioned above) for a few years now.
- [The Ultrasonic Rock Orchestra](#) has frequently presented its own concert twist on the original concept album configuration (with updated arrangements) which very much places the emphasis on the score, actors doubling as musicians, light on staging, etc.
- And, last but certainly not least, the [Church of Skatan](#) (the former St. Liborius Church in St. Louis, Missouri, now an indoor skate park) has presented what it describes as a "fully interactive shadow puppet spectacular" in tribute to the original album and film at Easter time for the past several years. (Its tagline, "YOU ARE THE PASSION," partially informs the point I'm about to make.)

This recent novelty aspect to the love of *JCS*, not unlike the cross-generational appeal of *Rocky Horror*, suggests American audiences now come to *JCS* in part to relive their youth and to connect on the common ground of a shared experience.¹⁶

With that in mind, I'd allow the audience to join in on the fun and participate in the major ensemble moments with lyric sheets. It gets them involved, makes them care about the story in a way they normally don't, bolsters the vocal sound of a smaller cast, and adds fun to the atmosphere. As long as they don't try to take over, they could even show up in costume!

¹⁶ Strangely enough, this reinforces the notion that the distance between church and theater has never been that great. Take Holy Communion, for example – theater at its most basic. "Let that be a symbol for this," said Christ. And at first a small group of apostles and then a large group of believers willingly suspended their disbelief and practiced that act of theater as an act of sacrament in pursuit of something wonderful and transformative. That ritual binds us to our churches as surely as the collective act of imagining in an audience binds us to our theaters. Now it has come full circle, with *JCS* a sort of "new Mass."