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Imaginary Jesus @ Mustard Seed



IMAGINARY JESUS PLAYS NOV. 16-DEC. 2, 2012 AT MUSTARD SEED THEATRE

will be on the schedule, but this is the first time that Jent has gone full out comic in depicting a serious search for Jesus. The first act is hilarious, as if Kevin Smith (the movie *Dogma*) and Nick Hornby (*High Fidelity*, among other novels) got together in a whirlwind game of “To Tell the Truth.” For you young ‘uns out there, this was a game show back in the early days of TV where three people came out and claimed to be the same person. It was up to a panel to determine which of them was telling the truth about his/her identity. Matt, however, has far more than three Jesuses (alternatively “Jesi”) from whom to choose.

Matt is a divided soul, literally. He’s played by Robert Thibaut, but he’s also played by Chad Morris as “narrator” who fills in the gaps by telling the audience what Matt is thinking when his actions don’t convey all we need to know. Well, okay. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it’s awkward, and how you respond to this conceit may determine in great part how you feel about this show overall. When we meet Matt, he’s having lunch with Jesus (Justin Ivan Brown) at a vegan restaurant. (Note: Jesus in his various permutations spends a lot of time around food, but he doesn’t seem to actually eat. A sign that he is spirit and not flesh? Or just an indication that he is a true imaginary friend?) Pete (J. Samuel Davis) arrives, and gets into a fight with Jesus and we learn that he is indeed “the” Peter, Saint, founder of the Church, and head honcho among the

Mustard Seed Theatre enjoyed a sold-out house for the opening night of *Imaginary Jesus* from the novel by Matt Mikalatos adapted for the stage by Deanna Jent. She is founder and Artistic Director of the company and also directs this show.

When you’ve named your theatre “Mustard Seed,” it’s obvious that plays exploring how faith works in art and life

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apostles. Jesus gets punched and bravely runs away, much to Matt's surprise and chagrin, and his journey begins when Pete tells him that "his" Jesus wasn't the real thing.

It seems that Matt has taken this idea of a personal savior very seriously by creating his own "Buddy Christ" (Kevin Smith's idea) who likes to hang out, banter, fix parking tickets and be Matt's all-around BFF. But finding your savior isn't easy and requires a trip back in time to the comic book store where Matt worked 10 years in the past where he kept his totemic "frog of hate" (important later) and finally back centuries to Jesus' time where he meets his spirit guide, Daisy, a talking donkey (Michelle Hand). We learn that there has been an event in Matt's life that kicked off his need for spiritual solace, and as a Christian, of course, he seeks it through Jesus. But what (and who) does that mean?

Soon, we are bombarded with all sorts of Jesuses: among others, Testosterone J., King James J., Political Power J., Hippie J., Televangelist J., Meticulous J., Free Will J., even Cirque d'Soleil J. A rather mysterious character, "Motorcycle Guy" helps this pilgrim progress also. An ensemble performs the alternative Jesi with various degrees of success. Magic 8 Ball Jesus is a hoot (and at one point a hostage) as he shakes his head to give one of the standard 20 answers. Ben Ritchie brings in the noise in his portrayal of Angry Jesus, the one who turned over the money-changers' tables in the temple. He's funny and has a lesson, but they all have something to contribute to the conversation. A race down Mt. Hood on sleds (pool toys) with Matt, Imaginary, Meticulous and Free Will is suggested by Pete to ferret out the real Jesus. One falls off the mountain, and one "exits chased by a bear." There's something familiar about that. . . . A flight into Powell's Bookstore (the famous "City of Books" in Portland, Oregon where the story is set) leads to confusions with Jesi all over the place. At one point, Matt even gets to visit with Mary (Amy Loui), the mother of Jesus, in the considerably less felicitous Act II.

After intermission, the sled race kicks off the action, then the story starts to slow down. The novelty is gone, and now the serious spiritual issues need to be explored, but there's a whiplash effect caused by the play itself. We do learn what sent Matt on his quest, and I'm not going to tell it here, but it disappointed me.

There's an unnecessary scene where Kyle Powell as the President visits Matt and his wife, Krista (Julie Venegoni) for dinner and it has something to do with the foot washing the actual Jesus performed for all his disciples, even Judas, when the most powerful man in the country offers to clean their bathroom. It is a really good Obama impression though it adds little to the play itself except to drag it out further. Mary's scene goes on about as long as the crucifixion itself, and the end of the play, Matt's epiphany, seems profoundly obvious long before he gets to it.

The technical work is exceptional: Dunsy Dai's versatile set made of large slanted moveable blocks that can be used for defining spaces, and at one point, they even represent the slide down the mountain. Tables and chairs appear so smoothly, it's barely noticeable, and everyone helps in scene changes, which look as well-rehearsed as the performances. They even get a joke out of it. Michael Sullivan's lights create low lit coffee shops and an "upper room," sunny days and dark nights (of the soul and otherwise) and even an ambulance. JC Kracijek's costumes are quite extraordinary because they're clever, of course, but there are also so many of them and even a talking donkey who walks upright looks just as she should. Michael Perkins' sound design using bits of familiar music interspersed with real-world sounds adds much. Jean Lang and her assistants are very busy stage managers here also.

I think it's fair to say that Jent is an actor's director, and she has assembled an excellent cast. Besides those mentioned already, Nicole Angeli is very good as Sandy, an ex-prostitute who is instrumental in Matt's journey. She gives the most grounded performance of the whole show. The rest of the group includes Aaron Orion Baker, Roger Erb, Daniel Lanier, Zoe Sullivan, Vanessa Waggoner, Leslie Wobbe, and Jamie Zayas

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as various Jesi and others. If you go, I think you'll have a really good time, as I did, for the most part. But I believe one change from Mikalatos original story would have made Matt's spiritual crisis and resulting search more urgently felt, and some judicious cutting in Act II would improve the whole play. Jent has proven herself a talented writer and her original play, *Falling*, shows that she can construct a tight script. She should take a lesson from herself. *Imaginary Jesus* has lots of potential, but it isn't the real thing yet.

By **ANDREA BRAUN – THEATRE CORRESPONDENT**

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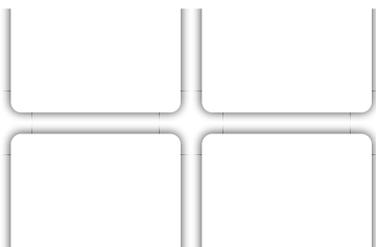
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