

'Imaginary Jesus' debuts at Mustard Seed



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In “Imaginary Jesus,” the new play that Deanna Jent adapted from the novel by Matt Mikalatos, Jesus appears in many forms: a Portland eco-hippie, a smooth power-broker, a bewigged barrister and, of course, the Sunday school standard in white robe and blue sash.

All of these versions, and many more, present themselves to a seeker named Matt (yes, just like Mikalatos. This is not an accident.). Are they real? Is Jesus real? Or is Matt simply making Jesus (or Jesuses) up, thanks to his own considerable imagination?

Bringing that many versions of Jesus onstage — sometimes en masse — could be asking for trouble. Matt’s earnest quest may seem naïve to some theatergoers, offensive or even blasphemous to others.

But Mustard Seed Theatre (note that name) could be a fine place for this new play to encounter its ideal audience, fundamentally sympathetic to Matt’s doubts, hopes and

sense of humor. It is certainly the right place for it to find a compelling stage treatment.

Jent, who is also the play's director, juggles her big, lively cast adroitly, delicately frosting the spiritual quest with outlandish jokes and physical comedy. Robert Thibaut, as Matt, and Chad Morris, as the Narrator, deliver a coordinated, understated style that makes Matt easy to relate to (instead of the kind of nut you cross the street to avoid).

J. Samuel Davis gives them rock-hard support as a pal called Pete; there are also appealing turns from Amy Loui as Mary, Justin Ivan Brown as Sunday School Jesus and Kyle Powell as Barack Obama. (The play covers a lot of ground.) And what could be more delicious than Michelle Hand as a talking donkey, dispensing wisdom and noshing on telephone cords?

They all enjoy the enormous advantage of Dunsai Dai's versatile set, functional and wonderfully imaginative.

With big, movable triangles that can be river cascades or room dividers, with a high-pitched urban panorama that rises into a forest of delicate trees, Dai locates the play in Matt's Oregon home while it evokes the wider world (and maybe more). It's a superb evocation of Matt's Christian perspective on the American landscape where it plays out.

'IMAGINARY JESUS'

Mustard Seed Theatre

When • Through Dec. 2. Performances at 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

Where • Fontbonne University's Fine Arts Theatre, 6800 Wydown Boulevard

How much • \$20-\$25; pay for Saturday matinees with canned food or a cash donation

More info • 314-719-8060;

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