

BOOK REVIEW

Rock Opera: The Creation of Jesus Christ Superstar From Record Album to Motion Picture, Ellis Nassour & Richard Broderick. Paperback \$4.50

In the disguise of a book review I really want to write about the film, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, directed by Norman Jewison. The starting point is the book. It is the second or third book on this amazing piece of theater and more recently – film. This kind of book is not intended as a great or mildly great literary experience. Nor is it a superb visual experience through pictures, no revelations of technical tricks on stage or screen. Yet, it is valuable to the moviegoer. It tells all, covers all, from the erection, as they say, to the resurrection.

Creation means making something out of nothing. The only thing missing from this assembly line package of J.C.S.S. is the mention in depth of the sheet music. Here, it must start. Confronted with the simplicity of the notes and lyrics, it would take a person of considerable imagination to envisage the market and artistic potential of this remarkable opus. When the line began to roll – who could have estimated the amount of work for artists and artisans the movement would create? Then, there are the backers. How could they foretell the profit it would produce? Two artists, the word-man and the music-man, were the creators. Tim Rice wrote the words and Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote the music. The creation of *Jesus Christ Superstar* was their brain and soul child.

Throughout this cliff-hanger of a book, the reader marvels at the turn of events. What next in the hunches, the beliefs, the influences, the needs that this Rock Opera brought into being? It is a true believer's story. Hope produced the most unexpected results for the most unlikely candidates. Just about anything could happen. It did. The understudies of the stage production landed the leads in the movie. This was a break in tradition. Often the pattern is followed of giving the role to a Hollywood star to boost the box-office. A fresh attitude towards the tradition prevented this wonderful property falling in ruins. It is hoped that others will follow Jewison's lead. A great performance on film can establish an unknown.

The book does its job well. It reveals how J.C.S.S. took on a life of its own apart from the Rock Opera aspect. This interests the filmmaker and the filmgoer. What the book doesn't do is make an evaluation of the way the filmmaker must resolve certain age-old problems when he comes to shoot a celebrated stage success. The book is not defective because it lacks this kind of analysis. It is not an intention of the book. But it provides me with an excuse to develop a defence for the film – if it needs one.

Jewison, like all filmmakers, had to solve two core problems: the inescapable economic and artistic considerations. He did it in one move. This is rare, and it distinguishes Jewison above many directors of musicals of the past. "The one thing I knew for sure I didn't want" Jewison said in an interview, "was a *King of Kings* job. I've seen Pasolini's *The Passion According to Saint Matthew* at least eight times; it's so sparse and simple. The first scenario that Webber and Rice came up with – can you believe it – was pure *King of Kings* with all the trappings; cast of thousands, you know". He knew the De Mille treatment was out. He knew a film version based on the stage version was out. He had to run a risk. Instead of a cast of thousands and Biblical costumes, he, like Pasolini, kept it simple. The costumes are modern yet in the tradition of the Christian painters of the Christ story. He had a "band of

followers" rather than a "cast". This solved the artistic problem of style. At the same time it saved money, and by choosing Israel he got the right setting; a good deal for his backers out of the Israeli Government, and a piece of publicity that might help win the Jewish audiences. The latter has always been essential in the success of musicals both on the stage and the screen.

Certain unfavorable reactions to the film were registered on religious grounds. Some said it was no way to treat Christian mythology. (They of course didn't call it that.) Yet, Jewison made the film in the tradition of artists, who previously presented the story with a great deal of show biz panache. Neither is it the first time Christ has been considered as a man. It is possibly the first time that concept has reached so many people in such a short time through the media of film. (Surely dead missionaries look out with envy at this package on the mass market!) Before, the monopoly had been held by the "Christian Industries". (Have you ever bought a pink plastic holy water font at a monastery?) As to Jewison's treatment, or O'Horgan's on the stage, neither were in bad taste. An inspection of Mexican churches or those of Rome will soon put the complainer right on the question of what is vulgar in Christian "art".

What could have been more God-awful than the religious westerns Hollywood produced decade after decade? Who complained?

Jewison introduced jet planes and tanks of the Israeli Army. This innovation also received the thumbs down reaction. Wisely, Jewison set J.C.S.S. in the convention of a film within a film. He got the audience to accept the fact that he is making a film. This device works dramatically, economically, and artistically. As the change from the arrival of the props and the actors to the action of the film unfolds, the audience is willingly coerced into accepting a new reality – the reality of the Christ story. When Judas is well into his part, he is suddenly confronted by a new reality. He changes back into an actor, and then into a human being as we watch him reacting to the threatening tanks. Jewison added another dimension to the film in this scene: this cruel reality of war co-exists with art. It also suggests that war machines could easily wipe out all art.

When Jewison reveals bad taste, it is not in the area of his treatment of his theme. A scene the audience enjoys each time I have seen the film is the reaction of Herod, when Christ is being whipped. It caters to the audience. It is ugly visually. Herod, in his gold mesh shawl to protect him against the sun's rays, sits and with squeamish contortions of his face, enjoys the scene. It is an ugly piece of camp. It lessens the impact of the scene. It appears to be an afterthought and a bad one at that. When a director like Jewison reveals bad taste, it is simply sad. He doesn't have to pander to the audience. Perhaps Jewison had difficulty in directing Mostel (*Joshua*, not *Zero*, alas) in the part of Herod. The Fellini set does not come off and the Carmen Miranda-like girls miss the timing. One remembers the platformed-soled Herod in the stage version – the floating veils, the limp wrists that disguised real power. In the film the song, a good one, has no punch to it. "So You Are the Christ" falls flat.

It must be difficult for a director not to fall into the temptation of catering to the audience. He is certainly encouraged to do so. But in the long run it does not pay. That one glaring bit of bad taste will follow the film forever. If, as

David Beard

some critics said, O'Horgan's stage version had even one bit of bad taste: then the whole show was guilty. If the charge is true then O'Horgan has made a stage masterpiece and a great success out of bad taste. Jewison, in contrast, has made a superb film with only one flaw in his style. This weak spot exists in other films Jewison has made, but he has been able to make it look virile and not weak as it is in J.C.S.S.

After seeing the film it is worthwhile to listen to the record album — where it all started. The original version is quite a different listening matter to the film version. The latter cries out for the visuals. It is a compact score. It irritates and without the visuals this version cannot stand on its own. (Should any film music stand on its own?)

Rock Opera is worth reading. It gives the person who is interested in the entertainment world, a view of possibilities, frustrations and realizations. It is also a sort of stern testimonial to the courage and imagination that is needed if you are going to make it in the film business.

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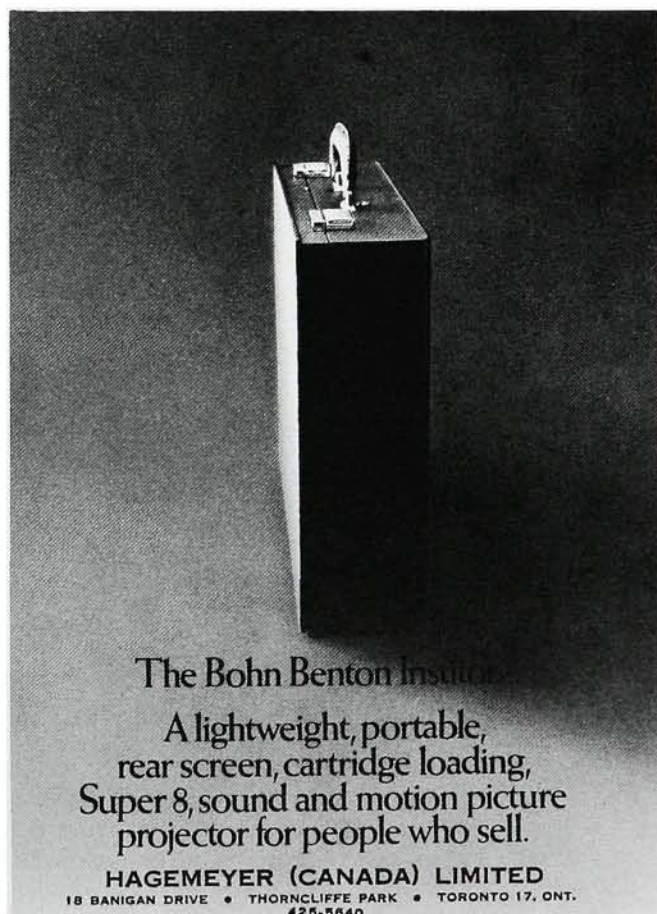
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