

Review: Lab Theater finds salvation in stirring "Judas Iscariot"

Daring Stephen Adly Guirgis play about the trial of Jesus's betrayer offers spiritual debate, roaring comedy and strong performances

By CHRIS SILK

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FORT MYERS — "Prosecution now conjures Satan, Prince of Darkness, to the stand."

That right there, on page 34, lies the final clue that "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot" probably isn't your typical Neil Simon.

That is, if the casual mentions of Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, a rapping, beat-boxing intro from an F-bomb dropping St. Monica and a pop-in from Mother Teresa didn't convince you already. But don't worry. As Pontius Pilate says, we're in Judea, we've got some Jews, so it's kind of like a Neil Simon up in here anyway.

The Laboratory Theater of Florida continues its genre-hopping season with "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot," a Stephen Adly Guirgis play about the trial of the betrayer of Jesus. Screams of laughter mix with deep questions of faith while Satan quaffs a barrel of Mesopotamian wine at the bar. Before you know it, three hours have passed; that's a good thing.

Guirgis also penned daring "The Mother***** with the Hat," a play with an unprintable title starring Chris Rock that was nominated for six Tony Awards and gave producers fits over how to promote it. He writes fierce, raw, urban works with sharp language and vibrant characters. "Judas" features a defense attorney with a shaky belief in God fighting to get Judas Iscariot out of Hell. The show examines the very nature of faith itself, the power of belief and even forgiveness.

Don't think that community theater shouldn't touch this. Credit to Lab Theater founder and artistic director Annette Trossbach, who helmed this show. She manages more with amateur actors than many other community theaters. Standout performances from James Recca and Joel Hawkins offer brilliant highlights. Solid turns from Tim Gunderman and Lucy Harris anchor the action.

The Lab Theater production isn't perfect, but Trossbach and her crew get the job done in solid, entertaining and often stylish fashion. Humor and philosophy mix in an amusing and biting blend of smart theater and just laugh-out-loud silliness. I wish the

show's message about salvation and self came through with just a little more force, but it does get there in the end.

"Judas Iscariot" sits squarely within Trossbach's directorial wheelhouse: viciously smart, wickedly funny and brilliantly intellectual. She deftly guides the stronger and more seasoned actors into discovering depths to their characters while encouraging newcomers to gain confidence on stage.

I continue to applaud the Lab Theater's "open to all" approach. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. For "Judas" the show (if not Judas the character), the results are mostly good. I wish the show put more focus on the relationships between the two lawyers, the judge and Satan, where the philosophical debate plays out. Inexperienced actors also land in a handful of critical supporting roles, denying some depth and nuance to their characters.

A newly svelte James Recca steals this show. While Recca plays three roles, Satan remains his (and the playwright's) greatest creation. Lucifer appears in a crescendo of sound and light. He's suave, smooth, chatty. Wears Gucci, does Pilates. Has a very long ... pitchfork.

Satan must be played with utmost confidence; Recca blooms here. He leers at Harris's waspish defense attorney, sneers at Gunderman's small-minded prosecutor and jeers at Stephen Hooper's hapless, hilarious gavel-banging judge. His Satan speaks with this velvety, hands brushing slowly across rich fur tone that hypnotizes. Snappish retorts, verbal battles, evil insights and a final rejoinder, the ultra-calm dispensation with which Recca brought down the house - "I'm a Buddha floating on a lily pad" - create this satanical character of great wit.

And ladies, if you are at all of a sensitive nature, look away when Satan mentions what he had for lunch. Please. I beg of you.

Better, Recca and Trossbach (the pair worked together in Theatre Conspiracy's "Intimate Exchanges," under Hooper's direction) elevate the minor character of bailiff Julius to scene-stealing delight. In a candy-striped robe of many colors and a blonde pageboy wig, Recca lolls beside the judge's bench as the air-brained court-officers. Lollipops provide an oral fixation. When not occupied with his pleasuring his candy, the hair-twirling, face-making Julius gropes the handsome male witnesses.

Forced to stand in for the judge, Recca has the character examine his green, orange and purple Halloween monster eyeball socks. Roll 'em up, roll 'em down. Massage the toes. Wiggle the toes. Ooohh. Scratch that. The scene in the background managed to distract even from the hilarity of the ever-so-serious Hooper in a flamboyant gold robe testifying as Caphias the Elder. You don't know who to laugh at more - the one in two wigs, a Crayola-striped robe and green socks scratching his feet or the one wearing a bunch of gold blankets telling you all about why he handed Jesus over to the Romans. Really. It's that kind of a show.

Gunderman and Harris worked together in "In the Next Room, or the Vibrator Play."

They bring an nice chemistry to their pair of enemy lawyers. Gunderman offers just the right amount of sleazy, unsavory nastiness from his prosecutorial El-Fayoumy without taking the character into true evil. I love the smaller touches, like his groping, leering and pitiable attempts to get other characters outside the main action to notice him. Drop the oversize costume mustache; it hides the actor's wonderful facial expressions.

Harris, always a solid, reliable performer, gives unexpected fire to Fabiola Aziza Cunningham. Her angry, ranting, shouting match with the Devil in the second half represents the show's climax. Those scenes pulse with energy; even nearly three hours into the show, I was leaning forward, hanging on every word.

Joel Hawkins delivers a growling, raging performance as Pontius Pilate. His Pilate arrives with such unexpected ferocity and honesty; his truths offer a new window in Judas's fate. Hawkins commits to the role, right down to the crotch grab and the precise location of the "VERITAS" tattoo that his Roman soldier received. I love the surprise of seeing an actor embrace such a vivid role.

Jonathan Perez plays Judas. Look for his post-betrayal scene in a bar, where he swaps barbs with Recca's Satan. Wil Harbison makes for an angelic Jesus, wearing a "Got Me?" shirt. His final confrontation with Judas offers a heart-breaking glimpse of the show's beautiful, touching message of true salvation.

Three graffiti artists (Edgar Meruvia, Alan Salgado and Tina Miller) contributed their work for the set. I love the urban feel and the designs, including the giant "In God We Trust" tag behind the witness box. I appreciate the attempt at community inclusion, but I wish the display of art had been more unified, or at least leapt from panel to panel in a recognizable fashion. Points for the "Nebuchadnezzar's Five & Dime" Store sign though, and the "Clem's" tag next to Judas.

The Lab Theater tapped volunteers to create sound, light and musical effects for various character entrances and exits in the show. I appreciate the effort and acknowledge that the theater has limited technical capabilities. I do wish the effects communicated something about the characters though, not just "hey, look over here!" I did chuckle at Mitch Haley's "Voice of God" pre-show announcement, which listed the "Ten Commandments" of audience behavior.

Costumes, most likely from Lois Kuehne's inexhaustible trunks with an assist from the actors themselves, prove a highlight. Recca's Satan wears a slick gray suit and elegant eggplant shirt. Gunderman's oily attorney wears what I swear is a sharkskin blazer and pants. I don't know that I've ever seen that sheen on anything living or dead - not even on "Miami Vice" reruns.

Hooper's costume as corrupt, venal, High Priest of the Sanhedrin Caphias the Elder brought literal screams of laughter upon his entrance. Gold, gold, gold and more gold; imagine if a Claire's Boutique melted down and was steamrollered into fabric. Caphias glittered like a Best of Everything at high noon. Gabriela Elvir's St. Monica gets a garter belt, cut-clear-up-to-there denim Daisy Dukes and a red frock coat. The show really

needed some cornrows or a drag queen though.

Everything you thought you knew about the Bible was a lie. Or was it? St. Monica has enormous pull with the Lord. Hope is located in a courtroom in downtown Purgatory. Satan loves God. This one will make you laugh, make you think and it might even make you pray. Don't miss it.

"I'm a Budda floating on a lily pad." Email me, csilk@naplesnews.com, find me on Twitter at [@napleschris](https://twitter.com/napleschris) or read my [Stage Door theater blog](#). You can also sign up to [receive the Stage Door blog via email](#).



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