

Rehearsal and Production

Mock Production Project

Dramaturgy for Last Days of Judas Iscariot

Notable Productions

Original Production:

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot

Opened/Ran Through: March 2nd- April 3rd, 2005

Theater Company: LAByrinth Theatre Company

Performance Venue: The Public Theatre's Martinson Hall

The critical reception was mixed for the initial first run of the play. Many critics stated the fantasy setting of a courtroom in Purgatory was the ideal spot for a gritty biblical drama. The New York Times claimed it was fun chaos, but at times it was straight chaos. Noting that the actors often changed costumes in the dark, and would often climb ladders to reach another portion of the stage. Sam Rockwell (who played the titular character) called for a line during the press performance. Theater critic, Ben Bradley, said of the performance, the true setting was not a courtroom, but the classroom. Questions of religion were encouraged to be asked, and there was a string of Christian existential pain that painted the picture of the production.

Despite the mixed reviews of critics, the production extended its run from the 20th of March to the 3rd of April.

Notably, the play takes place in multiple levels, with the courtroom serving as the base, and a cave area where Judas sits mostly semi-comatose. Often times, characters must utilize onstage ladders to reach higher parts of the stage, including the aforementioned cave in which Judas sits. The action bleeds into the audience, with the seating surrounding the action. The set is extremely sparse and muted in its color palate. Most of the courtroom has a bleak lighting, and it almost gives the sense of being in a parking garage, more than it does a courtroom.

Even the more outspoken characters of Satan, Judas, Pilate, etc, are found in more grays, blacks and beiges for their outfits. There is a feeling of having been in this place for a very long time, and the discomfort of its bleakness becomes palpable.

West End Production

Opened/Ran Through: March 28th 2008 to May 10th 2008

Theater Company: A Co=production with Headlong Theatre

Performance Venue: The Almeida Theater

The critical view of this production was a little bit more favorable. Critics noted the play was quite long (almost three hours in length), but the action and intensity of the characters and dialogue was enough to maintain audience attention. Michael Billington said of the production: the play was filled with high octane performances and the production reminded him of a fantasy setting akin to Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

Director Rupert Goold took the original design and made it slightly brighter and more vivid. Satan looks more like a used car salesman, and the red lighting reflects well in some of his scenes. The brighter pallet of colors in lighting and costumes almost opens up the feel of the production. There's more sense of space, and more opportunity to engage.

Actors Studio Production

Opened/Ran: March 9th to March 26th, 2017

Theatre Company: Members of the Actors Studio

Venue: The Ellen Stewart Theatre

Critically, this production is the most widely panned. Many critics thought the production was far too long, without enough strength in the cast to make it a solid vehicle amidst its 3 hour run time. The audience engaged with certain characters more (Satan, and a notable performance of Simon the Zealot, as examples), but many of the performances were, at best, acceptable according to some critics. According to critics, the pace also *felt* the slowest in this incarnation.

Interestingly about this performance is the cast size. Whereas, initially roles are double or even tripled in previous performances, the cast is not at all doubled in this version. Every part has a single actor to it, and all said and done, the cast total comes to 26 people. Although the costumes are bold, and the historical figures look more akin to what we see in photographs/paintings (Freud in particular looks far more like the Sigmund Freud we've seen in history, than the original off-Broadway character), the set is the most sparse, utilizing some of the set pieces from the original production and relying on lighting to create the rest of the balance.

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Jeremy St.Martin

Mock Production Project (The Last Days of Judas Iscariot)

Contextual Information

The world of the playwright

Stephen Adly Guirgis—Pulitzer prize winning Author—premiered the off-Broadway production of The Last Days of Judas Iscariot on March 2nd, 2005 with the LAByrinth theater company. Guirgis graduated with a focus on acting, and eventually switched over to writing in his late 20's. Before the penning of Last Days, Guirgis had written two plays: Jesus Took The A Train, and Our Lady of 121st Street. The latter of which was nominated for a Drama Desk Award. At the time, he and colleague John Ortiz (who played Jesus in the original off-Broadway production of Last Days) were starting the LAB and could not get a single playwright to present a script. It was then that the two men decided to become multifaceted—doing acting intensives every Wednesday night, and having Guirgis write the script for Last Days specifically for the LAB theater. Guirgis's friend and colleague, the late Phillip Seymour Hoffman, was moving back from LA to New York after becoming disenchanted with the Hollywood Scene. Hoffman signed on to direct the flagship production.

As well as writing the play, and penning a couple of scripts for major television shows (notably an episode of The Sopranos) Guirgis was heavily involved with leading Improv workshops dealing with HIV/AIDS. He would often hold these workshops in schools, hospitals, churches, etc, to give better understanding to HIV education.

The concept of The Last Days of Judas Iscariot was born out of Guirgis's waning relationship with the Catholic church. At a young age, hearing the story of Judas Iscariot and questioning God's love for Judas (as well as people in general) came as a shock to Guirgis and marked the beginning of

the end of his Catholic upbringing. He is quoted as saying: “[The story of Judas Iscariot] threw me a big jolt. I was little but I remember thinking ‘well, if I can forgive someone, why can’t God, who was supposed to be all loving?’ That was the beginning of the end of my Christian Experience.”

Although Guirgis uses many outward Christian thematic elements in the show, the political themes are strewn into the dialogue and the character concepts. Many of the apostles talk about Jesus’ revolt against the Romans, the political unrest of the period of time, and Judas’s antagonizing Christ’s ideals. Socioeconomically, the characters are stated to be working class, or lower. For direction on the biblical characters, Guirgis brought in James Martin—a Jesuit Priest, and theologian,

The World of the Play (as written)

Time period and setting:

The current setting of the play takes place in what would be considered “the present”. There is not much known as to the specific time, which lends itself to the idea of the afterlife and a feeling of eternity. The courtroom scenes are linear, the action in Judas’s timeline is also linear, starting from Henrietta’s testimony about Judas as a boy, working his way to meeting with Satan and trying to recant his crime against Jesus. Purgatory itself is compared to a neighborhood in a New York borough. However, it is interesting to note, the courtroom is referred to being IN purgatory, but is a separate entity in itself. The angel Gloria, in the beginning of the show, refers to the place as “Hope”. And whereas “Hope” is usually a setting where someone finds sanctuary, Hope in this case is not a welcoming place. She is even quoting as saying Hope doesn’t smell good (compared to Purgatory). Gloria alludes this is due to the litigious nature of the court room.

Politics/Economics:

The judicial system is of course the main focus of the play. All major cases of the afterlife are met here, and it seems cases are usually met with the judge denying them. This court setting keys in to the prosecutor-- Yousef El_Fayoumy's-- statement of the "Americanization of the afterlife". The jury is filled with the dying or the recently dead (as in the case of Butch Honeywell who is dead but doesn't realize it, and Loretta, who is on life support and is suspended between the possibility of waking up and dying at any possible moment). The procedure and etiquette of the courtroom are loose, at best. Defense attorney Fabiana Aziza Cunningham is often treated with scathing misogyny, particularly from the Hell bound prosecutor. The testimony from those involved directly in the case (Pontius Pilate, Simon the Zealot, etc.) is dissected meticulously with multiple cross examining per witness.

Mythology:

The saints, and bible figures key in the incident of Christ's betrayal, are featured. The saints always tell their stories separately in monologue form, breaking focus from the initial courtroom scene. Judas is separated from the action, only interacting with the main setting when testimony on his behalf is recounted, or when a character interacts with him directly in his catatonic state (i.e. Saint Monica). To add to the biblical history, the characters of Mother Teresa and Sigmund Freud are featured as expert witnesses arguing against (the former) and for (the latter) the case of Judas Iscariot.

Directorial/Playwright concept

Time Period/Setting:

The setting is undoubtedly contemporary New York, with the exception of the prologue moment when Henrietta is burying her son (Judas). In the opening scene she emerges from the rain, but no distinct setting is given. Also, the setting of Judas's cave is open to interpretation with Hoffman

making it a slightly more literal setting, and West End director Rupert Goold keeping Judas's area to a city street theme. With the exception of the historical figures, Mother Teresa and Sigmund Freud, Guigis kept everything modern day as far as costumes went. The defense attorney looks much like a Law and Order ADA, whereas the prosecutor comes off dressed more as Joe Pesci in My Cousin Vinny. Judas, himself, appears timeless in neutral tones of costume and lighting. The characters speak in slang, and argot, sometimes regardless of their status. Pontius Pilate even goes as far as to flirt with the defense attorney and talk about his 2pm tee time with God. Modern day references are peppered into the dialogue, for example, the soldiers who taunt Judas in the exhibit video, tell him Pilate will threaten to take away his WIC check.

Politics/Economics

As stated, Guigis wanted to keep the characters as working class as possible (with, perhaps the exception of Cunningham). The courtroom setting in "Hope" is sparse and with Purgatory being "Americanized" there is potential for the setting to have once been a magnificent courtroom depicted in a biblical judgment setting, now stripped down to a contemporary small claims feel.

The testimony spares no expense in raising questions of morality in the witnesses. Mother Teresa is grilled about taking money from corrupt billionaires, and her failure to recognize antisemitism. Sigmund Freud's 12 year addiction to cocaine is brought up as a counter argument to the legitimacy of his psychiatric work. Freud is initially brought in to testify Judas's mental state about committing suicide.

The politics of Jesus's revolt against the Romans comes into play with the mention of Jesus battling the Roman's at the temple and shortly after going back to his place to "just chill".

Mythology:

Though we are in a separate realm, Guirgis implies that Purgatory, Heaven, and Hell are not far removed from Earth, both in their locations and in their mimicry of styles. Gloria mentions using her wings to fly and look in on her children and grandchildren, meaning she has easy access from Heaven to things that are mundane. The mythological status of Satan is brought to a more human level, when the judge refers to him as “Lou” (short for Lucifer). Satan’s demeanor is not that of a mighty prince, but more an insistently foul mouthed sleazebag who disrespects the entire courtroom, simply because he can. In general, the line of what is considered Biblically proper is blurred in the language and the dress code. The saints are loose in their monologues, swearing and offering slang to their stories of their interactions with Jesus and Judas. Saint Monica herself spares no expense in taunting Judas, but sticking with Holy nature, she sits comforting Judas for four days before finally abandoning him.

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Dramaturgy Notes

Source Material

Timeline

Let's first discuss the timeline of Jesus' betrayal leading up to his crucifixion, and some of the notable bible verses that coincide with the timeline of events.

Judas's accepting of 30 pieces of silver:

Matthew 26: 14-16 And then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests and said unto them, "What will ye give me and I will deliver unto you?" And they covenanted him for thirty pieces of silver. And from that time, he sought opportunity to betray him.

Mark 14: 10-11 Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him.

Judas's initial betrayal at the last supper:

John 13:25-27 So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him.

(It's interesting to note that Satan entered into Judas, apparently possessing him. In the play, after the initial incidences, Satan meets Judas in a bar and tells Judas he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he did the acts that Judas did)

Jesus' Arrest:

John 18: 5-6 "I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.

Matthew 26:57 And they that had laid hold on Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled.

John 18:14 Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people.

Jesus Before Pilate

John 18:33 *Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?" "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me.*

Luke 23:4-5 *So Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowd, "I find no fault in this Man." But they were the more fierce, saying, "He stirs up the people, teaching throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee to this place."*

Judas' Death

Matthew 27: 3-5 *When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.*

Other scripture of note:

Jesus Raising Lazarus: John 11: 14-23

Jesus clears the Temple Courts: John 2: 13-22

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Jeremy St.Martin

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot Dramaturg

Glossary of Terms

Characters:

Judas Iscariot: Protagonist of the play. Betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver and committed suicide.

Satan: Prince of Darkness, referred to as Lou by the judge (short for Lucifer). Refers to himself as Clementine from Cappadocia* when speaking to Judas.

Yusef El-Fayoumy (pronounced: You-sef el-Fah-you-me) Prosecuting attorney from Hell. Brown nosing, rash, and eternally (literally) flirting with the defense attorney.

Fabiana Aziza Cunningham (pronounced: Fah-bee-ah-na Ah-zee-zah) Defense attorney, lives in purgatory. Smart, no nonsense, highly educated.

Judge Littlefield: Civil War veteran, presides over cases in Hope

Caiaphas The Elder (pronounced: Cah-i-phas): Jewish High Priest who condemned Jesus.

Pontius Pilate: (pronounced: Pahn-shus Pi-let): Roman Governor who was responsible for sentencing Jesus to crucifixion

Places of Note:

Purgatory: The general location for the play. Defined as an immediate place or state of being after death. A general term for the place of waiting and judgment for Heaven and Hell

Hope: The name given to the courtroom in which the trial is taking place. The setting is in stark contrast to the actual meaning of hope.

Cappadocia: (pronounced: Cap-a-doe-shee-a) A historical area governing several provinces in Turkey.

Canaan: Canaan was a Semitic-speaking civilization and region in the Ancient Near East

Phrases of Note: “Domine Adjuva Incredulitatem Meam” (Translation: Lord, help my unbelief)

“Sic Deus Dilexit Mundum” (Translation: God So Loved the World)

Misc: Duvalier Family (pronounced: Doo-vahl-yea).: Family mentioned by Defense attorney Cunningham. Dictatorship of Cuba who killed many of their citizens, supposedly gave money to Mother Teresa.