

## REVIEW: Cast shines in 'Judas Iscariot' at Salem Theatre

**Monday** Posted Aug 22, 2016 at 11:32 AM

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By Keith Powers / Correspondent

**If you go...**

**WHAT:** "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot," at Salem Theatre

**WHERE:** 35 Congress St., Suite 301 (Shetland Park), Salem

**WHEN:** Through Aug. 27, Thursdays through Sundays, 7:30 p.m.

**TICKETS:** \$25, \$22 senior, \$12 student. \$3 additional at the door. Visit [www.salemtheatre.com](http://www.salemtheatre.com)  
or call 781-308-4737

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A thoughtful critic from another era and another art-form wrote, "If the music is bad, don't blame the musicians. And if the playing is bad, don't blame the composer."

Those guidelines could never more useful than when approaching Salem Theatre Company's production of "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot," onstage through Aug. 27 at STC's home in Shetland Park.

Stephen Adly Guirgis's bleak comedy, which had short but influential runs both in New York and in London, recasts the fate of Jesus's betrayer as a free-for-all trial set in Purgatory. A host of historically fictional witnesses give their views on the justice (or injustice) served to the most infamous apostle.

On the one hand you had STC's deeply committed and talented troupe, with a large cast acting the daylight out of this exhausted debate. On the other hand you have Guirgis's verbose, deeply flawed script, which trots out an age-old argument about Judas's place in theological history, but tries to refresh it with off-beat characters and hipster dialogue.

The combination just doesn't work, and that's the real problem. The humor rests on caricature, and while some of it hits the mark, most of the characters seem either smarmy or superficial.

But the players try their damndest, with acting and inter-acting that work hard to bring alive the almost non-stop confrontations that take place on Judge Littlefield's docket in Purgatory.

The setting is modern — an inner-city courtroom, situated between heaven and hell. Judas's case gets a hearing, thanks to his defense lawyer Fabiana Aziza Cunningham (Caroline Watson-Felt), who browbeats the bigoted and self-serving Judge (Adam Gutierrez) into allowing it. The prosecution gets lawyered up, with Yusef El-Fayoumy (Aidan Marchetti) playing a lurid, shape-changing inquisitor.

One by one various witnesses take the stand, and as their histories (mostly real, as retold by Guirgis) get rehashed through interrogation, sympathy for Judas's actions is supposed to mount. Simon the Zealot, Sigmund Freud, Caiaphas, Mary Magdalene, even Mother Teresa and then to top it all off Satan (Alexander Stravinski) come through the courtroom. Some get beaten down during their testimony by the hard-charging lawyers; some give beat-downs in return.

Judas himself (Kyle Gregory), mostly catatonic, lurks in the background throughout. As does another, completely silent figure (Jay Connolly), unidentified, unseen by others.

The premise — that the argument needs to be made afresh, with tough humor through characterization to make it relevant — fails on several levels. The humor, for one: while some characters dazzle with innovation — Saint Monica (Brit Christopher), the wise-cracking mother of Augustine; Satan, the fabulous Prince of Lies; Gloria (Hannah Wagner), the sprightly Purgatorial assistant; Pontius Pilate (Owen Burke), the tough-but-true fall guy — most are wooden depictions that could have been cobbled from Cliff Notes or Wikipedia.

Sympathy is hard to work up. The play is over-long and talky — which wouldn't be a problem if the argument were heading somewhere. But it doesn't; a climactic scene between Jesus (that was him the whole time, silently sitting in the corners) and Judas — an emotional blame-fest — could just as easily have been the opening scene. Nothing has led us to this place.

Director Alicia Greenwood does give us things to like, and they have to do with the visual approach and the energy of the players. The set — a triangle platform, giving the players a terrific and facile stage to address the audience — works perfectly. Blocking is subtly managed: characters take turns gaining the upper hands in the endless arguments, their superiority or inferiority usually supported by where they stand on the platform.

And there is the buy-in. Every one of the players, especially Watson-Felt and Marchetti, spouts truly challenging (and sometimes mind-numbing) tried-and-true philosophical positions. Guirgis doesn't write them as real; the players all try to make them seem that way.

“The Last Days of Judas Iscariot” runs through Aug. 27 at the Salem Theatre Company's home in Shetland Park. For tickets and information visit [www.salemtheatre.com](http://www.salemtheatre.com) or call 781-308-4737.

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Keith Powers covers music and the arts for GateHouse Media and WBUR's ARTery. Follow @PowersKeith; email to [keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com](mailto:keithmichaelpowers@gmail.com)

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