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Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat



There are some stupendously unbelievable things about a musical so grounded in a classic Old Testament story. Is the pharaoh of Egypt really a flirtatious Elvis impersonator? Are the Canaanite sons of Jacob really French-accented beret-wearing bar hoppers who twirl sexy cabaret girls before taking them home to their dad? Is the dreamcoat really technicolored? As the chorus sings to us regarding both the story and the man, "Joseph, Joseph, is it really true? is it really you?" Civic Light Opera's new production of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" weaves together both the amazing stories from the Bible and the unbelievable elements invented by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber into a seamless tapestry accentuated by some rollicking performances.

We should be reminded that the Joseph story from the Bible is pretty amazing, but in Rice and Webber's version of the story, the musical highlights are abundant. Joseph (Eric Kunze) is first introduced singing about closing his eyes to "see for certain what I thought I knew" while the world sleeps in the song "Any Dream Will Do." He is waiting along with the world "still hesitating." Jacob's (Paul Ainsley) other jealous sons soon introduce themselves: Reuben (Danny Stiles) is the eldest, Simeon (Andrew Makay) and Levi (Leland Burnett) are next in line, but Joseph is the clear favorite, because he reminds Jacob of Joseph's mother. Jacob shows the world his love by giving Joseph a multi-colored coat and opens up like an umbrella in the production, prompting Joseph to call himself "a walking work of art." Making his brother even more annoyed is Joseph's professed dream that eleven sheaves of corn all turned and bowed to him, as symbolic of his brothers' obedience ("the dreamer has to go," they sing.). Joseph looks like a man apart in this production, while his brothers appear to be more lovable.

The brothers are so sick of Joseph that they sell him as a slave to some hairy Ishmaelites and dip his coat in goat's blood to show to Jacob, claiming that he's dead. Reuben and company act sad in relating the news to Jacob, singing about "one more star in heaven" in the song "One More Angel in Heaven." Of course, as soon as Jacob turns his back, the company celebrates their brother's demise with song and dance. Joseph is taken to Egypt to be a slave of Potiphar (Paul Ainsley), who "owned a large percentage of the Nile." The background to his house is the "Egypt-wood" sign, adding a modern touch of disbelief to the age-old story. Meanwhile, Potiphar's wife (Heather Castillo) is attracted to Joseph but he doesn't "believe in free love." But one day, Potiphar caught his wife together with Joseph against his will, and threw him into jail. In prison, Joseph knows that "the answers lie far from this world," and asks God to "close every door to me, keep those I love from me." And in a recurring motif, Joseph tells us all "I know I shall find my own peace of mind, for I have been promised a land of my own."

To conclude the first act, the Narrator (Kelli Provart) relates how the Baker and Butler (Jeffrey Landman) are thrown into the same cell as Joseph. These servants of the Pharaoh have their dreams interpreted by Joseph, favorably for the Butler's involving grapes being turned into wine, and unfavorably for the Baker's involving birds eating away his bread. Most notably, the chorus goes to the twentieth century sports stadium in cheering on Joseph, calling him and his dreamcoat "ahead of your time." If Potiphar's wife and her dancers appear a bit dreamy at times, the Butler and Baker bring us right back to the present. For instance, the Butler appear to be a heck of a hip hop dancer with some great locking moves. If the dream interpretation is

not too unbelievable, so is popping and locking in ancient Egypt.

The highlights of the musical comes at the beginning of act two. The Pharaoh (Robert J. Townsend) is morphed into a modern-day Elvis. If the tale of dream-telling is amazing back in Biblical times, then the modern re-telling of the Pharaoh as a singing sensation is even more so. Webber brings the old tale into modern times, telling of a ruler that "if he cracked a joke then you chortled for days," but was also "fairly right-wing" in modern terms. Joseph is recast as "a man who can interpret," and "could become a star." Townsend decides to interrupt the medley and descend upon a fortunate female audience member, singing "it's good to be a king." The King's dream involves seeing seven fat cows that were eaten by seven thin cows that followed them. Joseph interprets this as seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. He advises the Pharaoh to store the surplus from the years of healthy crops and save them for the future years. Upon hearing this, the King offers Joseph a job as his "number two" in the song "Stone the Crows." Here the choreography begins to assert itself, featuring a retinue of female attendants thanking Joseph for his foresight, and also making the Pharaoh just a tad jealous that Joseph is such a star. Again, the simple story becomes a modern sitcom.

When Simeon sings about "Those Canaan Days" with his brothers, we are treated to a Parisian cabaret-style song and dance just as unbelievable as the story of Jacob's sons. "No joie de vivre anywhere," Simeon notes, "do you remember those wonderful parties, ... the gayest the Bible has seen." The berets become part of the fun, as the brothers are choreographed in a magnificent performance with a Parisian dancer. The physical challenges are enormous, including some flips, multiple heaves, and a ton of spins.

To escape the famine, Jacob's family move to Egypt, where they beg the Prince (really Joseph in shiny garb) for food. Prompted by this, Joseph retell his dream that eleven sheaves of corn would bow to him, and provide them with food after hearing their tragic story. But he also plants a chalice in the young Benjamin's (Dane Biren) bag. In Kunze's best moment in this musical, Joseph goes on a rampage, doing a Jesus-Christ-Super-Star-like take in the high-pitched song "Who's the Thief?" When Benjamin is discovered with the cup, every brother stands up for him unlike previously with Joseph, singing "Benjamin is straighter than the big bamboo" and "Benjamin is honest as coconuts." Perhaps most remarkable is Judah (Ty Taylor), who gives a soulful interpretation of the song as he traces around Joseph, putting his body on the line. "Save him, take me," he pleads energetically and with much pathos.

When Joseph finally reveals himself, and shows up in a golden chariot to meet his father Jacob, the set has turned into an Oscar-night-worthy stage. Joseph is revealed as shiny as any star in heaven, and the musical has turned from slightly subdued to a maximum crescendo. The return also goes to the music of "Any Dream Will Do." Perhaps it's appropriate for a musical focused on questioning who those old Biblical people really are that the conclusion is enigmatic and questioning: "the world and I, we are still waiting," sings Joseph, "still hesitating, any dream will do." The Technicolor dreamcoat is, afterall, just any other dream in modern or ancient eras.

"Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" is performed by the Civic Light Opera of South Bay Cities (<http://www.civiclighthouse.com>) at the Redondo Beach Performing Arts Center until May 9, 2010.