

Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat @ The Muny

Music by Andrew Lloyd Webber

Lyrics and Book by Tim Rice

Based on the story from the Book of Genesis

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Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat was the first musical collaboration between Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. And boy, does it show. It was originally written as a simple pageant piece to be performed for children in schools and churches but has since gained a life of its own, growing and growing until it turned into a bombastic, Broadway-style spectacle. The Muny closes their 104th season with their sixth production of this popular show, and they definitely lean into the spectacle of it all. However, and I can't believe I'm saying this about the Muny, it all feels kind of rote. This production – and the musical itself – is very haphazard and very clunky; it really rubbed me the wrong way with how flashy and fluffy it all is. And this is a musical theatre fan saying this.

The framing device for the show is a Narrator telling a Children's Chorus the Bible story of Joseph, one of the Twelve Sons of Israel, as we see the story unfold before their eyes. Joseph is the favorite son of his father, Jacob, the shepherd who founded the nation of Israel. Jacob discovers within Joseph the ability to accurately interpret the dreams of others, so he bestows upon Joseph the Coat of Many Colors, a dazzlingly ornamented robe that symbolizes all of the dreams that Joseph made true. The other eleven Sons of Israel are jealous of Jacob's favoritism towards Joseph, especially after Joseph has a dream predicting that in the future, Joseph will be the one thriving while the brothers fall on hard times. Angered by Joseph's vanity, the brothers sell him into slavery, faking his death to fool Jacob. While incarcerated in Egypt, Joseph's ability to read dreams is found out pretty quickly, and he works his way up to be the right hand of the Pharaoh. With Joseph gone, the brothers become destitute and miserable, and they realize that Joseph's prophecy has come true. When they seek the Pharaoh for help, Joseph tells his brothers that in order for their crops to flourish, they must change their hearts and minds.

For the sake of transparency, I am an atheist, so I have no authority whatsoever to discuss the story of Joseph from a religious angle. I do, however, consider the Holy Bible, and by extension the Book of Genesis, an important text whose stories deserve to be told. Though I cannot judge works based on the Bible through a religious lens, I am qualified to judge them based on their artistic merits.

There are two things that keep me from enjoying *Joseph* – at least, the Broadway version that *Joseph* eventually grew to be. First, the songs are all over the place: bubblegum pop, country, power ballad, funk, disco, jazz, and even calypso. The style and tone of every scene in the show are pretty off-kilter and lacking in cohesion. You almost get to a point where you start to panic a little bit because the style is so confusing that the story becomes hard to follow, simple

though it may be. The score doesn't have that much of an identity, which isn't really a problem for some other shows (*Assassins* comes to mind), but it's noticeable in *Joseph* because of its second fundamental problem.

A sizeable chunk of the show feels like filler, put there just to make the show longer. The hoedown in "One More Angel in Heaven"? Could've been cut. The encore tacked onto "The Song of the King"? Could've been cut. The waltz in "Those Canaan Days"? Could've been cut. The Megamixes? *Cetus lapetus*, why do they even exist?! These moments essentially turn *Joseph* from a story that needs to be told to a Kidz Bop concert. *Joseph* can only work as a musical if it's performed the way Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice originally intended: as a pageant with a small cast, minimal set and costumes, and straight-up telling the story with no gimmicks and no filler. Performing *Joseph* that way is not only being respectful to the authors, but it also respects the audience – the performances will feel much more truthful, and it will tap into the show's inherently childlike simplicity much better than whatever the hell Broadway did to it. *Joseph* could easily be a one-act musical without losing anything of importance. The Muny's production tried to be both minimalist and flashy, almost as if they were trying to respect the authors while also giving the audience what they want, but it all comes across as a jumbled mess.

Case in point: the production design is very inconsistent and, in some cases, poorly constructed on a practical level, particularly the scenic design by Edward E. Haynes, Jr., the costumes by Leon Dobkowski, and Kelley Jordan's hair and makeup. The set and costumes have a Middle Eastern mosaic art motif that is very colorful and really creative; but the sets aren't big enough to fill the Muny stage very well (one can barely fit two actors on one platform), and while some of the more simple costume pieces and wigs are fine (like the titular dreamcoat), a few complex ones (like Joseph's Egyptian garb) looked like they could fall apart at any moment. The rest of the production values, however, are nice and vibrant: Greg Emetaz's video, Jason Lyons's lights, and John Shivers and David Patridge's sound. Director Josh Rhodes's staging and choreography are energetic enough, but the direction itself is kind of awkward, he doesn't utilize the size of the Muny stage as well as he could – some song numbers just feel kind of empty.

With all of this negativity, you may be wondering if there was literally anything at all that I liked about this production. Well, Charlie Alterman's musical direction is excellent and the Muny Orchestra is wonderful as always. The actors are pretty good, too, with great voices and movement all around; Jason Gotay brings a boyish charisma to Joseph, and he shares some nice moments with Jessica Vosk as the Narrator. Vosk also has some great interactions with the always-endearing chorus of Muny Kids and Teens. Eric Jordan Young plays the dual roles of Jacob and Potiphar (Joseph's slaver), and the way he differentiates both roles is very convincing. As with anything he's in, Mykal Kilgore is fantastic as the Pharaoh, portraying him more as James Brown than the traditional Elvis Presley parody that is specified in the script; regardless, he's a lot of fun. There's also some great solo work from Joseph's oldest brothers: Harris Milgrim as Reuben, Sean Ewing as Simeon, and Darron Hayes as Judah.

I said in my *Sweeney Todd* review that everything the Muny does from the pandemic onward is no longer going to actively try to appeal to everyone, and their production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* definitely did not appeal to me. I found little to be desired from this show; everything about it is inconsistent, lacking in identity, and excessive in its flashiness and fluffiness. *Joseph* would have been much more serviceable in a black box theater done in the style of a church pageant as it was originally intended. I would say that I'm disappointed, but I think I would be too harsh. Overall, this has been a great season for the Muny, with the standouts being *Chicago*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Legally Blonde*, *The Color Purple*, and even *Camelot* (I feel like I'm one of two critics who truly loved that production). In terms of quality, loving five shows out of a seven-show season is pretty damned good. Even then, the two I didn't love had qualities about them that I very much enjoyed. I have been hopelessly devoted to the Muny for a decade now, even though the institution has been putting St. Louis musical theatre on the map for 104 years, and I don't see either the Muny or myself slowing down any time soon. I cannot wait to see what the Muny is going to do for their 105th season. Muny Team, I give my thanks to you for another great summer, and I'll see you in the next one.