



Magdalene: Woman of Light

Judging from the steady audiences for its three-week inaugural run in Denver, "Magdalene: Woman of Light" has a built-in box office of female seekers who are both familiar with this biblical legend and looking for a spiritual alternative to the rote, chauvinistic practices of the mass religions. Whether this "rock opera experience" has the legs to leverage this demographic depends upon stylistic and dramatic changes made by the creative team before the production's next iteration.

Told entirely in song and dance, the operatic musical exhibits an affinity to Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, with Masonic rites replaced by ceremonies of the Egyptian mystery schools, which nurtured Atlantean traditions—the so-called cults of Isis and Osiris—from the time of the Flood into the Common Era.



Natalie Oliver-Atherton as Mother Wisdom

Photo: Michael Ensminger

Initial prayerful tone is established by a gospel chorus of hooded priests and priestesses congregating with temple dancers. As the formal music segues into a bluesy melody, Natalie Oliver-Atherton (think Lena Horne doing *Porgy and Bess*), in the regal form of Mother Wisdom, provides a stirring, soulful set up for the initiation of Mary Magdalene (Marika Reisberg).



Marika Reisberg as Magdalene

Photo: Michael Ensminger

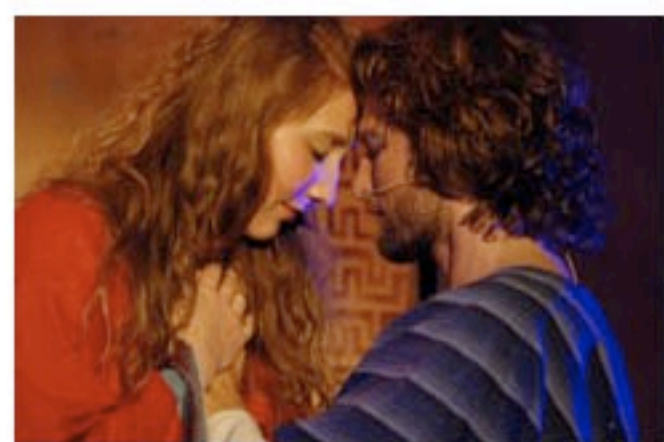
The background dance segues from Nubian angularity into a 4/4 rock groove, and in a warm soprano, Reisberg—occasionally over-acting where a simpler conveyance would do—sings of Magdalene's vision of a radiant male figure calling to her. The trappings of a priestess are bestowed on Magdalene, who then sets out on her journey.



Benjamin Francis as Jesus and Marika Reisberg as Magdalene

Photo: Michael Ensminger

In Act II, the story picks up in Galilee, where, to a honky-tonk tune, Magdalene comes upon Peter (a spike-haired, intense Steven J. Burge) and the apostles, who are struggling to understand what Jesus (Benjamin Francis, half rock star, half avatar) is trying to teach them about the kingdom within. Magdalene immediately grasps the lesson. She and Jesus recognize their spiritual connection, while Peter immediately resents Magdalene as a rival and (in orthodox patriarchic fashion) as a woman.



Marika Reisberg as Magdalene and Benjamin Francis as Jesus

Photo: Michael Ensminger

After this, the reverential tone of story begins to change. Magdalene and Jesus' love for each other develops too quickly to establish the complexity of their relationship on spiritual, psychological, and physical levels; here, the story would benefit from a duet and/or dance during their first meeting to explain the nature of their alignment.

Another challenge that must be addressed is the abrupt comedic interludes that follow Peter's reaction to Magdalene ("She's a Girl") and Jesus' resurrection ("Tell Them [The Good News]"). With additional foreshadowing, such light-heartedness may work, though the respective issues (chauvinism and eternal life) are central struggles in the drama and may have greater impact and clarity if infused with more gravity.

Also, in the final scene of Act III, the conflict between Magdalene's exalted standing with Jesus and the Church's campaign (represented here by Peter) to malign her (Pope Gregory I called her a "penitent prostitute" in 591; the Church admitted there was no textual proof for this charge and revised the Roman Missal and the Roman Calendar in 1969), is inexplicably resolved, with Peter accepting her as a teacher.



Steven J. Burge as Peter

Photo: Michael Ensminger

Even the Gnostic Gospels and Dead Sea Scrolls, which bolster Magdalene's position, do not support a reconciliation between Peter and Magdalene, and the Church has never accepted Magdalene's special relationship with Jesus, as its condemnation of *The Da Vinci Code* (and by reference the factual text, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, upon which its argument rests) clearly illustrates. This disparity should be faced squarely in the final scene, allowing the audience to create their own motivation for recapturing the sacred feminine component of spiritual integration.

After attracting local backing and interest from both coasts, production is fur for some adjustments and another shot in a bigger market. *Magdalene: Woman of Light* runs at The New Denver Civic Theatre through October 19th. 303-309-3773 or DenverCivic.com.

Bob Bows