

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot

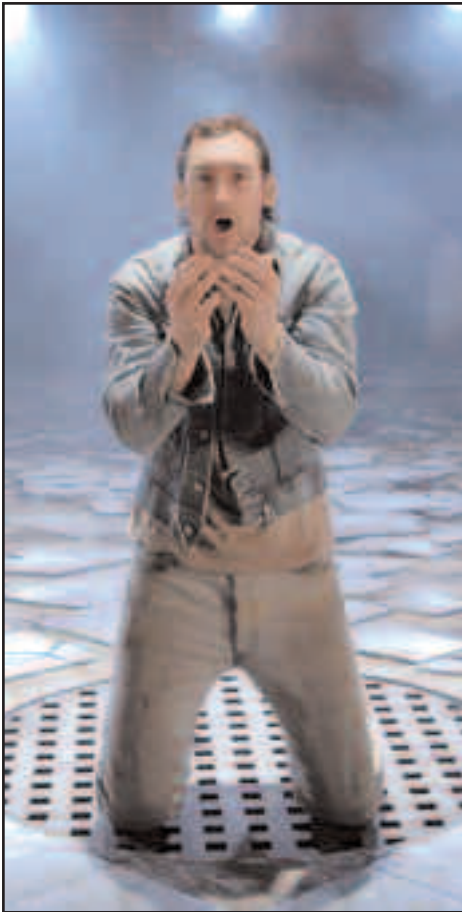
by Stephen Adly Guirgis



PROJECTS PACK

compiled by
Samantha Lane, Kirsty Hoiles and Charlie Payne

ALMEIDA
PROJECTS



Joseph Mawle
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Welcome to the Almeida Theatre's production of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* by Stephen Adly Guirgis.

Something exciting has been happening at the Almeida. In the rehearsal room a host of iconic figures have been engaging in a passionate and heated debate that has raged across the centuries. Satan has been seen in discussion with Judas Iscariot and Mother Theresa has been making tea with Sigmund Freud. We are talking of course about rehearsals for the European Premiere of Stephen Adly Guirgis' latest play *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, which at the time of writing were currently in full swing.

Judas Iscariot feels alone. Vilified by all Christians for the last 2000 years for his betrayal of Jesus Christ to the Roman authorities for thirty pieces of silver. For that act and for his subsequent suicide he has allegedly been condemned to hell for all eternity. It is a story with which we are all familiar. Perhaps the time has come for a reprieve? Many others had their sins washed away by Jesus: many others were given the opportunity to start again. And are there not other figures that should bear their share of the blame? And where better a venue for such a case to be tried than in a courtroom delicately poised between heaven and hell: as the attorney for Judas' defence states, "This is Purgatory, ...I've got all day."

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot is not a play about one man's guilt and another's forgiveness; rather that through such a contemporary dramatic exploration of an ancient debate about celebrated figures, we as an audience are able to re-examine our own betrayals, our own personal lapses of belief, and who we need to look to for forgiveness.

The Almeida Projects Team are really excited about exploring some of the key ideas and questions posed in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Thanks to all of the creative team and the cast who have been so generous in their enthusiasm and support of the Projects work. We very much hope that you and your students are able to draw energy both from its ideas and the skill with which they are presented.

We look forward to welcoming you to the Almeida soon.

Samantha Lane and Charlie Payne
Almeida Projects



Dougkas Henshall
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

ALMEIDA PROJECTS

Under the artistic directorship of Michael Attenborough, the Almeida presents an eclectic programme, ranging from redefined major classics to the cutting edge of brand new work. Our Projects reflect the main programme's ambition by finding ways to challenge and excite our participants about the work you come to see at the Almeida. We hope to inspire you to approach your own theatre work in the same spirit of generosity and risk-taking that we encourage in our rehearsal room.

PROJECTS PACK

This pack aims to provide an insight into our process in taking the production from research stage to performance. We hope you will use it to help you in your own investigations into the play both before and after your visit to the Almeida. This pack contains quotations from the play which use strong language.

Workshops

Before you see the production, one of our Projects Team may be visiting you for a workshop, bringing some of the techniques explored in the rehearsal room, the challenges the play presents and some questions. The sessions are designed to be practical and participatory so please come energised, ready to work and wearing appropriate clothes and shoes.

Hosts

When you come to the theatre, you will be met by one of the Projects Team who will be on hand to answer your questions and listen to your feedback about the production. Please do take advantage of this opportunity to find out more about how the production has evolved.

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Joseph Mawle and Douglas Henshall
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot

By Stephen Adly Guirgis

Cast in order of speaking:

Henrietta Iscariot	Amanda Boxer
Gloria/Mother Theresa	Dona Croll
Judge/St Peter	Corey Johnson
Bailiff/Simon the Zealot	John Macmillan
Fabiana Aziza Cunningham	Susan Lynch
Yusef Al-Fayoumy	Mark Lockyer
Saint Monica	Jessika Williams
Loretta/Sister Glenna/	
Mary Magdalene	Poppy Miller
Uncle Pino/Pontius Pilate	Ron Cephas Jones
Butch Honeywell	Shane Attwooll
Judas Iscariot	Joseph Mawle
Matthias of Galilee/	
Sigmund Freud/St Thomas	Josh Cohen
St Matthew/Caiaphas the Elder	Gawn Grainger
Satan	Douglas Henshall
Jesus of Nazareth	Edward Hogg

Creative team:

Director	Rupert Goold
Design	Anthony Ward
Lighting	Howard Harrison
Composer and Sound	Adam Cork
Casting	Joyce Nettles
Assistant Director	Vik Sivalingam

Production Manager	James Crout
Company Manager	Rupert Carlile
Stage Manager	Suzy Bourke
Deputy Stage Manager	Helen Bowen
Assistant Stage Manager	Laura Draper
Costume Supervisor	Iona Kendrick

For Almeida Projects

Director, Almeida Projects	Samantha Lane
Projects Administrator	Charlie Payne
Workshop Team:	Kate Budgen
	Ned Glasier
	Amy Hodge
	Vik Sivalingam

Plot Summary



Susan Lynch and Mark Lockyer
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

SUMMARY

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot is a riotous courtroom drama, set in a corner of Purgatory called Hope (aka downtown New York City). The trial is between God and the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth versus Judas Iscariot. Fabiana Aziza Cunningham, the agnostic defence lawyer, obtains a writ from the God she isn't sure she believes in, to force a retrial for Judas. Egyptian lawyer Yusef El-Fayoumy, up from Hell for the job, represents the prosecution. Various people are called to testify, from experts such as Mother Theresa and Sigmund Freud, and direct witnesses including Simon the Zealot and Pontius Pilate, to Satan himself. Meanwhile Judas sits catatonic in a room in the ninth circle of Hell, uncommunicative since his death, attended only – we later discover – by Jesus Christ.

The play considers the conflict between divine mercy and human free will. If God is truly all-forgiving, why was Judas condemned to Hell for his betrayal of Jesus Christ and his subsequent suicide?

Act 1

The play opens with a woman “emerging from the past”. She is the mother of Judas Iscariot who shares with the audience her grief at the death and lonely burial of her son Judas. She explains that she believes her son cannot be in hell, for if he is in hell then there is no God.

We move to a courtroom in a corner of downtown purgatory called Hope. We meet Gloria, a woman who has acquired wings by working in Hope for two years. She describes flying back to earth to watch her family. She explains that the nature of Hope as a place has changed over the centuries and that in 2008 it is a courtroom where the souls are judged. Judge Littlefield dismisses case after case put before him including the case of God and the Kingdom of Heaven and Earth versus Judas Iscariot, submitted by a female Irish lawyer, Fabiana Aziza Cunningham, who has a writ signed by Saint Peter.

Saint Monica appears in the court and explains that she has been enlisted by Cunningham to petition God on behalf of Judas. She both describes and re-enacts her visit to Judas and her attempts to goad him into defending his betrayal. In the re-enactment, Judas remains totally impassive and she sits with him for three days until she sees a single red tear fall from his eye. She explains how she looked into his eyes and detected a great sadness and held him in her arms for a further four days. On the fourth day he lets fall another single tear, and she decides that she has seen enough to petition to God on his behalf. St Monica describes leaving him her outer garments so he could smell something human and she also collected her own tears in a bucket and poured them over his face so that he could taste the salt.

The Judge is still unwilling to try the case despite the eagerness of Cunningham to defend it and El-Fayoumy to prosecute. The Judge doesn't feel Judas is worthy of defence due to his betrayal and because he has not signed the writ himself. Cunningham eventually cites that the judge has been in Purgatory since 1864 when he took his own life on a battlefield in Georgia, and that the truths of his own case and that



Joseph Mawle and Edward Hogg
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

The world tells me that God is in heaven and my son is in hell. I tell the world the one true thing I know: If my son is in hell, then there is no heaven – because if my son sits in hell, there is no God.

Henrietta Iscariot

of Judas are not dissimilar. The Judge then schedules the case for the following morning.

Gloria appears again. She introduces Loretta who is on a life support machine on earth, and Butch Honeywell who is definitely dead. All three are on the jury and they briefly discuss their impressions of the case before they are called back to court.

The first witness, Henrietta Iscariot, is called to the stand. It is revealed that Judas had been caught shop-lifting as a child. A scene between the eight year old Judas and his mother is played out before the court in which he admits to having sold the five fish he had caught to feed his hungry siblings to buy a spinning top for himself. The defence council then asks Henrietta to describe the scene that took place the following day. We see a meeting between Judas and Matthias of Galilee who describes how his family have been left impoverished and starving by the Romans. Judas gives him the spinning top. Finally the prosecution, El-Fayoumy, tells the court that Judas was later charged with stealing the staff from a blind man to buy cotton candy and another spinning top. The blind man was allegedly later knocked over and killed.

Mother Theresa is called to the stand by El-Fayoumy who flirts with her. He is so moved by her mere presence that the court is adjourned for five minutes.

Saint Peter and Saint Matthew appear. Peter talks about the moment he first met Jesus, who he did not think looked like the Messiah. Jesus helped him fill his nets with fish when, as an expert fisherman, he had caught none all day. Jesus made him a fisher of men. Matthew explains that he was a Jewish tax collector for the Roman Empire, and he was therefore deemed a traitor to his people and considered unclean. It was against the law to look at him, but Jesus looked him in the eye and asked Matthew to follow him and he became clean again.

Back in the court room El-Fayoumy explains how Mother Theresa



Susan Lynch and Mark Lockyer
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

received a canonisation and a Nobel Peace Prize for her work with the poor and the sick. She explains how, when she was feeling great sadness that God didn't want her and she was doubting that he was real at all, a fellow nun, Sister Glenna, spoke to her about the nature of despair. She says we should feel great sympathy for Judas if he is indeed in hell. She explains that he too has succumbed to despair which has prevented him from accepting happiness from the hands of God. Cunningham then turns the tables on Mother Theresa revealing the fact that she took money from corrupt sources for the poor, that she opposed abortion, and opposed taking a stance on anti-Semitism. Cunningham herself has had two abortions, and she does not believe that Mother Theresa belongs in heaven.

Simon the Zealot is called to the stand. He explains that Zealots were opposed to any Gentiles in Palestine and were in favour of the strict adherence of Mosaic Law. He tells the court that Judas had Zealot beliefs. He describes the horrors of living under Roman oppression and that he and others believed Jesus had the power to overthrow them but did not do so. Simon believes Judas betrayed Jesus to the Romans as an attempt to shock him into action and fulfil his destiny as the saviour of the Jewish people. The defence suggests that Jesus gave Judas his permission to betray him at the last supper.

Satan is called to the stand. He denies that he made Judas betray Jesus. He says that he appeared to Judas in a bar following the betrayal. Judas enters the playing space and the meeting is re-enacted. Judas does not recognise him and is in no mood to talk. Judas admires Satan's shirt and persuades him to switch shirts with him. Judas says that he is afraid of going to hell for a minor incident that happened the night before (which we assume was the betrayal). Satan explains that Hell is merely an absence of God and that it isn't so bad. He asks Satan what he thinks might happen to a person who has betrayed the Messiah. Satan suggests that it would be better for that person if he had never been born. Satan asks Judas about Jesus of Nazareth. Judas responds with, "Aw, fuck that guy, man - he's a bitch!" The court is then adjourned for lunch.

Judas was almost an alter-ego to Jesus – he was the shadow to Jesus' light. He was the sour to the sweet and the cool to the warm.

Mary Magdalene

Act 2

Saint Monica introduces Mary Magdalene. She describes herself as Jesus' best friend, and also says that Judas was her favourite of the disciples. She describes the intense friendship between Judas and Jesus, and says that Jesus never talks about God's abandonment of Judas as he finds it too painful.

Sigmund Freud is called by the defence. El-Fayoumy questions his expertise in the field of psychiatry. Cunningham questions him on the nature of suicide. Freud states that any victim of suicide must be pre-certified as psychotic and he agrees that Judas is therefore not responsible for his actions and that he does not belong in hell. He believes that the responsibility for the prevention of the tragedy rested with Jesus. El-Fayoumy attempts to devalue Freud's statement by revealing the fact that he consumed massive quantities of cocaine, and that he was a confirmed atheist.

Caiaphas the Elder is called to the witness stand by the prosecution. The Judge allows the Bailiff to preside over his testimony as he and Caiaphas were business partners and he feels he would not be objective. Caiaphas states that Judas approached him in order to betray Jesus and that in doing so Judas revealed himself to be neither loyal nor honest and therefore disobedient to the laws of the Torah: Judas had crossed the line. The defence lawyer, Cunningham, then questions the witness and states that in handing Jesus over to the



Joseph Mawle and Edward Hogg in rehearsal
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Roman authorities, he was no different to Judas, in betraying a fellow Rabbi. Caiaphas claims that Jesus was disloyal and a blasphemer and that he did not know that Jesus would be killed. He handed him over for the protection of his own people but he insists that Jesus could have saved himself by retracting his blasphemous claims. The defence then asks why Judas was a traitor for handing over a man who was considered such a threat to the Jewish community. Caiaphas states it was the fact that he took thirty pieces of silver as payment. Cunningham states that Judas attempted to prevent Jesus' death by returning the silver whereas Caiaphas did nothing. Caiaphas states to the prosecution that he is not interested in gaining forgiveness from anyone other than God; he feels instead that the writers of the Gospel are to blame for the persecution of the Jews for two thousand years, and that they are the ones that need forgiveness from him and his people.

Judas was a dick, but he deserved better. Just one saint's opinion.

Saint Thomas

The scene shifts away from the court room. Saint Thomas addresses the audience. He describes himself as a coward and a doubter. He explains that Jesus helped him with his faith when he didn't feel he deserved it and yet he didn't help Judas in the same way. He describes Judas as having both positive and negative qualities – he was incredibly loyal and very much a favourite of Jesus. Judas, unlike many of the other disciples, was never backward in coming forward and was not the kind of man to act out of greed.

Judas Iscariot had no remorse – his fear left no room for it. His fear was one hundred percent ego driven and self-serving. One hundred percent panic. Zero percent remorse. If you believe nothing else – believe that.

Pontius Pilate

Back in the court room, Pilate is called to the stand for the defence. Pilate claims that he was merely trying to diffuse a potentially dangerous situation. He explains that he was ordered by the Roman Emperor Augustus to be the governor of Judea and he detested the place. Whilst in the job he oversaw seven hundred public executions but then Cunningham points out that the Crucifixion of Jesus was the only one of which he publicly washed his hands. Cunningham sites Pilate's hatred of Judea and the Jewish race as a motivation for killing so many including Jesus. Pilate retorts that he was impressed by Jesus' courage and integrity and that he had no intention of giving him more than a beating but that the two hundred thousand Jewish people who had converged on the city were hungry for revenge and he ordered the death of Jesus to appease them and retain a level of order: he was simply doing his job. Finally he is asked by El-Fayoumy whether he thought Judas was recanting out of fear or genuine remorse. Pilate replies that Judas' fear was so great that it left no room for genuine remorse.

Satan is called back to the stand once again by the defence. Satan says he wishes to file a complaint that God is stealing souls from him. The



Corey Johnson and Douglas Henshall
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

There's a concept, Cunningham, called "playing the card you are dealt" – one can either accept that concept, or, one can slowly lose their mind, heart and soul.

Satan

She was my poem, Mr. Iscariot. Her and the kids. But mostly ... her ... You cashed in silver, Mr. Iscariot, but me? Me, I threw away gold ... that's a fact.

Butch Honeywell

jury are led out of the court while Satan is reprimanded by the judge. Satan demands that this be the last time he is called to give testimony in a trial and he asks for two souls to take with him when he leaves to replace the two that have been stolen. He also demands painkillers and a large shot of whiskey. He then proceeds to level a string of deeply personal abuse at both Cunningham and El-Fayoumy before the jury are led back into the court. Satan denies that he has an ongoing feud with God and states instead that he loves him. He also states that he was created by God in the first three days as an angel who witnessed the creation of the earth; God then created man and gave him dominion over the earth and ordered the devil to serve man. Cunningham then states that the devil tempted Eve to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge to prove to God that he had made a mistake in giving man power over the earth, at which point he fell from heaven. Satan says that he doesn't compete with God for the souls of man, but just sits back and watches as God competes with himself. By giving humans free will they destroy themselves. He reconciles being thrown from heaven by acknowledging that one must accept the cards one is dealt. Cunningham insists that his testimony is a lie. Satan states that God loves all the creatures he created including himself and Judas, and the only thing stopping Judas leaving hell is his own despair. Cunningham refuses to believe this is a true statement and insists that Satan acknowledge that he is lying and that God is either powerless or spiteful. He suggests she address her own lack of faith.

We see Jesus making his way to Judas. He explains that he is in everyone, both good and evil and that he loves every last one of us. Therefore if we hate what he loves we do not really know or understand him at all. Jesus tells Judas that he misses him and that his grief is worse than being kicked by a thousand strangers. Judas expresses his fury that Jesus helped every stranger and all the other disciples but not him. Jesus states that if he knew that by helping him it would have changed Judas' mind then he would have done so. Judas describes that it was Jesus' behaviour in the temple that made Judas love him. Jesus explains that Judas has been with him in heaven ever since his ascension. He then makes the devil appear and asks Judas to touch him; he explains that Satan is nothing but an apparition. He insists that Judas look him in the eye and tell him that he doesn't love him. Judas does just this. Jesus insists that he has always loved Judas and that he never left him and it appears to be Judas' own despair that stops him from reaching out to Jesus. Judas senses Jesus is leaving him and asks him to stay with him, but Jesus insists he is still there; Judas says he can't see Jesus' hands to take them but Jesus insists they are right there in front of him.

Butch Honeywell appears, carrying the remainder of a twelve pack of beer for Judas. He tells Judas that the jury found him guilty. Butch then explains that while he believes he is actually dead, he is afraid as he does not feel that his soul is ready for judgement. He then recounts the story of how he met his wife at a party. When he first met her he felt she was too good for him. On the way home from their first date, he stopped outside of the house of a friend of his who had died. This upset him so much, he found himself crying in the arms of his wife-to-be. Three years into his marriage he cheated on his wife. She never knew anything about it and the immense guilt that he felt led him to further alcohol-fuelled betrayals as they were the only things that seemed to make him feel better. He compares Judas' betrayal of Jesus to that of his own of his wife: he says Judas may have cashed in silver but that he threw away gold.

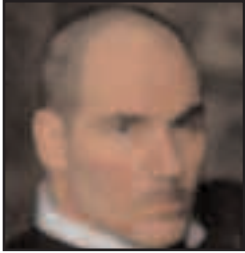
The Characters



Henrietta Iscariot (Amanda Boxer)
Mother of Judas Iscariot.



Gloria (Dona Croll)
A woman with wings.
She has been in Purgatory for two years.
She is a Jury member.



Judge Littlefield (Corey Johnson)
Presides over the courtroom in Hope.
A citizen of Purgatory since 1864 when he
hung himself from a tree on a battlefield in
Allatoona, northern Georgia.

Saint Peter (Corey Johnson)
A fisherman.
One of the Twelve Apostles.



Fabiana Aziza Cunningham (Susan Lynch)
Half Irish Catholic, half Romanian Gypsy.
Attorney for the defence.



Yusef El-Fayoumy
AKA: Yusef Akbar Azziz Al-Nassar
Gamel El-Fayoumy.
Lives in Hell but temporarily
detained in Purgatory.
Attorney for the prosecution.

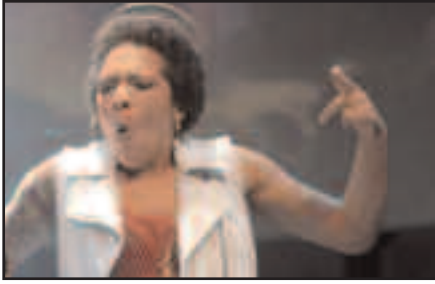


Butch Honeywell (Shane Attwooll)
Chairman of the Jury.



Loretta (Poppy Miller)
On a life support machine on earth.
She is a Jury member.

The Characters



Saint Monica (Jessika Williams)
Mother of Saint Augustine.



Simon the Zealot (John Macmillan)
One of the Twelve Apostles.

Bailiff (John Macmillan)
AKA: Julius of Outer Mongolia.
An officer of the court.



Mother Theresa (Dona Croll)
An Albanian Born nun who devoted her life to caring for the sick and poverty stricken in the slums of Calcutta.
Soon to be canonised.
Recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize.



Saint Matthew (Gawn Grainger)
Formally a Jewish tax collector for the Roman Empire.
One of the Twelve Apostles.



Sister Glenna (Poppy Miller)
An Irish nun.
One of the Sisters of Loretto and a friend of Mother Theresa.

Mary Magdalene (Poppy Miller)
AKA: Mary of Magdala
An unmarried woman.
A disciple of Jesus.
Present at the crucifixion and the first person to whom Jesus appeared after the resurrection.



Saint Thomas (Josh Cohen)
One of the Twelve Apostles.

Matthias of Galilee (Josh Cohen)
An 8 year old boy.

The Characters



Sigmund Freud (Josh Cohen)
Founder of Psychoanalysis, a key theorist of modern psychiatry.



Pontius Pilate (Ron Cephas Jones)
Official title Heg-e-Mon meaning Excellency.
A Roman.
The fifth prefect of Judea governing from 26 – 36 AD.



Caiaphas the Elder (Gawn Grainger)
A Jewish Rabbi.
Appointed High Priest of the Sanhedrin in 18CE and presiding during the betrayal and subsequent death of Jesus.



Judas Iscariot (Joseph Mawle)
One of the Twelve Apostles
Betrayed Jesus to the Romans for 30 pieces of silver.
Committed suicide by hanging himself from an olive branch.



Jesus of Nazareth (Edward Hogg)
A Jewish Rabbi and carpenter.
Son of Mary the Virgin.
The father of Christianity.



Satan (Douglas Henshall)
AKA : The Prince of Darkness.
Originally created by God as an Angel and then ordered to serve man. Responsible for persuading Eve to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden at which point he fell from heaven to preside over hell.



Stephen Adly Guirgis

The Writer and the LAByrinth

Stephen Adly Guirgis is a product of New York City. He was the son of an Irish Catholic mother and an Egyptian father who moved to New York in 1963 and settled on the Upper West side.

“I’ve lived my entire life in New York, and it informs everything ... September 11 reinforced for me that whatever I’m writing about, it better be something that really matters to me because we don’t know what is going to happen tomorrow. And for me it’s stories about people in pain in New York.”

Stephen Adly Guirgis

New York Times Interview

He went to a Catholic school on 121st Street in Harlem and then attended the Rhodes School on a scholarship. Guirgis then studied at the State University of New York at Albany where he was able to pursue his interest in theatre and meet fellow student and actor John Oritz. In 1993 Oritz persuaded Guirgis to audition for a new acting company which began as the Latino Actors Base (LAB). Guirgis was one of the first non-Latino actors invited to join and he felt immediately at home. The LAB soon became the LAByrinth theatre company. It was originally set up as a meeting/workshop space for actors to share techniques and workshop plays written by members. Although it has since blossomed in to a thriving multi-ethnic theatre group, producing a great deal of original work, its original purpose remains the same. All of Guirgis’ work up to and including *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* has been nurtured, created and ultimately premiered by LAByrinth under the direction of Oscar winning film actor Philip Seymour-Hoffman.

Other published plays by Stephen Adly Guirgis

In Arabia, We’d All Be Kings (1999)

Den of Thieves (2002)

Jesus Hopped the ‘A’ Train (2002)

Our Lady of 121st Street (2003)



Rupert Goold

Headlong

HEADLONG: /hedl'ong/ noun
1. with head first, 2. starting boldly, 3, to approach with speed and vigour

Director Rupert Goold saw *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* when LAByrnth premiered the piece in New York in 2006 and, as a long-standing admirer of Adly Guirgis' writing, immediately began discussions to bring the play to the UK. Goold is Artistic Director of the touring company Headlong Theatre and he approached the Almeida's Artistic Director Michael Attenborough to see if the two companies could work together to find a home for the play's European premiere. The resulting production will mark the first co-production since Michael became Artistic Director.

The last six months have seen the creative teams at both the Almeida and Headlong working with Stephen to further develop the script for the new production. We have met with both British and American performers to cast the production and found an extraordinary international ensemble for the show. The production will also reunite the creative team behind 2007's acclaimed *Macbeth* in the West End – Designer Anthony Ward, Lighting Designer Howard Harrison and Composer and Sound Designer Adam Cork.

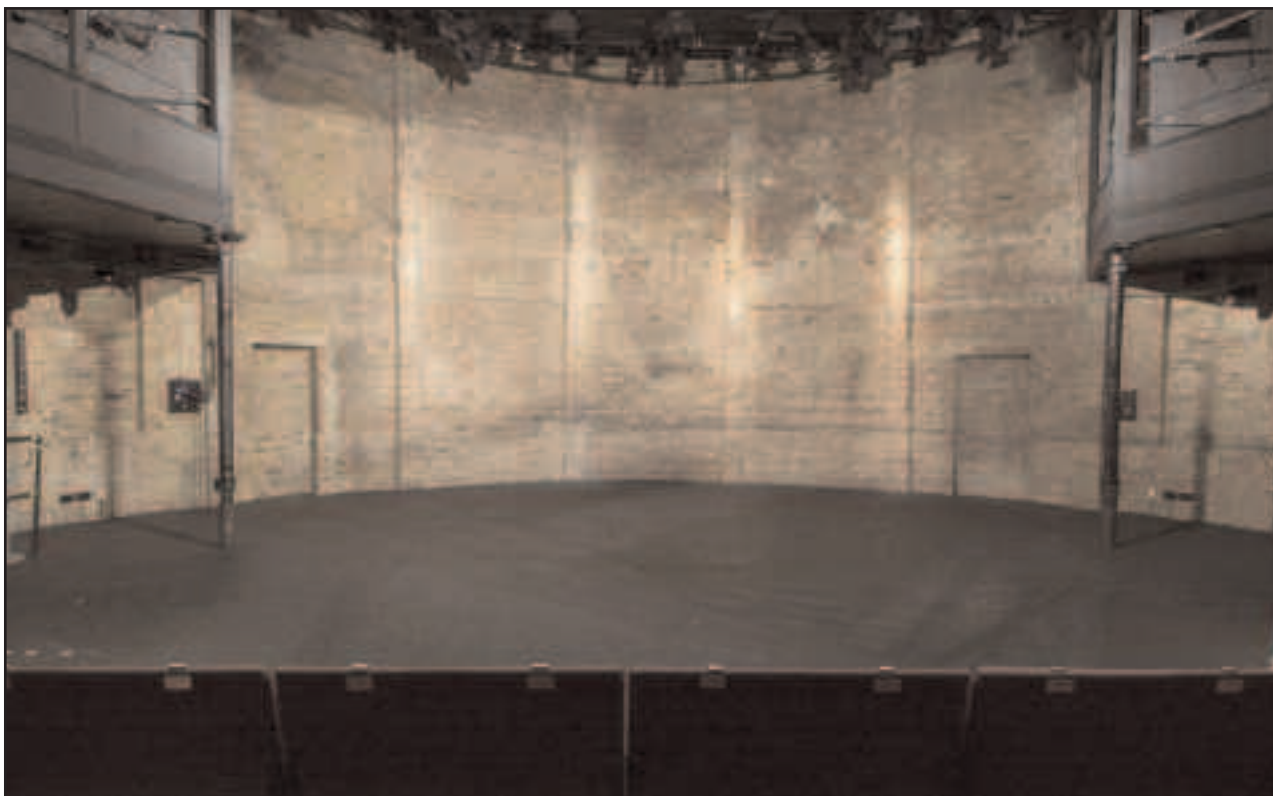
The European Premiere of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* is a major theatrical event and both Headlong and the Almeida are proud and delighted to be presenting this work together.

Headlong is one of the UK's leading touring theatre companies. Under Rupert Goold's leadership it has established a reputation for ambitious, provocative work on a large scale. Recently acclaimed shows include the national tours of *Paradise Lost*, *Angels in America*, Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings* and a reimagined version of Marlowe's *FAUSTUS*, featuring Jake and Dinos Chapman.

"Tackling issues with extraordinary theatrical audacity... a company that clearly intends to continue boldly"

Financial Times on Headlong

Ben Power – Literary Manager, Headlong



The Almeida Theatre - empty space
Photo: Lara Platman

The Almeida is a “found space”, and was not originally built as theatre. Designing for our theatre requires great ingenuity because there is no conventional backstage space (wings), nor is there a fly tower to allow us to lower and raise big pieces of scenery. This means each designer has to choose whether to reveal the building as it was, or to transform it into a conventional theatre space. In *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, designer Anthony Ward has decided not to hide the building’s brick wall. We do have an area under the stage (substage) where actors exit to and enter from. It is also where props are kept and where quick costume changes take place. We can also cut holes in the floor for trapdoors through which to raise and lower set items, and even characters like Satan and Jesus in this particular play.



The model box from below
Designer: Anthony Ward
Photo: Stage Management



The model box from above
 Designer: Anthony Ward
 Photo: Stage Management

Now Hope, it changes with the times, but has stood always as God's gift to the last of his children. It is said that every generation rearranges the cosmic furniture differently ... Today, Hope is no longer a place for contemplation – "litigation" being the preferred new order of the day.

Gloria

THE MODEL BOX

The model box is a scaled down 1:25 version of what the set will look like in the theatre. This is created mainly for use by the production team, the setbuilders and painters, and the lighting designer as a reference. It is also useful for the actors and director when thinking about how to stage the production.

Stephen Adly Guirgis posits that most of today's great decisions are made in courtrooms, so he set his play in one - specifically, one in downtown Purgatory (known as Hope), the place where troubled souls wait (sometimes for a very long time) to be permanently assigned to either heaven or hell. By using the conventions of courtroom drama, he is able to explore such a big and complex theme in a recognisable form that we are already aware of from TV and cinema. Yet does this courtroom need to be a literal one?

At designer Anthony Ward's model box presentation to the cast on the first day of rehearsals, Rupert Goold explained how the set is deliberately removed from a literal American courtroom environment and given an organic feel. The set is divided into three areas – above is heaven, the stage itself represents purgatory, and substage is hell. The architecture is epic in proportions, giving the impression of an infinite courtroom, infinite purgatory – a bottomless pit on stage. The floor is broken, smashed and full of rubble, giving an explosive quality that perfectly juxtaposes the moments of stillness in the play.

The stage is wide and open and the audience can consequently see, and make judgement on the events on stage – just like a jury. The gallery style seating at the Almeida further enhances their role as onlookers.

The set also makes use of multimedia technology – the upper area, or 'heaven,' is enclosed by a large, semi-circular screen that projects numerous images throughout the play, from the streets of New York to clouds, giving further epic proportions to the courtroom. It is also used to introduce Satan – who enters the courtroom for the first time through the trapdoor, literally rising from the depths of hell.

The whole set is very mystical and suggest a feeling of abandonment – a kind of Nietzschean 'God is dead' quality.



Jessika Williams and Joseph Mawle in rehearsal
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Assistant Director Vik Sivalingam tells us what's happening in the rehearsal room:

Rehearsal Weeks 1 & 2

The first day began with the obligatory meet and greet, where the company meets the rest of the permanent Almeida staff. In an established building like the Almeida, this is a more involved process simply due to the number of people. Once introductions were made, Rupert Goold (Director) and Anthony Ward (Designer) presented the model of the set to everyone.

We then gathered the company together to read the play. Rupert then talked about the play and its challenges: the subject matter, the inversion of this awareness and the intensely American vernacular that is its language.

The rest of week one and two was spent looking at the scenes in isolation with the actors concerned. Rupert and the actors discuss the story of the scenes and the characters' relationships to each other. Once a consensus is agreed upon, the scene is put on its feet in the playing space.

Rehearsal Week 3

This week the rehearsal cranked up in intensity. We moved into the part of the process when the actors are beginning to get 'off book' - to work without their scripts.

Naturally, this is a slower and sometimes frustrating process. The actors stumble initially on the scenes simply because the lines now take on a different life and they have to find the various thoughts in the other actors and the space.

What is amazing about this part of the rehearsals is that as the scenes take shape, we begin to discover greater depths to the characters and situations. These revelations render some of the earlier choices either too easy or superfluous.

As the play takes shape both textually and physically, Rupert begins to address some of the moments that aren't written in the play: moments that illuminate the friendship between Judas and Jesus - something that is reported a lot in the play.

We staggered through the play in its entirety for the first time on Saturday morning - a useful exercise to see the shape of the play.

Rehearsal Week 4

This was the week for spit and polish. The run on Saturday had helped to give an overview of the play, the overall shape, and the state of play that we were at.

What we realised from the run was where the storytelling was clear, where it needed clarifying, and more importantly whose story was being told.

So the majority of this week was really about deconstructing the play and working it through beat by beat in each of the scenes. This included breaking down some of the staging that had been agreed upon and making sure that the moves enhanced the story telling. Then on Friday afternoon we ran the play in its entirety for the second time.



Joseph Mawle and Shane Attwooll in rehearsal
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Rehearsal Week 5

This week was when we concentrated on the detail of the play. After two runs in the previous weeks, there was a fluency in the scenes. The actors were beginning to own their characters and the play in a way that allowed the play to take on a life of its own.

Not content to leave it at this, we dissected and interrogated the play further - really crystallising what the characters were doing at any given point. In order to achieve this, we worked on individual scenes on Monday and Tuesday. We also scheduled in an intensive three-hour workshop with mask expert John Wright, who spent Tuesday afternoon with four actors working on archetypes.

Wednesday morning we ran Act 1 and then did working notes in the afternoon, and on Thursday we did the same for Act 2. On Friday, we ran the play once again before the long three-day Bank Holiday weekend. All in all, it was a satisfactorily thorough week, leaving us in a very comfortable place for the coming tech week.

Rehearsal Week 6

Tech week - when everything that has been worked on in the rehearsal room is now transferred on to the stage and the set.

Monday morning was spent with just the actors doing a speed run - simply to remind them of the play. We began the first tech session in the evening, starting from the top of the play and working our way through, inserting all the other elements that would make it a fantastic final product. There were music and sound effects to be added, video and multimedia projection on the incredible surface of the set, and lighting the scenes to give them maximum impact. Also there were the technical elements of the lift through the trapdoor that carried actors to and from the bowels to the stage. All these elements take time and patience to go over again and again and yet again!

This process took the best part of three days which was really very efficient and we were able to do a dress run on Thursday afternoon, finally seeing the play in its performance-ready state.

Simon the Zealot:

Personally, I think Judas was trying to throw Jesus into the deep end of the pool – make him swim.



Donna Croll in rehearsal
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Storytelling

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot employs a number of storytelling conventions to help tell the story, such as:

- Freeze frames
- Direct address (characters have direct dialogue with the audience through monologues, and the lawyers appeal to us as jury members)
- Flashbacks
- Multimedia

These storytelling conventions are often used and then discarded. There is nothing consistent about the storytelling and it changes from moment to moment. This is challenging for any actor as he/she has to accept what happens in any given moment, go with it completely, embrace it, and tell the story in the fullest sense! The principle of staying in the moment is fundamental to the play, so a good practical exercise would be *Meisner's Repetition*. Two actors face each other and repeat their observations about one another back and forth. An example of such an exchange might be:

A: You're smiling.

B: I'm smiling.

A: You're smiling!

B: Yes, I'm smiling.

The actors are asked to observe and respond to each other's behaviour. If they can respond spontaneously to how their partner's behaviour affects them, their own behaviour will arise directly from the stimulus of the other.

Think on Your Feet

This notion of thinking on your feet can be extended through the *Point and Talk* exercise. The actor should point at something in the room, but say something else (not the thing they are pointing at). So if they point at a table, they might say 'cat.' The idea is that the actor doesn't think, he/she just responds, and keeps pointing and talking for a fixed time (say 5 minutes). If the actor cannot think of anything to say, he/she should continually point at the same object and repeat 'nothing' until something comes into their head, thus responding until the impulse to change occurs.

Conveying Relationships

The relationship between Jesus and Judas lies at the core of the play, but actually there are few opportunities where an audience sees them interacting. Consequently, the actors have been finding ways to tell the story of their relationship to support what happens throughout the play. There are interludes between scenes to show the audience something about the dynamic of Jesus and Judas' friendship. For example at one point we see them playing basketball together, and at another point we see them sharing a cigarette. Can you devise a series of interludes, with no words, that illustrates the complex nature of the relationship between Jesus and Judas?



Susan Lynch in rehearsal
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Playfulness

There is a strong element of playfulness in the script. There are numerous games and exercises that encourage actors to play and have fun. Try *Building a Shed!* Everyone starts in a circle, with one person in the centre. He/she should start a physical action that can be repeated. One at a time, the other actors enter the space and ask:

- A: What are you doing?
 B: Building a shed!
 A: A what?
 B: A shed!
 A: Can I help?
 B: Yes!

Person A then changes the physical action (and person B copies this action). After the action has built a natural rhythm, the next person enters (NB – the person entering must do so using the silliest walk and must talk using the silliest voice – and person B must mimic this voice). Continue until everyone is ‘helping’ to build the shed!

The Actor’s Physicality (mask without a mask)

One of the major challenges for the actor playing Judas is to find the appropriate physicality for his character – he spends the majority of the play in a state of catatonia, and says little. How does the actor playing Judas physically express what has happened to him? And how does he make the character complex and interesting in the light of this? One way of exploring physicality is to use masks. Try the following exercise:

Embody the Mask - choose a mask that “speaks to you” from a collection and decide what kind of body matches and extends the quality of that mask. Keeping the mask in mind without wearing it, become the body at the core of the mask, showing no emotion facially. Where is this character’s centre of gravity? Walk neutral. Then shift to a low centre of gravity – feel what that does to change energy, rhythm, and tempo. Switch to a high centre of gravity and feel those changes as well. Go back to the neutral walk. Now choose one part of the body that becomes most noticeable about your walk and emphasize this, lead with it. Try different body leads. Maybe it’s a caved in chest, or a chest puffed out. What kind of person does this feel like? Grumpy? Happy? Smug? Actors offstage should try to guess what masks the actors onstage are portraying. Creating the body for the character and keeping that body while changing emotion is difficult and getting it right comes with experimentation and practise. Use the mask in surprising ways and challenge yourself.

Other ways of experimenting with physicality involve finding a physical pose or gesture for things that aren’t human, like textures, colours, animals, and emotions – fluffy, scratchy, angry, red for example – using your body in different ways. You could then work with emotions – choose an emotion and then use your bodies to evoke the emotion, and then freeze it. Audience members should try and guess the emotion portrayed. If they can’t, they should give specific suggestions for adjusting the body, like arms outstretched with palms up, and head craning forward. This exercise demonstrates how specific mask work is, showing how little it takes to completely change the emotion your body is portraying. Subtle change makes a huge difference in what your body says to the audience.



Jessika Williams and Joseph Mawle
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Judas Iscariot: The Historical Character

Judas Iscariot was the disciple who betrayed Jesus. According to the gospels, he led a group of armed guards to the place where Jesus was praying and identified him with a kiss. The guards arrested Jesus and took him to the Jewish religious authorities, who then turned him over to the Romans. There are a number of accounts of this betrayal in the Bible (John 13:21-31 and 18:2-9; Matt 26:45-50 and 27:3-10 John; and Acts 1:15-26) and they all differ slightly, making the motives behind Judas' act questionable – and the perfect courtroom debate:

“Very little is known about Judas [beyond] two basic things: Jesus chose him as one of the twelve apostles, and he handed Jesus over to the Jewish authorities. Many of the standard traits of the Judas who appears in films and onstage, such as his reddish hair color and his fiery disposition, are almost purely speculative, invented primarily for artistic purposes. These representations have influenced how Western culture has come to think about the man and his actions.

The writers of the four gospels were also good storytellers who knew that, for simple dramatic effect, the story of Jesus required an arch-villain: a divine protagonist needs the wickedest of opponents. Later Christian traditions built on such presentations were, unfortunately, also influenced by nascent anti-Semitism, [using] Judas as an example of the wickedness of Jews in general.

[In fact] Judas was not always as villainous as he has appeared historically in art and literature. Judas Iscariot was, after all, chosen to be one of the twelve apostles. How could someone so irredeemably evil decide to give up everything to become a follower of Jesus?”

Excerpts from A Jesuit Off-Broadway: Center Stage with Jesus, Judas, and Life's Big Questions by James Martin, SJ (Loyola Press 2007). Reprinted with permission of Loyola Press. To order copies of this book contact Columba Bookservice at +353 1 294 2556 or visit www.columba.ie

Judas was the kinda guy – at least with me – where, one minute he's your friend, and the next minute, he's making fun of you in front of everybody. He used to like to say that the reason Jesus had to do the Miracle of the Loaves and the Fishes was because I at all the food when no one was looking. Stuff like that. But the other times he could be real nice...

Saint Thomas



Christianity and *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*

The Last Days of Judas Iscariot doesn't attack Christianity, in fact it seeks to explore faith, and it does so with respect and tenderness. Indeed, James Martin, a senior Jesuit Priest, was involved as theological advisor during the writing, rehearsals and performance of LAByrnth Theater Company's original production of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Initially, James was concerned about how he might be able to help teach Stephen Adly Guirgis about what happened in first-century Palestine to Jesus and the man who betrayed him. He said:

"[Stephen Adly Guirgis] ...had stumbled upon a theological conundrum that has challenged theologians, philosophers, and saints for centuries. Doesn't God, who is kind and merciful, forgive every sin? How could a merciful God create hell?"

Theological questions were foremost in the playwright's mind, and our conversations ranged from the broader questions about grace, forgiveness, and despair to more detailed inquiries into the history of the individual characters in the drama.

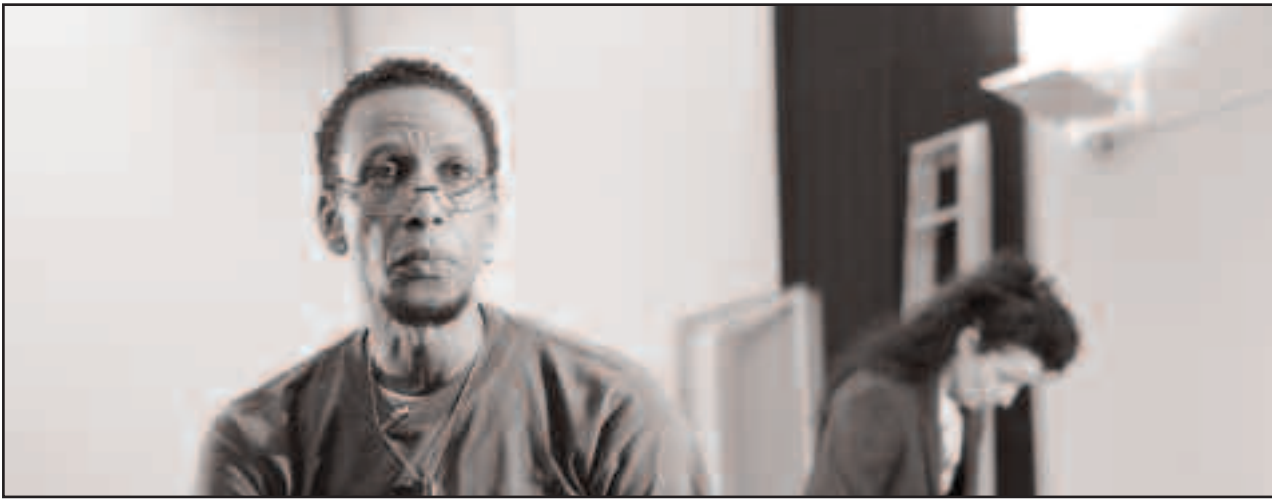
After all his research, Stephen wanted to hear what I thought about who killed Jesus. The responsibility for Jesus' death was the underlying theme of his play, and the answer to the question of who was responsible would help us unlock the riddle of Judas Iscariot.

But the Gospels are murky about precisely what lay behind the death of Jesus. For the evangelists were not as concerned with providing a historically accurate picture as modern readers might assume. What [they] were intent on providing was not historical truth but something more elusive, and far more important for the early Christians: the religious meaning of the events in question...

"...Stephen's use of the trial device would show the audience not only how but also why the death of Jesus occurred, shedding light on a notoriously dark topic. As I watched Stephen deal with the demands placed upon these scenes – the requirement to sort through so much history, the artistic need to keep the interest of the audience ... I was impressed with what he was able to accomplish."

God can lead us anywhere, but sometimes, the people, they doan wanna go. If the people doan wanna go, then, whaddya gonna do?

Mother Theresa



Ron Cephas Jones and Susan Lynch in rehearsal
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Whatchu know about what's a lie and what's the truth?! Whatchu know about my history?! All's you got to go on is some book written four different ways by four different Jews wasn't even there in the first place!

Pontius Pilate

Stephen Adly Guirgis' characters speak to us in a language that is vibrant, colloquial and urban – the language of the street (so be prepared for some serious swearing!) In *The Last Day's of Judas Iscariot* this is true of all characters to varying degrees, both human and divine. The gap between the saintly and iconic status of many of the characters, and earthy, and at points offensive, way in which they speak contributes greatly to the humour of the play. It confounds our expectations. It also allows us to identify more easily with the biblical debate and see it as contemporary, therefore finding a greater relevance to our own lives.

Some of the language can be referred to as Eubonics, or African American Vernacular English. This style of speech which was initially considered culturally specific was formally named as Eubonics in 1996 by a primary school in America. They considered it the first language of a large proportion of their pupils which meant that they could teach Standard English as a subject in the school. The use of the term Eubonics rather than African American Vernacular English allows it to be seen as a language in its own right rather than just specifically a mode of communication for the Black American community.

“Adly Guirgis provided a sophisticated theological treatment of the issue, in all the slangy (and sometimes foul-mouthed) urban argot for which he is known amongst theater aficionados. In this case, the streetwise lingo represented the playwright's attempt at what theologians call an “inculturation” of the Bible – that is, a translation of the Gospel texts not simply into a different language but for a specific culture.

For Adly Guirgis, that culture is contemporary urban life. Hence, his saints and apostles speak (and often shout) as if they were standing on a crowded subway platform at rush hour. Freed from the need to provide historically accurate quotations for his characters, Guirgis deploys such language to reveal the essential nature of his characters in surprising ways.”

James Martin



Gawn Grainger in rehearsal
Photo: Hugo Glendinning

Focusing on what led to the downfall of Judas Iscariot, Stephen Adly Guirgis seeks to question if Judas had any choice but to “play the cards he’d been dealt”. He questions the notion of forgiveness, and to what extent anyone can accept divine forgiveness if they can’t forgive themselves. These vast questions are gradually guided into the lives of the play’s most ordinary characters, until we understand that the play’s questions are as relevant to a man who cheats on his wife and is unable to forgive himself, as they are to Judas himself. It deals in the nature of human despair.

Although technically a courtroom drama, the courtroom concept is used more as a theatrical device to explore Judas’ betrayal of Jesus. This is such an epic theme, and the courtroom scenario enables a thorough, multi-faceted exploration of Judas’ act, as it is an environment that the audience are familiar with. At the heart of the play is a naturalistic, complex and very clever argument, but the situations that help it evolve are complete anarchy where anything goes; after all, rules are there to be broken! Judas apparently stabbed Jesus in the back, but the play questions this: is Judas a traitor or did he act in order to help Jesus?

Questions to consider:

Was Judas’ betrayal selfish or selfless? Did he push Jesus into the deep end and force him to act, or was he just a rotten coward?

Was Judas’ betrayal actually an integral part of Jesus’ journey, without which there would be no Christendom?

Why did it have to be Judas?

Can we believe in the Bible?

What was Jesus’ mission?

What is sin?

Does hell exist?

Whatever your feelings about Judas’ actions, the play reveals, explores and examines these in the light of contemporary expectations and perceptions.

Indeed, the play explores a number of key themes beyond the notion of betrayal, such as good versus evil; guilt; the notion of ‘traitor,’ subverting what we know; challenging existing perspectives; fate and predetermined events, to name a few.

Further Research:

A Jesuit Off-Broadway: Centre stage with Jesus, Judas and life’s big questions by James Alfred Martin. Loyola University Press.

“God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?”

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Section 125, tr. Walter Kaufmann



The Last Days of Judas Iscariot **Projects Pack**

Compiled by Samantha Lane, Kirsty Hoiles and Charlie Payne

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Script extracts from *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* by Stephen Adly Guirgis

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