

REVIEW | McLean's one-man is a clear, humorous take on Bible

# It Comes Down to a Single Word: Performance

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## RECOMMENDED

To begin, a confession: While I have never had much trouble understanding Shakespeare (at least not since a terrific seventh-grade English teacher read many of his plays aloud), I've always found a good deal of the Bible, whether the Old or New Testament, either baffling or impenetrable. Only after seeing "Mark's Gospel" this past weekend -- the one-man show at the Mercury Theater in which actor Max McLean enacts one of the four canonical renderings of "the good news" -- did I realize what had been missing. It comes down to a single word: performance.



Max McLean as Mark in Mark's Gospel at the Mercury Theater.

With wit, humor and a multiplicity of voices and attitudes, McLean brings a dramatically rooted clarity to what is a profoundly mysterious odyssey. And the actor (whom Chicago audiences first met last year when he starred as Satan's right-hand man in a stage adaptation of C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*) even manages to make the many parables Jesus spun -- tales that frequently left his own disciples scratching their heads -- seem more decipherable. (The disciples, as we are told, were given explanations later in private.)

**"With wit, humor and a multiplicity of voices... impeccable."**

Along the way, this production also makes you realize how Shakespeare extracted (and transformed) much that is in the Bible. And perhaps because I recently saw an eye-opening production of "The Tempest" at Steppenwolf, there were times during "Mark's Gospel" -- particularly in McLean's evocation of Jesus' miracles, and his attempts to end pervasive corruption -- that the story seemed to suggest Shakespeare's future secular magician Prospero.

Assuming the role of a scribe (neither wholly ancient nor modern), McLean chronicles the life of Jesus of Nazareth, from his baptism by John the Baptist, to his on-the-road ministry, to his peculiar admonitions to those who witnessed his miracles to remain silent about what they'd seen. (That, of course, might have been the shrewdest way to assure that everyone talked about what he'd done.) The factional politics that would eventually lead to Jesus' crucifixion are clearly explained, as are the events of the crucifixion, desposition and resurrection.

McLean is an actorly actor -- his voice is a well-honed instrument, his diction impeccable, his movements precise, his face expressive. And working with director Jeffrey Fiske, who also staged "Screwtape," he sees to it that the pacing of this two-act, two-hour show is impeccable. Nick Rasten's minimalist geometric set suggests the terrain traveled, as does a sort of Power-Point map of the Holy Land outlining Jesus' routes from Jerusalem to the Sea of Galilee, and beyond.

True, the devil of "Screwtape" was more delicious company. But devils serve up cheap thrills. Jesus inspires questions.