

FOX RIVERSIDE LIVE!

A Conversation with Ted Neeley

Volume 1, Issue 1

Friday, April 9, 2010

FOX

Riverside Theater Foundation

Riverside, California

By Jasmine Regala & Pamela Hogan

The day after *Jesus Christ Superstar's* opening night performance, Ted Neeley, who plays the title role, immediately gushed about the *Fox Theater*. He said, "Whoever supported this building, these lovely folks, needs to get [their] credit."

Amazed by the history and recent renovations, Neeley was touched by the community's efforts to preserve such a historical site. He raved about the *Fox Theater* as he shared his and the cast's astonished surprise when they sung their very first note in the *Overture* of the first act. To their surprise, the minute they sung that first note, they themselves were transported into heaven. After that first scene, they ran to the wings of the stage with wide-eyes, amazed by the beauty of their own sound.



Ted Neeley
Act I "Simon Zealots"
Photo by Joan Marcus

His pleasure over the time and care that was taken to preserve the old look and feel of the theater was only outweighed by his appreciation for the excellent acoustics. As Neeley enthusiastically relayed an awe-inspired description of the acoustical elements and how the *Fox Theater* "absorbs" sounds instead of bouncing it back, he compared its acoustical properties to Philadelphia's Kimmel Center, which was specifically built for symphony.

It was particularly gratifying to find an actor with so much experience in theaters of all sizes to find our playhouse so outstanding. He praised the people who had the foresight to dedicate the resources for this cultural purpose. He expressed his gratitude for having such a place to perform.

"I was born screaming"

Neeley described the *Fox* as one of the "top two best acoustic [theaters]" he has ever performed in. "It is, without question, unbelievable!" Serendipitously, the sound executive, Stan Miller, walked by when Neeley explained how he can "literally tune [him]self to the room." Enthusiastically hugging Miller, Neeley flashes a charismatic smile & sings his praises while Miller tries to escape the spotlight.

Neeley, known to his friends as Teddy, which is very much in keeping with his warm personality, told us a little

insight to *Jesus Christ Superstar*. The rock opera, first inspired by the Bible's New Testament, *Book of John*, was Andrew Lloyd Webber's first collaboration with Tim Rice. Hoping to portray Jesus Christ, *the man*, and his hu-

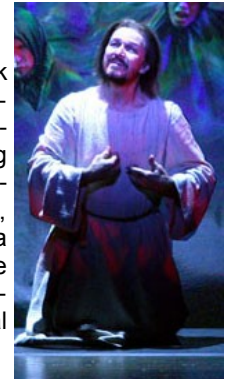
"unbelievable"

man influence, the play is a powerful piece that has undergone an evolution of set designs, choreography changes, and musical rewrites by both Rice & Webber.

Without any professional training, Neeley's natural talents, along with his casual demeanor and down-to-earth personality led him to Webber and Rice's first success. As a complete accident, Neeley randomly followed a friend to an open casting call due to a mixture of curiosity and boredom. As the pair neared the exit after the friend's audition, Neeley's own number was called. With a little push from his friend, Neeley climbed up on stage to a darkened theater and, with nothing prepared, decided to sing Stevie Wonder's "For Once in my Life." The director, Tom O'Horgan, must have heard something because he requested a ballad encore to decipher Neeley's vocal range. Luckily, with experience from his rock n' roll band, *Ted Neeley Five*, along with a dash of raw natural talent, Neeley sang the same song, Tony Bennett-style, and landed his first rock musical, *Hair*, in its Los Angeles run. This eventually led him to *Jesus Christ Superstar* under O'Horgan's same directorship, which was adapted into a film in 1973 by Norman Jewison, from which Neeley received two golden globe nominations.

"I was born screaming," Neeley jokingly said, when describing how he began his career. This screaming, however, developed into a successful career and a passion for the theater that extends past Broadway with the founding of the Rubicon Theater Company in Ventura County. Neeley, who originally wanted to be a rock n' roll drummer, shows his genuine love for the theater as the Rubicon nurtures the local youth by providing a place for them to perform and develop their talent.

With Neeley's graciousness, natural talent, openmind, and sprinkle of serendipitous luck, he arrived at Riverside's renowned *Fox Theater* on April 1, 2010, playing the title role of Jesus in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, thirty-seven years after his Golden Globe-nominated performance. Through his experiences, which arose from "being at the right place, at the right time," along with a fearlessness of saying "yes" to every promising opportunity, Neeley is happy to share whatever he has learned, saying, "Everything I know is just from being there."



Ted Neeley
Act I "the Temple"
Photo by Joan Marcus