



HOUSTON

ESTHER is for the faithful at A.D. PLAYERS

A Purim inspired passion play with dazzling dance

Review By: [Brett Cullum](#) Sep. 11, 2024



ESTHER is an amazing artistic stretch for the [A.D. Players](#) and pays off in many ways for the faithful. The dancing is immaculate, the singing is top-tier, and the production itself looks stunning. It wrestles with its own material between being sexy and edgy but at the same time being scriptural and reverent. I don't know if they ever find the perfect balance, but this is a swing for the fences, and I am here for it. If you are excited about the idea of an Old Testament musical to add to the canon of the likes of **JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT**, then you are in the right theater. It is part Las Vegas revue show and part Purim passion play, and if you enjoy both, you will be in heaven sitting at the George. The audience it is created for will be ecstatic!

ESTHER is described as a dance musical or a movement opera; it sets off to tell the tale of the Biblical heroine through the motion of one performer while another sings the part. This works well because rarely are good dancers great singers, and vice versa. Also, delivering a song while you are dancing a routine is tough. So pairing up a bona fide international dance star like [Sharna Burgess](#) with a vocalist to sub in for her is genius. It keeps the dancing quality way up there and also allows the score to soar on its own. Sharna does the daredevil ballroom moves, and Claire Marie Spencer belts out the numbers for the titular role. It works, and this is how the entire story of **ESTHER** is related.

If you are unfamiliar with the book of Esther from the Old Testament of the Bible, it is easy to summarize. King Xerxes of Persia exiles (almost kills) his current queen, who has spoken out, and all the virgins of the land are paraded in front of him for consideration as the new matriarch. A Jewish girl, who they call Esther to hide her religious identity, is chosen to be the new queen. Shortly thereafter, the king's advisor, Haman, makes him sign off on an order to execute the Jewish people because Haman sees them as not appropriately subservient. Esther's cousin Mordecai implores Esther to persuade the king to retract it. She throws a banquet, asks to see the King (a defiant act for a woman), and reveals that she is one of the people who are to be eliminated. The plan ends up working, and Xerxes retracts the order and kills Haman. The entire event is the basis for the religious holiday of Purim.

The production feels as if it were designed around [Sharna Burgess](#), an Australian world-champion Ballroom dancer featured for many years on NBC's DANCING WITH THE STARS. She's an amazing, world-class performer and does an incredible job acting the emotions of Esther through her movement. Any segment with her is a joy to watch, and I would pay for the ticket just to experience her artistry live. She is paired with a formally trained ballet dancer named [Stephen Hanna](#), who plays Xerxes. He is a good partner for Burgess, and they execute everything exquisitely. Wil Geary dances Haman, and Maliq moves through the show as Mordecai. Geary is all leering power and gymnastics, while Maliq is more traditional grace and grounded form. Both are strong here, and the dancing side of the cast is rounded out by an ensemble of dancers and dance students from around the area. It is some of the best dancing I have seen in Houston theater!

Augmenting the dance performances is a group of powerhouse vocalists who all play Eunuchs as well in the presentation and sing for the lead characters. Local legend Labraska Washington brilliantly delivers the head of the group, Hegai, who narrates the entire show. He is in fine voice from start to finish. Claire Marie Spencer expertly intones Esther, Werner Richmond presents Xerxes, [Daniel Z. Miller](#) gives us Haman, and [Brad Goertz](#) takes on Mordecai. These five sing most of the show, save for some sequences delivered by a female trio who act as fates or a Greek chorus - Lizzy Cooper, Cara Degaish, and Rayevin Johnson. All of the singing is spot on, with Labraska pulling the heaviest load in just the sheer number of songs to sing. [Brad Goertz](#) gets a stunning duet with Claire Marie Spencer that is the highlight of act one. These vocalists are some of the best singers I have heard in Houston theater!

If anything is at odds with ESTHER, it may be the tone or the conundrum of trying to be edgy but, at the same time, reverent. It's the age-old struggle between secular and sacred. The company's Eunuchs are decked out in a mix of leather and Biblical robes that suggest a post-apocalyptic Mad Max vibe but presented by a staid Sunday School class. ESTHER feels a bit like it is trying too hard to be cool, if that makes sense. Some of the more radical rock design elements feel forced rather than organic, and that may be because the material is not quite there for this treatment.

The score is mainly comprised of vanilla Christian pop-sounding songs, and the material is a Biblical story. Esther is saving her people at a life-or-death dinner party, representing the extent of agency for women in that era. It's hard to convince a modern-day audience of the life-or-death peril of what she is doing (even though it is a huge risk for a female of her time). Wisely, the show adds swordplay to make it all feel more risky, but even at that, the narrative is not a revolution. It's easy to praise the performers and, at the same time, want more from the material. But how can one make the Old Testament book of Esther edgy, hip, or modern? This is a story about having faith in being on the righteous side, but it's hardly the flashiest passage of the Bible.

[Dewey Moss](#), [Jeremy Johnson](#), David Wise, and [Rachel Stange](#) all seem to have collaborated on the book, music, and concept. The songs are nice, and the orchestrations are wonderfully rich with Middle Eastern flair, but often, they drift too easily from number to number, sounding about the same. I wanted more rise and fall from the songs, more drama. It could use some variances. **Kirk A. Domer created the set to look like an intense rock and roll show with scaffolding everywhere, sometimes missing stairs creating precarious angles for actors to perch on. But it all looks more dangerous than it is, and perhaps that is all simply by design from director [Rachel Klein](#), who guides the**

show wisely. The production moves at a great pace and is dazzling to look at, but it feels more akin to pageantry than peril. It has less menace than it thinks it does. But I can not say I was not engaged, and the show held my attention for the entire running time.

ESTHER thrilled the sold-out Sunday matinee crowd at the George, who gave it a rousing standing ovation. I suspect [A.D. Players](#) knows its audience, and they have given them a show that dazzles people who have come in the right context. It was not shown if the struggle of scripture versus spectacle was an issue for them as it was for me. If you love exquisite dancing and good singing. If you admire a company that does all of this in service of an Old Testament heroine, then ESTHER is a sure bet. I loved the talent on display here, and it's technically on par with some of the bigger theaters in Houston. I just wish ESTHER had more of a narrative thrust and dramatic lows and highs to match the exquisite dancing and wonderful singing. But if you are a fan of the scripture, I think you will be pleased for the most part. ESTHER should be a hit here locally, but it may need polishing to move further in its journey. But it's a must-see if you are a fan of ballroom and the Bible. It is as beautiful to look at as the dancing from [Sharna Burgess](#).

ESTHER is playing at the George Theater located on Westheimer just west of the Galleria. It has a parking lot that fills up fast, but street parking around the area is accessible. It's a beautiful facility and offers all the amenities of some of Houston's largest arts spaces.

The photo was provided by AD Players and features [Sharna Burgess](#) and Stephen Hana as Esther and Xerxes