

BAY TIMES

LGBTQ News & Calendar for the Bay Area

An Entertaining and Energetic Christmas Carol in San Jose

Published: December 15, 2011

By Jeannie K Smith

Rick Lombardo, Artistic Director of San Jose Repertory Theatre, has had a vision, and brought it to life in a new adaptation of the venerable Dickens classic, *A Christmas Carol*. Lombardo's version breathes some much-needed new life into the staging of the familiar story, resulting in a thoroughly entertaining show and an invigorating appreciation for the genius of Dickens.

A large ensemble of talented actors fill numerous roles, including singers and musicians, some settling into larger ones as the story unfolds - Scrooge, for example, is taken up by Richard Farrell, well known to Bay Area theatre goers, although this is his first time on the SJRep stage.

Most of the performers quickly change costumes to step into different roles, becoming townspeople, schoolchildren, carolers, shopkeepers-- whatever the scene requires. It's fun to watch them transform and reappear, sometimes with radically different appearances.

Lombardo restores Dickens' deliciously erudite text, employing members of the ensemble as narrators. It's not the entire text, but enough of it to put us inside the story, and it feels often like hearing it for the first time. The themes come through loud and clear, such as the indictment of business and industry that ignores the plight of the common people.

The text is augmented with a healthy dose of actual Christmas Carols, chosen to enhance a particular passage or bring home its message, and reminds us of the religious context for the season. This is a bit surprising at first, since in our PC age we are so accustomed to the "cleansing" of a text to make it less religious; but Dickens had no such qualms, and wanted his readers to connect the season with tender sentiments born of a religious understanding of the holiday. Lombardo doesn't flinch from celebrating this connection, with song and word, but keeps it from becoming heavy-handed.

At heart, the production captures a feeling of community and interdependence, emphasizing kindness and charity as well as familial devotion. We are transported to Victorian London to witness Scrooge's restoration in a night's visitations, only to recognize the need for restoration in our own hearts, and perhaps finding it in this delightful and touching story.

The special effects, engineered by Scenic Designer Peter Colao, are suitably impressive and clever, wonderful theatrical devices that are transparent but effective - this of course includes buckets of lovely snow. The three Ghosts are especially ingenious, the Christmas Future being truly awesome. Costumes, by Frances Nelson McSherry, capture the period as if they jumped off a Victorian Christmas card, and accomplish the many character changes with minimal fuss.

Huge kudos go to the multi-talented ensemble of adults and children, who are basically on-stage almost non-stop for



Everett Meckler as Tiny Tim in San Jose Rep's *A Christmas Carol* playing until Dec. 24. Photo by Kevin Berne.

the entire show. They regale us with carols before the curtain, then sing, dance, act, play musical instruments, narrate, roll in the snow, and more, before the show ends. Their tireless energy and enthusiasm really make the show sing with spirit and feeling, and make the evening worthwhile.

Having not seen *A Christmas Carol* in many years, I was happy to discover a production that renewed its joy and heart. If you're in need of something to dispel that Bah-Humbug feeling this season, San Jose Rep has the gift for you.

What: *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens, adapted by Rick Lombardo, presented by San Jose Repertory Theatre

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

When: Wednesdays at 7:30pm, Thursdays-Saturdays at 8:00pm, Saturday matinees at 3:00pm, Sunday matinees at 2:00pm; through Dec. 24 (check schedule on website)

Tickets: \$10 - \$74, 408-367-7255 or at www.sjrep.org