



Tis the season to be jolly and Christmas offerings are popping up everywhere!

By Charles Jarrett

Monday, December 05, 2011

Tis the season to be jolly, by golly, everywhere you turn! I was beginning to think that retail stores were about to have Santa Clause trade in his reindeer for a turkey with an entourage of goslings, when I saw Christmas decorations going up before my family had even arrived for our Thanksgiving gathering!

Thanksgiving leftovers were hardly out of the refrigerator when the Smuin Ballet opened their exciting "**Christmas Ballet, 2011 Edition**" last week in the Dean Leshner Regional Center for the Arts for two evenings only, on November 25th and 26th. Then on November 30th, The San Jose Repertory Theater delivered a superlative "**A Christmas Carol**", certainly one of the most memorable, innovative and ingenious I have ever seen! On November 28th, the Willows Cabaret Theater in Martinez brought up the curtain on a delightfully entertaining Christmas holiday musical comedy featuring the **Wonderettes**, while in Lafayette, the Town Hall Theater opened their fun musical version of "**Scrooge!**" on December 1st.



Photo credit: Kevin Berne

Scrooge (Richard Farrell) stares in bewilderment as the Ghost of Christmas Present (Seth Margolies) casts a magical spell from his cornucopia of good will in San Jose Rep's "A Christmas Carol"!

Where do I start this week? Perhaps with the closet theater to Rossmoor first, Lafayette Town Hall, and moving onward and upward using the same formula, the next shortest travel distance, Martinez and leaving the longest journey till last.

Typical of most productions featuring the most reviled skinflint in theatrical history, "**Scrooge!**", Town Hall's production starts off with a great opening musical number featuring some very lovely voices and some very talented actors. John Blytt once again returns in the role of the not so nice money lender, Scrooge. Clive Worsley is quite superb as Bob Cratchet, Randy Anger does an excellent job as the Ghost of Christmas Present, and Dennis Markham provides an most satisfactory and believable nephew, Fred. While I cannot begin to address each and every actor in the production, special credit was earned by the acting skills of Rebecca Pingree who played Martha Cratchet and Michael Sally who embodies well the character of the out of body ex-partner of Scrooge, Jacob Marley.

Altogether, this production of "**Scrooge!**" is a very good production, reasonably priced and close to home. Director Jessica Richards has done some very clever things, in fact added a concept that I have never seen done before that I feel adds measurably to the story. In this production, the ghost of Christmas Past turns out to be Scrooge's deceased sister, Isabel, (Fred's mother) returning from the "other side" to try to help her brother reclaim his life before it is too late. I frankly thought this was a brilliant touch, even more touching than just having his deceased business partner,

Jacob Marley, coming back to help him. Also, Anna Smith, who played Isabel and two other characters as well, demonstrated some pretty outstanding acting skills, delivering an excellent performances.

The costumes starting with the dress Isabel was wearing, were really quite excellent. Bessie Delucchi provided the cast with costumes that fit well and looked very appropriate. The set design, by Emily Greene, was really quite favorable and worked well.

I personally have never really cared much for this adaptation of the "Christmas Carol" story, because I frankly do not care for several of the songs and the type of musical "take" its author envisions for a story that is really quite sad and poignant. To me, "Scrooge" the musical, by Leslie Bricusse, is far too much like a Walt Disney adaptation, much too upbeat, with songs like "It's Not My Fault", "Thank You Very Much" and "I Like Life", sounding too much like Mary Poppins or Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang styled musical numbers. The "Thank You Very Much" number, where the creditors of the mean old Mr. Scrooge are celebrating his demise, releasing them from their financial obligations, is just too out of character for the recipients of this good fortune in this time and place. The music style is 20th Century music, definitely not in keeping with the time frame in which the story takes place, not even remotely reminiscent. In addition, Scrooge's response as he joins in the celebration is just too much out of character for him, certainly for this point in his redemption. He dances around like a school boy, thinking all of this jubilation is because for some unexplainable reason, these hard pressed debtors now love him. Humbug! I always feel Dick Van Dyke will come storming in any minute adding his dance choreography to this "lighter" version of the infamous epiphany that Scrooge is supposed to be going through. I guess I am just an old stick in the mud, great acting aside; I just seem to prefer the more typical, darker version of "A Christmas Carol". This adaptation certainly weakens the powerful message that this story portends! This may be a great version for the kids and younger audience and perhaps for someone who have not been steeped in the old Christmas Carol tea pot, as I have, but there I go, blowing off steam again!

"Scrooge!" continues Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., with 7 p.m. performances on the 11th and 18th, in addition to matinee at 2 p.m. on December 11th and 18th, and a 3 p.m. matinee on December 10th and 17th, closing on the 18th. Tickets range between a very reasonable \$12 and \$32 each. The Town Hall Theatre Company is located at 3535 School St, on the corner of Moraga road near downtown Lafayette. Call (925) 283-1557 or visit their website at <http://www.townhalltheatre.com/> to purchase tickets.

The Willows Theatre has unleashed a delightfully silly story, entitled the **"Winter Wonderettes"** about a girl's quartet who reside in a rural community who call themselves, the "Marvelous Wonderettes". This musical is actually a sequel to the earlier musical entitled the "Marvelous Wonderettes", which is a tribute to the girl quartets of the 1960's. This story takes place just a few months after the first story evolved as it is now Christmas time in 1968 and the Marvelous Wonderettes, Betty Jean, Cindy Lou, Missy and Suzy, have been asked to entertain fellow employees at the Holiday Party for Harper's Hardware, where Betty Jean has worked since high school. The girls have decorated the hardware store, turning it into a winter wonderland! Their entertainment consists of the girls sharing some Christmas songs and greetings from a number of countries and a medley of well known, popular Christmas songs born in the same time frame. These old favorites include some upbeat 60's songs that I am sure will be quite familiar to you, such as "Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree", Jingle Bell Rock, Little Saint Nick and "A Marshmallow World".

Interspersed with the girls homespun entertainment program, in their hometown hardware store, are some personal revelations about their own complex lives, including a very pregnant and happily married Suzy (Lisa Drummond) and an upbeat Cindy (Diahanna Davidson). Betty Jean (Laurie Hedstrom) is experiencing some romantic difficulties, and Missy (Pamely Khoury) has a few issues to reminisce about as well.

Every year, as is tradition, Mr. Harper is scheduled to appear dressed as Santa Claus at the end of the evening to pass out the employee's holiday bonus envelopes. Trouble ensues when Mr. Harper misses his cue multiple times. Betty Jean runs off to find him and returns to the stage with what she thinks are the bonus envelopes. The envelopes are passed out to the audience (which are supposed to be fellow employees who have come to see the Christmas party show), but upon opening them they discover a big surprise, an ominous surprise about their employment future.

As is Missy's nature, she tries her best to cheer things up by sharing happy Christmas memories as well as a tribute to

Christmas around the world. After everyone is feeling better, the girls decide to bring on their own Santa; Missy's new husband Bill (an audience member). Following a delightful bit of audience participation in the program, the evening ends on a happy, upbeat note!

Under the excellent direction of Lois Grandi, a long time Rossmoor audience director favorite, the show moves along very well and provides an excellent stage for your future exploration of Christmas activities this year. The ladies are superb talents, two of whom I am very familiar with, having seen them perform previously, and whom I have already held in high regard, Pam Khoury and Laurie "Kinsella" Hedstrom. The two new acquaintances were an absolute delight, Lisa Drummond and Diahanna Davidson, who I hope to get to know much better in the future, as entertainers.

This fun-filled evening of entertainment continues Wednesdays (3:30 and 7:30), Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., with matinees on Saturdays at 2 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m., now through December 30th. The Willows Campbell Theater is a delightful cabaret style, terraced seating theater in downtown Martinez, at 636 Ward Street (almost directly behind Bank of America, and one block east of Main Street). Call 798-1300 for tickets or visit their website at <http://www.willowstheatre.org/> for more information, and the ability to order tickets on line.

I often rave about the professional and innovative theater that you can find with in a reasonably short drive to San Jose, located in the San Jose Repertory Theater company, and here I go again! I spoke earlier about my preference to see the time revered classic Christmas story, "*A Christmas Carol*", done in the Dickensonian style, much as it might have risen from a spiritual vapor reincarnated from Dicken's own personal pen and paper, an artfully reconstructed, faithfully detailed, a historical adaptation that richly rewards the audience with the true flavor and emotional value of his marvelous work. I do not believe I have ever seen a production more rewarding than this one! I have seen this story portrayed many times in my 28 years of writing this column and I believe Director Rick Lombardo has found the silver lining in this dark and poignant tale of greed and redemption. This production includes vocal and instrumental music relative to the time and to the mood, performed by the 16 actors themselves. Baroque and beautiful, the sweet sounds of voice, violin, chimes, bells, drums, a recorder (flute type instrument), guitars and piano are repeatedly introduced scene after scene, appropriately. The songs are familiar, many of which you may have sung in Sunday school or choir, and they ring richly and appropriately into the fabric of the tale.

Yes, this is the same tale which you have probably seen many, many times, by many theaters over the years, but perhaps not as simply presented or as scaled down and yet be so moving and effective. While I applaud its lack of grand, expensive sets, huge casts and artistic artifice, I equally applaud the remarkable cleverness with which each scene is executed. Scrooge's office, desks, bed and props are quickly spun into the set fabric of the tale, almost magically, aided by some of the best lighting design I have seen in recent years (Dawn Chiang). Costumes designed by Frances Nelson McSherry are authentic and beautiful. Peter Colao has used a minimalist approach to the scenery, that when melded with the brilliant direction of Rick Lombardo, enriches this story, tenfold.

The acting includes only a couple of actors I am really familiar with, Dan Hiatt (superb as Marley) and Lizzie Calgero (terrific as the Ghost of Christmas Past). Richard Farrell, a veteran actor of many mediums, appears for his first time in "*A Christmas Carol*" as Scrooge and I must say, he delivers a remarkable performance. Marvin Greene is outstanding as Bob Cratchit and Kimberly Mohne Hill performs as Mrs. Cratchit and Mrs. Fezziwig, on an equally outstanding level. Blythe Foster is pluperfect in her several roles, Belle, Fred's Wife and Molly. Seth Margolies owns the roles of Fezziwig and the Ghost of Christmas Present. Sam Misner is superlative as Fred and young Scrooge and Kate McCormick sings beautifully and plays Edna with bravado. Paul Baird plays his many roles, including Dick Wilkins - - in spades. Even the children, Emilio Fuentes (Ignorance), Lucas Kernan, Alison Lubiens (Want), Everett Meckler (Tiny Tim), and the young lady, Jessica Salans, deliver their many characters on a truly professional level, as professional as any young actors I have ever seen.

If you are an aficionado of the "art of theater", then, if for no other reason you must make the trip to San Jose to see this simply stellar production. I will retain and cherish this memory for a very long time. I will encourage all my fellow theater critic members of the SF Bay Area Theater Critic's Circle to make the trip to San Jose as this one needs to be seen by those who can fully appreciate its special qualities.

"A Christmas Carol" continues Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 7:30, with Thursday, Friday and Saturday performances at 8 p.m., and matinees on certain Wednesdays at 11 a.m., Saturdays at 3 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m., now through December 24th. Tickets may be purchased on line at <http://www.sjrep.com/> or by calling (408) 367.7255. The box office is located in the theatre lobby. Tickets range in price between \$28 and \$74 each, with a \$6 discount for all senior tickets. The San Jose Repertory Theatre is a beautiful facility, easy to reach and always rewarding. The San Jose Repertory Company Theatre is located at 101 Paseo de San Antonio, between 2nd and 3rd Streets, one block north of East San Carlos Street in San Jose. There is multi-storied public parking structure at the corner of East San Carlos Street, between 2nd and 3rd streets (rates vary), and a street level parking lot just north of the theatre (same block) at \$10 flat rate for the evening.