

Review: A lively 'Christmas Carol' at the San Jose Rep

By [Karen D'Souza](#)

12/01/2011

It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.

Aghast at the ever-widening gulf between rich and poor in Victorian England, Charles Dickens wrote a haunting tale of greed and redemption in just six weeks. Since its debut in 1843, "A Christmas Carol" has touched a nerve because the holidays are truly a time "when want is keenly felt."

But now, as the economy continues to batter the little guy and the safety net frays into oblivion, Dickens' indictment of unchained capitalism hits home hard. From "Oliver Twist" to "Nicholas Nickleby," Dickens built his canon on the fervent belief that a culture beset by social injustice was a culture destined for ruin. His interest in the matter was far from academic. Stung by poverty as a boy, he never forgot the curse of hunger and hardship. The dark side of the Industrial Revolution gives the play its bite and, alas, its timelessness.

Though it's hard not to get a little jaded about the chestnuts over the years, Rep artistic director Rick Lombardo unwraps this holiday classic with great care.

The director-adaptor has jam-packed it with lively carols, adorable children and 18 actors jiggling through more than 50 roles in a boisterous romp that mines its political messages as well as its heart-melting core.

Even the most jaded theatergoer, a grizzled veteran of every "Carol" and "Nutcracker" out there, may have to ward off the sniffles this time. The Rep has packaged Dickens' sense of



A Christmas Carol 2: (back) Richard Farrell as Scrooge, Seth Margolies as the Ghost of Christmas Present, and (clockwise from far left) Marvin Greene, Everett Meckler, Jessica Salans, Lucas Kernan, Kimberly Mohne Hill, Fiona Donovan, Emilio Fuentes, and Alison Lubiens as the Cratchit family in San Jose Reps A Christmas Carol. (Guitarist: Dan Hiatt) Photo by Kevin Berne. A Christmas Carol 3: (l to r) Richard Farrell as Scrooge and Seth Margolies as the Ghost of Christmas Present in San Jose Reps A Christmas Carol. Photo by Kevin Berne. (Kevin Berne Images 2011)

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humanity with an irresistible dose of holiday cheer guaranteed to put some holly in your heart.

To be sure, the production is not perfect. The ensemble takes turns with the narration, and that's a bit of a mixed bag. But the hardworking cast takes pains to imbue all of the individual characters here with vivid detail. And they sing with a genuine sense of enjoyment in every fa-la-la.

Richard Farrell, a veteran of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, endows Scrooge with a suitably crotchety demeanor as he sits in his counting house, scowling at his beleaguered clerk Bob Cratchit (the stalwart Marvin Greene) and dismissing the good cheer of his nephew Fred (a sensitive turn by Sam Misner). But the actor truly earns his pay capturing the giddiness of the reformed Ebenezer.

Having been visited by four specters who presage his doom, Scrooge relents his venal ways and emerges as wide-eyed as a toddler. By the end of the evening, Farrell skips across the stage like a man drunk with the joy of living.

Along the way, there are many lovely turns. Blythe Foster ("The Dresser") rivets whether she is playing Belle, Scrooge's old flame, Fred's wife or a cockney fishwife looking for a brawl. Lizzie Calogero is equally captivating as the ghost of Christmas past (despite some odd amplification of her voice) and various and sundry period ladies.

All of the ghosts that appear to Scrooge have their charms, but the ghost of Christmas future is particularly creepy here, a looming grim reaper with skeletal fingers pointing the way to the grave.

Indeed, while the most poignant aspect of "Carol" remains its exposé of man's inhumanity to man, this production also taps into the play's insights on the cycle of life. For all its falling snowflakes (set design by Peter Colao) and period finery (Frances Nelson McSherry), the delightful antics of the children in the cast are by far the cutest thing onstage.

There's no point competing with Alison Lubiens for the audience's heart. The cherubic second-grader, who plays wee Alice Cratchit and assorted other tots, steals every scene she is in with disarming ease. She and the other adorable little ones elicited many an "aw" from the opening night audience. Everett Meckler shined particularly brightly as the frail but brave Tiny Tim, who sings a three-hankie number of his own.

If you want to banish the bah-humbugs for good this year, lend an ear to this "Carol."

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Check out her theater coverage at www.mercurynews.com/karen-dsouza and follow her on Twitter: @KarenDSouza4.

'A Christmas Carol'

By Charles Dickens, adapted by Rick Lombardo

Through: Dec. 24

Where: San Jose Rep, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes (one intermission)

Tickets: 408-367-7255,

www.sjrep.com