

Review: 'Carol' returns with music, two acts

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Clarence Brown plays 'Carol' with music, warmth

As November moves into December, the Clarence Brown Theatre returns to Charles Dickens.

This is the seventh consecutive winter the University of Tennessee theater has produced Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." Yet in many ways the show that continues through Dec. 22 is a new production.

For the first five years the theater used a different adaptation. Last year it changed to a one-act, 90-minute story by Barbara Field. Now director Casey Sams kept Field's adaptation but expanded and enriched it. Now two acts, the show adds about 30 minutes of important yet often subtle additions and changes to what Dickens called his "ghostly little book."

Music, often traditional carols performed by musicians incorporated into the cast or sung by actors, is almost another character. Music at the Nov. 27 preview began both acts, moved the plot and transitioned scenes. Ensemble actors again are both characters and narrators reciting words from Dickens to set a scene or relate background.

While the Cratchit family story isn't as big a part of this "Carol" as in some shows, Micah-Shane Brewer and Angela Graham show love and depth in supporting roles. Johanna Dunphy repeats her last year's role as Belle, showing why a young Scrooge loved her and an older Scrooge regrets losing her. Laura Sebastian as Scrooge's "Joy to the World" singing housekeeper Mrs. Grigsby is fun to watch.

The ghosts so important to "Carol" are excellent. David Brian Alley is a strong, scary ghost of Jacob Marley in white makeup and chains. (He's equally menacing as a live Marley in a scene from Scrooge's past.) Katy Wolfe Zahn and Neil Friedman repeat their Christmas Past and Christmas Present roles perfectly. (They also get some of costume designer Bill Black's more eye-catching costumes. Zahn wears a white frothy ballerina-inspired dress of tulle and glitter accented with a holly headdress. Friedman's mismatched plaids, patterns and green make a costume statement of holiday excess.) It was good to see the giant, black drape form of Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come return to torment Scrooge on stage. Last year replaced the figure with a virtual menace using production technology.

David Kortemeier plays Scrooge for the third year, and this is his best performance. He begins as brusque yet vulnerable; his regret at lost love and past decisions is poignant as the first act ends. The actor infuses his Scrooge with humor and even childlike stubbornness, insisting on playing games though he can't be seen by others. As scenes from past and present play out Kortemeier stands often to one side of the stage. He's not watching but reliving; playgoers should watch him. He expresses Scrooge's emotions often in small facial expressions or movements. It's never more telling than as Alley's Marley, contemptuous and clad in all black, offers the younger Scrooge, played by Eric Sorrels, a job. As his younger self happily sets his future with Marley, Kortemeier's expression shows he now realizes its consequences.

Overall the 2013 "A Christmas Carol" is a more measured production and richer telling of a story that continues to leave playgoers smiling and humming as they leave the theater.

'Christmas Carol'

-Where: Clarence Brown Theatre, University of Tennessee

-When: 7:30 p.m. today, Dec. 4-7, Dec. 11-14 & Dec. 19-21; 2 p.m. Dec. 1, Dec. 8, Dec. 15 & Dec. 22

-Tickets: \$25 adult, \$19 senior citizen, \$12 UT faculty/staff or non-UT student, \$5 UT student for Wednesday or Thursday show; \$30 adult, \$25 senior citizen, \$15 UT faculty/staff or non-UT student, \$5 UT student for Friday, Saturday or Sunday at <http://clarencetheatre.com> or 865-974-5161.

