



BURNING Theatre Blog

Review: *A Christmas Carol* @ CBT

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I have a confession to make: even though I've been involved in the theatre for my entire adult life, I haven't seen a staged production of Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* since my parents took me and my sister when we were kids. In fact, I've been a little disdainful about Christmas theatre productions in general; thinking of them mostly as box office necessities rather than "real theatre", whatever that is. You could say I've been a bit of a humbug about the whole thing. Which is why I'm happy to report that I've had a rather Scrooge-like change of heart after attending the Clarence Brown Theatre's most recent production of Dicken's seminal holiday tale.

As Christmas traditions go, you'll be hard pressed to find a more entertaining evening in East Tennessee than this beautiful and boisterous cornucopia of music, dance, humor and spirit. Edward Morgan and Joseph Hanreddy's adaptation is in every way the story you're familiar with, flowing with narrative ease at a steady pace, while liberally but appropriately infusing your favorite carols throughout. Director Kathleen Conlin's lavish staging is undeniably full of revelry and cheer, but she manages to capture more than just a surface telling of this classic. In the course of all the festivities Conlin presents us with moments of surprisingly relevant and moving theatre; gently encouraging us to remember that, for many the world is a cruel place, and that true compassion for our fellow human beings is often in woefully short supply even in our own hearts. Though she never belabors these moments, for me, their existence and deft execution are what elevated the production from simply a box office bulwark into the realm of worthy cultural tradition.

Though its a common refrain heard from the other characters in the story, Jed Diamond's Scrooge clearly presented something I'd never really believed about the character: Ebenezer Scrooge really is worthy of our pity. Diamond presents us with a man whose supernatural journey of forced introspection takes a serious emotional toll, and we begin to see the pitiable effects of that experience very early on as Scrooge is pulled from one painful realization to the next, so that by the time its all over, we are honestly relieved for him. In one of the earlier scenes, as I watched Scrooge railing and pleading desperately in vein at his younger self to chose love over acquisition, I was earnestly moved. Judging from the sniffles in the audience, I was not alone. Diamond's Scrooge is no doubt miserly, petty, and cruel (quite often to very humorous effect), but it was a gratifying insight to discover that perhaps Scrooge's regrets are not buried as deeply as even he would like to believe, because when his revelations and eventual redemption come, they are all the more human and potent as a result.

The entire ensemble is to be congratulated for creating a vibrant sense of communal storytelling without resorting to campy showmanship. From the seamless exchange of narrative voices, to the frequent choral and dance interludes, to the perfect execution of myriad scenic changes, to just the lovely simple feeling of honest enjoyment that seemed to radiate from the stage, the entire cast together is responsible for creating something that might be called the spirit of the play. Of particular note were the performances of Collin Andrews as Bob Cratchit who, along with Brain Gligor as Scrooge's jovial nephew Fred, made for some of the evening's most belly laughing moments. Connor Hess as the Young Scrooge plays opposite Lauren Pennline's Belle, and together the two have a solid chemistry that results in a devastating dramatic climax. Laura Beth Wells exhibits strong comedic character work as the irascible Mrs. Dilber, while Peter Kevoian makes for a bubbling and memorable Fezziwig.

There are few other venues in East Tennessee that compare to the CBT's main stage in scale or technical capability, so its always a treat to enjoy the full force of a show exhibiting this level of production quality. Kevin Depinet's scenic composition is simply marvelous. To my mind, the stage seemed to suggest the inside of Big Ben, with a massive clock face dominating

upstage right, through which we can make out the rooftops of Victorian London courtesy of Joe Payne's clever projection design work. As one might expect in a story where time is supernaturally fickle, the clock figures heavily into the design as a whole. Thanks to John Horner's thrilling lighting design we are treated to a fantastical variety of effects, from the psychedelically spooky to one particularly ingenious moment when the clock face appears to become the stained glass window of a cathedral. Likewise Mike Ponder creates a soundscape that runs the gamut from a busy Victorian street to the rattling chains of purgatory. The bustling traffic of thirty or so artists dancing about the stage with energy and precision comes to us courtesy of choreographer Casey Sams while Melony Dodson (Music Director) ensures that the show's many carols are delivered with warmth and brightness befitting the season. Finally, Bill Black furnishes the cast in a rich and sumptuous array of period perfect petticoats and bonnets, tailcoats and top hats, as well as an assortment of costumes from all walks of Victorian life, and of course, a quartet of colorful and fantastically rendered spirits. The effect of all this production value is a show full of as much pageantry as heart, which works in lockstep with the performers, keeping Dicken's classic tale as exciting to watch tonight as it must have been more than a century ago.

If this show is already a part of your holiday tradition then you'll be especially glad to attend this year's production. And if you haven't seen this play in a few years, (or if you've been a humbug like me about it) do yourself a favor and let the cast and crew of CBT's *A Christmas Carol* share a little of their holiday cheer with you, I'm sure you'll be glad you did.

A Christmas Carol runs through December 17. You can get tickets

-- JP Schuffman is a critic and the Managing Artistic Director of the Knoxville Theatre Club which fosters the creation of theatre by artists in Knoxville and the Cumberland / Appalachian regions. KTC offers educational and training opportunities, and provides resources for the local theatre community.