

**THEATER**

**REVIEWS**

**Pageant**

Pageants abound during Christmastime, but only Triangle Productions could drag out this beauty—a musical comedy in which six queens compete for one crown, and judges from the audience pick a new winner each night.

*Pageant* spoofs classic beauty contests right down to a cheesy host named Frankie (Rick Lewis) who parades frocked-up fellas through evening gown introductions, spokesmodel pitches and even a swimsuit production number in which they don't just lip-synch, but actually sing. The "talent" showcase, however, proves the most entertaining with a lineup of vaudeville acts that range from a tap-dancing cowgirl to Southern Belle ventriloquist.

It's all in good fun to play dress-up, but this send-up of an American institution is too tame. It makes one wonder if the country's conservative Republicans (or maybe just family-friendly Disney executives) have infiltrated Stumptown's last stronghold of outlandishness. This is Portland, after all; leave the Miss Congeniality award for Peoria.

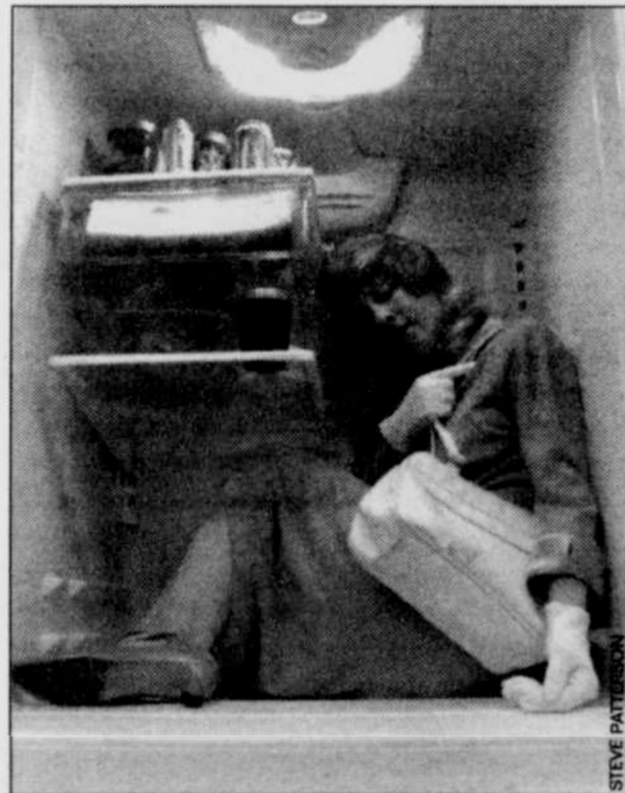
—Timothy Krause

**Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge**

What a holiday hoot! Gay satirist Christopher Durang (*Beyond Therapy* and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*) has gifted a twisted farce that cleverly skewers Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* to present a good dose of laughter for both those who love and revile the original holiday chestnut.

In this Artists Repertory Theatre production, Scrooge's "bah, humbug" gets derailed when the Ghost of Christmas Past, Present and Future (now embodied by one big, beautiful black woman) accidentally spirits them away to the wrong place and time. Instead of the happy Fezziwigs or Scrooge's lonely grave, they repeatedly catch off-guard a desperate Cratchit matriarch sick of her ever-effusive but always poor husband, crippled goody-two-shoes son and 20 other children who live in her root cellar.

Mrs. Cratchit sets out on a rollicking bender, searching for a little holiday cheer of her own while planning a leap from London Bridge. Here Durang's revisionist tale of redemption



Val Landrum stars in *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*

collides head-on with another holiday war-horse, as newly winged Clarence unintentionally convinces Mrs. Cratchit what *It's a Wonderful Life* it would have been had she never existed. Only when Scrooge and Mrs. Cratchit are *Touched by an Angel* does this delightfully gauche, surprisingly jovial ride arrive at its happy holiday.

While not achieving a perfect pitch, gay director Jon Kretzu has his cast tilting with wild abandon. Among them, Duffy Epstein steadies the sweet spot between classic and comic Scrooge even as Sarah Lucht's drunken Mrs. Cratchit tips the show forward. To their credit, David Sikking's Bob Cratchit is a saccharin simp personified and Mark Schwahn is a Tiny Tim poster boy, while all around the energy and excitement is sheer Christmas morning.

God bless them, every one.

—TK

**Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place**

Sowelu Theater Ensemble's current production is of two minds, so to speak, offering an intriguing theater experience that takes its audiences in strikingly different directions by presenting the same one-act play twice in the same evening—once with a cast of all women and then again with a cast of all men.

The road map to these strangely similar yet altogether different places is feminist playwright Megan Terry's *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, a peculiar short play in which three men share cell time for a bungled murder of one's wife, reviving the event and re-enacting related historical atrocities.



Gladys Cratchit flips her Fezziwig in the latest from gay satirist Christopher Durang

Under Julie Akers' intense staging, the all-female cast heavily engages military lockdown to wrestle with gender issues, brandishing a dark power in their tightly closed, testosterone-driven performances. In the second half, director Barry Hunt puts up an equally imaginative and much more buoyant male cast that charmingly finds asylum in a delicate dance of schizophrenia—sort of a cool, dry choreography of mental mining.

Individually, these interpretations are a little thin. When played back to back, however, the pair offers an explicit showcase of two directors' conceptual inventions. It's a rare opportunity to see so immediately such contrasting variations on a theme. More importantly, however, Sowelu's dichotomy allows its audience some elbowroom in sorting through the aftermath, some leniency in interpretation of what it all could mean and space in which to find truth.

—TK

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