

**Scrooge (Richard Elmore)
tells off Bob Cratchit
(Frank Muhr)**



CLIFF COLES

More Joy, Bigger Ghosts

Willamette Rep brings back the holiday classic

An ensemble of storytellers clad in gray gathers slowly on stage, eerie music muting their greetings and a light mist scuttling across the boards. That's the cool and magical beginning to Willamette Rep's second annual production of *A Christmas Carol*. The show is spiced up from last year with singing, humor and bigger ghost scenes, but audience members are still treated to a version that doesn't skimp on Dickens' rich language or moral weight.

Director Kirk Boyd emphasizes the theatricality of David McCann's faithful, wordy script. There are 10 actors continually changing roles and serving as narrators, juggling words and action. Theatricality comes naturally to most of the ensemble. Helene Morse and Scott Shirk are particularly adept at developing characters and connecting with the audience. Yet the emphasis on play is at times overdone. Benjamin Newman is highly entertaining, but he seems overly conscious of this fact and monopolizes audience attention by being a little *too* interesting.

A Christmas Carol faces challenges in

any adaptation. The complete transformation of a human soul in less than two hours is hard to do, even if you do have three spirits helping you along. Richard Elmore, who plays only Ebenezer Scrooge, is a wonderful curmudgeon. He faces fear, death and humiliation with drama. He gives to the poor with cheer, but he doesn't change enough from one man to another. In the whirlwind of words and movement, Scrooge should take a few moments of reflection.

In the end, it is the humanity of the ensemble that draws the audience into the show. Mindy Linder's performance is honest; from her delight in wordplay at the ensemble's introduction to a beautiful scene as Scrooge's once-loved Belle, she keeps faith with Dickens. Richard Leebrick looks and feels like a spooky Dickens denizen. Caleb Pruitt as Tiny Tim is adorable as is Frank Muhr as his hardworking, downtrodden father.

Left from last year's bleaker version of the same script are the set and some costumes. I appreciate Boyd's decision to keep Norm Spencer's set simple and let the audi-

ence use their imaginations. Lighting director Michael Peterson helps people know where to look and how to feel, but the lighting is sparse as well. Heather DeBey's costumes are key in helping the actors play multiple roles. Beginning with a simple, nearly modern base, actors add skirts, frock coats, mob-caps and other pieces to change quickly and without fuss. DeBey does this excellent work on a shoestring. It wouldn't be surprising to find her doing excellent work with an actual shoestring, but if WillRep is to make a yearly go of *Carol*, I would like to see them invest more in the high quality, conscientiously tailored costumes associated with professional theater.

Much has been made of Boyd's luck and skill in nabbing Oregon Shakespeare Festival's resident sound designer Todd Barton. Barton is a man who admits he derives great pleasure in "finding strange sounds on a daily basis," such as the haunted echo of chains dropped against an old oil tank. I listened for old oil tanks but only heard the sounds of ghosts and early industrial London. His work helped fill in some of the theatrical gaps left by the simplicity of the show.

Technical and wardrobe showmanship were saved for the ghosts, who were a big, snazzy splash against the clean and simple production. The contrast jarred me; I didn't always like it. But Scrooge didn't seem to like it either, so perhaps that was the point.

The play is still a little bleak. It's Dickens. With such inherent bleakness, it may seem like an odd choice for a Christmas tradition. What Boyd has offered us in this staging of *Carol* is a journey to joy. Unlike other holiday events, where I often leave feeling I've been beaten over the head with the Yule log of cheer, this play allows me to find cheer on my own terms. There is probably more Scrooge than Tiny Tim in most of us, and this production of *A Christmas Carol* is refreshing as a holiday activity. We are allowed to think our way into the meaning of Christmas, to judge, reflect and redeem ourselves along with Ebenezer Scrooge. **GW**

Opening Nights

A Christmas Carol 2007

Opens at the Actors Cabaret of Eugene Nov. 30.

You like your holidays splendidous and all Broadway'd out? Right, well, Broadway's on strike right now, so you might as well suck it up and head to the corner of 10th and Willamette, and I don't mean to the snotty, Scrooge-y gym but to the warm and welcoming ACE, where the music of Alan Menken (think *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, etc.) and the lyrics of Lynn Ahrens (*Ragtime*) will charm the meanness right out of your heart. Show dates are Nov. 30 and Dec. 1, 7-9, 14-16 & 21-22. Tix available at www.actorscabaret.org or 683-4368.

It's a Wonderful Life:

A Live Radio Play

Opens Dec. 1 at the Wildish Theatre in Springfield; opens Dec. 6 at the Lord Leebrick Theatre.

Is this your favorite holiday movie? Well, the play's a bit different, according to the PR. Your performing arts editor must admit she's never seen the movie, so the distinctions might be lost. But "live radio play" sounds cool! Directed by the much-honored Carol Horne and starring, among others, Best of Eugene Readers Poll winner and daily paper columnist Bob Welch (oh, and some actors, like Jeff Pierce, Sharon Sless and Bary Shaw), this show should be an interesting addition to the holiday canon. Head to the pretty, pretty Wildish or wait for the show's return to the intimate Leebrick. Show dates are Dec. 1 & 2 in Springfield and Dec. 6-16 in Eugene. For tix, go to www.lordleebrick.com or call 465-1506.

The Wizard of Oz

Opens Nov. 30 at Cottage Theatre in Cottage Grove.

What? No Ghost of Christmas Past? No little children of war and famine? No angels walking around giving presents to people? Nope. Just the traditional, familiar scaries — the monkey, the Wicked Witch of the West — and the familiar lovelies: Cowardly Lion, Scarecrow and, best of all, Toto. It's the movie, adapted and turned into a stage production. Want to feel all warm and fuzzy without getting Xmas-ified? Head south, people. Show dates are Nov. 30 and Dec. 1-2, 6-9 and 13-16. Tix available at www.cottagetheatre.org or 942-8001.



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