

A LITTLE DICKENS

OCT's A Christmas Carol finds something fresh in the familiar

It's a timeless literary trope, from Ecclesiastes to *Groundhog Day*: A cynical man, mired in despair and the funk of worldly resentments, is confronted with the error of his ways to such an extent that he undergoes an immediate and permanent transformation, emerging from darkness into light. Such victories of the spirit are the epitome of happily ever after, and we never tire of their telling.

Few stories of transformation, however, are as beloved and enduring as Charles Dickens' 1843 novella, *A Christmas Carol*, which has been filmed, staged, revamped and respoiled so many times it's become an integral piece of our cultural DNA. In Eugene alone this holiday season, there are at least three spins on Dickens' classic, including Ballet Fantastique's jazzed-up *An American Christmas Carol* at the Hult, actor Rickie Birran's dramatic readings around town and Oregon Contemporary Theatre's new rendition, adapted and directed by Elizabeth Helman.

Helman's adaptation is a punchy, economical retelling of the tale of Ebenezer Scrooge, that miserly old grouch who, after being visited on Christmas Eve by three ghosts, does a complete 360, becoming a good guy. It's always invigorating, watching Scrooge get thumped and renewed, and OCT's production hones this story to its bare essentials, giving us a sort of shorthand that touches on familiar sentiments while providing a few pleasant surprises.

The play's skeletal structure and minimal sets function as a thumbnail sketch, allowing the cast to dig into the pith of each character. Instead of bustling city streets and loud

TINAMARIE IVEY
AS THE GHOST OF
CHRISTMAS PRESENT
AND ROBERT HIRSH
AS SCROOGE



feasts with the Cratchits, Helman — through monologues and tight staging — turns the focus onto the emotional truth inside each character.

As Scrooge, Robert Hirsh is fantastic; rather than playing Ebenezer as an unregenerate jerk, he allows the audience to see the burnt romantic that hides inside the hardened shell, as though Scrooge barely believes his own bahs and humbugs. Hirsh's Scrooge is less devil than victim, making his pain all the more human.

The whole cast, in fact, succeeds in finding something fresh in each well-worn role. Ralph Steadman, in triple duty (he also plays Old Joe), makes for a hilariously saucy Fezziwig, and his Marley is less scary than sad and

frustrated. Joseph Workman (as Fred, young Ebenezer, Peter Cratchit) adds a dose of ebullience to the proceedings, and Tinamarie Ivey (Mrs. Fezziwig, Ghost of Christmas Present), Melanie Moser (Christmas Past, Martha Cratchit, Maggie), Damon Noyes (Bob Cratchit) and Erica Towe (Belle, Kate) are all strong, as are the kids in the production: Hugh Brinkley (Tiny Tim, young Scrooge) and Kyra Siegel (Belinda, Fanny).

Clocking in at just 90 minutes, OCT's take on *A Christmas Carol* offers a short, sharp dose of Dickens, and it goes down just right. ■

A Christmas Carol plays through Dec. 20 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; \$15-\$30, 465-1506.

EVENTS CALENDAR



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