

HOLIDAY TREATS

Local theaters hit the stage with a whirl of winter classics

What is it about the encroaching cold and dark that sends us shivering out into the night in search of a collective theater experience? Local theaters can smell our desire, and like an expert patisserie, they set out the most familiar, uplifting theatrical fare to tempt us.

There will be no angst-ridden, painful social statements made on stage this December. The holiday theater season is about warm, familiar classics to satisfy an audience hungry for community and tradition.

Fans of **Actors Cabaret of Eugene** have spoken and the cabaret has listened. Their popular Scrooge-tastic version of *A Christmas Carol* is back in the theater's brilliantly festooned hall.

"We at Actors Cabaret love the holidays," executive director and producer Jim Roberts says. "We go all out decorating the theater with wreaths, garlands, mechanical characters. Our patrons spend the holidays with us every time we present a Christmas show and tell us that they feel like they're at home."

In classic ACE style, their version of *A Christmas Carol* is a razzle-dazzle, rowdy affair. According to Roberts, "Charles Dickens' classic gets the full Broadway musical treatment in the (Menken, Ahrens and Okrent) adaptation. Joe Zingo's take on the show makes for a less dark and more family-friendly version with all the music, colorful costumes and uplifting ending."

A Christmas Carol plays at ACE through Dec. 19.

Eugene songstress Shirley Andress reprises another tradition at **The Shedd** with an evening of holiday music.

"I love putting this particular concert together because it feels like a coming home," Andress says of *Swinging on a Star*, playing Dec. 10-17. "It's steeped in tradition and brings people together in a very positive and joyful way."

This year's concert features Bill Hulings, Bob Cross, Tracy Williams-Tooze, Marisa Frantz and Vicki Brabham, with Andress in the lead. Together they take on the challenge of swing-era holiday songs.



A CHRISTMAS CAROL AT ACTORS CABARET OF EUGENE

"This concert was designed to bring back those wonderfully arranged Christmas tunes from the 1930s through the 1950s," Andress says. "These arrangements are some of the coolest renditions of Christmas tunes out there. Super challenging to sing, but the end result is well worth the struggle of balancing those tight harmonies"

Andress speaks passionately about the power of music during the holiday season. "The music is hauntingly familiar," she says. "I think holiday music brings that best out in many of us."

If you have not had the pleasure of attending **Fred Crafts' Radio Redux**, allow yourself a treat this holiday season when you see *Miracle on 34th Street* at the Hult Center Dec. 18-20. Crafts himself is a consummate performer, bringing together some of Eugene's best to preserve the tradition of radio theater.

Scrooge, Tiny Tim and all those horrifying ghosts reappear at **Oregon Contemporary Theatre** with director Elizabeth Helman's adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*.

"Dickens' ghost story of one man's redemption on Christmas Eve has endured for over 170 years," says OCT artistic director Craig Willis. "Growing up, it was a story I looked forward to revisiting each December. It's a story

whose message evolves as our individual and cultural circumstances change."

OCT hopes to bring families in to see this show, satisfying their goal of engaging with the entire community. "It's fun to see kids on our stage and in the audience," Willis says. "*A Christmas Carol* is a great story for kids. The music, singing and dance are engaging and lively. And at the center is Dickens' haunting tale that offers valuable life lessons."

He also notes that OCT has had "terrific success with other holiday stories, but you can't exactly bring the kids or grandchildren to *Santaland Diaries*," David Sedaris' darkly humorous story of working as an elf at Macy's department store.

A Christmas Carol runs through Dec. 20 at OCT.

This is just a small sampling of local holiday performances. If your tastes run toward the non-traditional holiday show, **Cottage Theatre** is staging *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* Dec. 4-20. **Cirque du Soleil's** touring production *Cirque Musical Holiday Spectacular* will be at UO's Matthew Knight Arena on Dec. 13. For children's theater, *Annie* plays at **Upstart Crow** Dec. 4-12, and **Rose Children's Theatre** presents *I'm Dreaming of an A Cappella Christmas* Dec. 18-20. ■

THE SCROOGE EFFECT

OCT offers another look at Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

Most of us have grown up with the tale of Ebenezer Scrooge rediscovering his Christmas spirit and, while the story doesn't change, our relationship to the story does.

Sometimes life makes Scrooges of us all with its litany of heartbreak, missed opportunities and too much time wasted stressing about careers and money. That's what makes Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* so immortal.

As time passes, it becomes harder to look at *A Christmas Carol* with the wide-eyed wonderment of a child (like I used to) — particularly in the age of Black Friday's naked consumerism and all manner of worldly horrors pushing and shoving into our consciousness.

Oh Dickens, you warned us all those years ago — but were we listening?



ROBERT HIRSH AND BRITTANY DORRIS IN OCT'S A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Oregon Contemporary Theatre's 2015 annual edition of *A Christmas Carol* is adapted and directed by Elizabeth Helman.

Helman's adaptation makes space for holiday music, nicely establishing the Victorian tone. The show is briskly, if somewhat flatly, paced. The production is strong, though some action sequences — Fezziwig's ball, for example — could have been cleaner.

Reprising the role of Scrooge is Robert Hirsh. Hirsh is perfectly understated; we feel some sympathy for the

cranky old codger. We've all known people like him, hardened on the outside, and maybe some of us can see a little of ourselves in the hurt that led him to where he is.

Bob Cratchit (Tony Stirpe) is rosy-cheeked and optimistic, Joseph Workman brings a plucky derring-do to the role of Scrooge's nephew Fred and the spirits of Jacob Marley and Christmas Past, Present and Future (played by Bruce Lundy, Alycia Olivar and Brittany Dorris) offer some fun frights for all ages. As Tiny Tim, Hugh Brinkley shoots an arrow straight through your heart.

When telling a story as woven into our culture as *A Christmas Carol*, the audience is yours to lose. We all expect and want different things from the experience; we have our own notions of how the story should be told. It's hard to imagine OCT'S 2015 production falling short of anyone's expectations.

Maybe it was just me, or the way the moral of the story hit me at this time in my life, or the hangover from all the bad news in the media, but I left the theater feeling mildly — but not unpleasantly — maudlin; a new chapter in my interaction with this timeless classic.

I wonder if that's what Dickens had in mind from the very beginning. — William Kennedy

A Christmas Carol runs through Dec. 20 at Oregon Contemporary Theatre; \$15-\$28.