

COZY UP TO A FINE CHRISTMAS SHOW

Very Little Theatre's *The Christmas Foundling* mixes holiday cheer and cultural commentary

Part Christmas pageant, part serious drama and totally a reflection on the nature of contemporary family, *The Christmas Foundling*, which finishes up a brief run this weekend at Very Little Theatre's small Stage Left, is loosely based on Bret Harte's classic 1868 short story "The Luck of Roaring Camp," in which the birth of a child transforms a community.

As the play opens, we meet Old Jake (Donovan Werts), the affable singing gold miner who shares a modest cabin with Hoke (Blake Beardsley), his terse, reliable and haunted partner. This odd couple seeks gold in the splendid Sierra Nevada mountains around Piney Gulch, a rough mining camp whose luck — and ore — have largely played out.

They're joined by a trio of stock western characters named Boston (Brett French), Moscow (Mike Curtin) and Georgia (Thomas Weaver).

Into all their lives one Christmas Eve arrives a very pregnant woman who is near death with hunger, cold and exhaustion. She survives just long enough to produce a child, which the men of Piney Gulch, having little alternative, adopt as one of their own, feeding the hungry infant by connecting him directly to the udder of a goat. "We decided to eliminate the middleman," Jake explains.

Hoke and Old Jake also collect a fair amount of gold — for the boy's college education, of course — by charging admission to any miner who wants to see him. This sets up a perfect Christmas tableau, with three visiting miners bearing gold and, in place of frankincense and myrrh, a Russian edition of the poetry of Alexander Pushkin.

Faced with this new life in their midst, the men clean up their own lives. No more hard drinking, no more swearing, no loose women around young Tom (seventh grader Jasper Hitchman), who enjoys a raised-by-wolves childhood that might have been designed by a romantic like Henry David Thoreau, except that Tom and his odd parents haven't quite yet seen the need for him to learn to read.

A threat to this bucolic idyll arrives one day in the form of Aunt Sarah (Brittany Dorris), the prim New England sister of Tom's dead mother. She's spent the past decade chasing



BRITTANY DORRIS, JASPER HITCHMAN, DONOVAN WERTS AND BLAKE BEARDSLEY IN *THE CHRISTMAS FOUNDLING*

clues to her missing sister's whereabouts and has followed the rumors to Piney Gulch. She demands to take the boy home for a "real" — read New England prep school — education.

The conflict that follows, while talky at times, does a good job of reflecting on a broad range of themes in contemporary America, from the definition of family and the cultural rift between urban and rural (as well as Eastern and Western) to questions about the best form of education and even the proper role of the English language in the United States.

Kari Boldon Welch directs this show as a cozy, feel-good play for Christmas, pushing the heartwarming aspect right to the limit without ever sliding over the edge into kitsch. I'd defy even Scrooge to sit though it without smiling and even on occasion getting watery eyes.

Her cast is great across the board. Beardsley's Hoke is as enigmatic as Werts' Jake is garrulous. Young Jasper Hitchman does a fine job as the boy Tom, and the trio of French, Curtin and Weaver as Boston, Moscow and Georgia forms a Grecian chorus for the action that carries a lot of the cultural and political weight of the show. The set, by Welch and Sarah Etherton is simple and effective.

Finally, Werts' singing is dead perfect for his character and even draws the audience into singing along.

Go see it if you can. All three shows were sold out opening weekend, so tickets may be hard to come by.

The Christmas Foundling continues 7:30 pm Thursday through Saturday, Dec. 7-9, and 2 pm Sunday, Dec. 10 at Very Little Theatre's Stage Left. General admission seating \$12 at TheVLT.com.

EVENTS CALENDAR

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SHELTER ANIMAL RESOURCE ALLIANCE S.A.R.A.'s Treasures Gift & Thrift Shop. Volunteer, Donate, Shop, ADOPT! 871 River Road, Open Daily 10am-6pm. 541-607-8892 sarastreasures.org LOOK FOR THIS WEEK'S RESCUED CAT.

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