

'Scrooged in Astoria' delivers holiday hilarity

Astor Street Opry Company's musical comedy opens Dec. 1

By KATHERINE LACAZE
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Those who attend the Astor Street Opry Company's latest production of "Scrooged in Astoria" — opening 7 p.m. Friday, Dec. 1 — will experience the conventional themes and emotions associated with any Christmas show: tidings of goodwill, a sense of peace and joy, and the giddy merriment of the holiday season.

What is unconventional — and what has delighted audiences for years — is how the community theater company gets you there using a melodramatic, hysterical and loose retelling of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," stylized as a 1960s TV show and replete with musical commercials and more than 20 wacky characters.

The script, written by local playwright Judith Niland and featuring original music by Philip Morill, allows the cast and crew some leeway each year the production is staged. Astor Street regular Bill Carr is the second director besides Niland to take a crack at it, and the material makes the task an enjoyable one.

"This is a fun show to produce," said Carr, who is directing "Scrooged" for the second time but has also performed in it and served as stage manager in the past. "It's a great show, it's a well-written show, and it's a lot of fun to be in. We can fill up this theater with music and happiness and joy, and it gets people out here singing."

He doesn't feel confined by the repeat-nature of the production, but rather appreciates using creativity to mold and build off the show from within.

"There is some room for latitude in this," he explained. "You can convey a lot of different things with just a look, or where you stage some stuff. It's always growing; there's always something you can add to it."

Behind the scenes

One flexible feature of the show is that the Scrooge-esque character can be portrayed as a man or woman without otherwise altering the story. This year, the character will be Maxine Croke, played by Jaime Baird. Carr has also exercised creativity in staging certain characters or adding new props.



COLIN MURPHEY PHOTOS

Actors pose for a photo before a rehearsal of "Scrooged in Astoria" at the Astor Street Opry Company.



LEFT and RIGHT: Performers in the Astor Street Opry Company's production of "Scrooged in Astoria" rehearse a scene.

Patricia Von Vintage is assisting Carr in directing this year's production, as well as playing the role of Sneake — after all, Carr said, "we're community theater, so we do a little bit of everything."

Being part of the production crew, she has a new understanding and appreciation for the amount of work and coordination required to pull off a prop- and scene change-heavy production with a large cast.

"You definitely realize if nobody works together as a team, it won't come off as a team," Von Vintage said. "I'm definitely seeing the importance of, as a whole, everybody working together, whether they're in the scene or not."

Backstage, the crew and cast — with



members ranging from kindergarteners to seniors — "have to be like synchronized swimmers" as they move props, set scenes and keep the show moving forward to fulfill the director's vision, she said.

As for Carr, he feels more relaxed this year helming the ship and was pleased with the cast's progress nearly two weeks ahead of the show's opening.

"The play is going to be great, and the community itself and our patrons, they're going to love it, too, because they're so enthused about what we're doing up in here," he said.

Community connections

ChrisLynn Taylor is providing musical

direction, as well as playing Miss Yule Macie, the Ghost of Christmas Presents. She also is the mastermind behind the production's beloved singing commercials, many of which promote the local businesses and organizations sponsoring the show at a certain monetary level.

The commercials are used between set changes and incorporated directly into the scenes. That technique works well since the show is stylized as a '60s holiday special, where the TV actors "would break character, turn around and sell a bottle of soap, then go back into character and save someone's life on the operating table," said Markus Brown, executive director of the Astor Street Opry Company.

He believes the commercials Taylor writes and choreographs are a key part of the play's appeal. They foster a sense of familiarity between the audience and the characters, places and events in "Scrooged," which, as the title implies, is set in Astoria.

"It's a pretty unique, intrinsic quality to the show that we connect the community heavily with the performance itself," Brown said. "Those people around the area that come and see the show, they're very familiar with the Butcher Block or Clatsop Power or any number of the sponsors that are represented."

Because the commercials are sponsorship derivatives, Taylor periodically adds new ones — 12 this year. Self-described as "the Weird AI of the Astor Street Opry Company," Taylor said she is thrilled to see her work performed by a variety of actors year after year.

"I can't believe what I'm doing is on-stage, being applauded," she said. "Whether I'm singing a commercial, or leading a commercial or I'm onstage to do Yule Macie, this show is so much fun to do. It's a favorite, because you get to make people happy."

"Scrooged in Astoria" runs through Saturday, Dec. 23. Friday and Saturday performances begin at 7 p.m. Two matinees, on Sunday, Dec. 10, and Sunday, Dec. 17, begin at 2 p.m.

The house opens 30 minutes before each performance, and the Miss Vivian saloon and Miss Virginia soda fountain will be open for refreshments.

For more information, call 503-325-6104 or visit astorstretoprycompany.com. 