



John Betjeman's poem 'Christmas' contains the immortal line, 'That hideous tie, so kindly meant.' Here, Kevin Perry and Rita Smith reveal what they truly feel about receiving a pair of socks and an ornament as gifts.



Photos by Patrick Webb

There are never any family arguments at Christmas, right? Karl Johnson, left, and Mike Mathis claim sole possession of a poinsettia while rehearsing the troupe's seasonal show.

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In one sketch, his character reads a letter from a couple pledging to avoid the commercial aspects and concentrate on what is important. "I grew up not focusing on the gift giving, but spending time with family and friends," Scherrer said.

Fellow actor Rita Smith has a couple of solo scenes and interacts with the ensemble of eight. In one comedic encounter with longtime stage collaborator Kevin Perry, they reveal what they *really* think about those ugly but well-intentioned gifts.

"I think it's a wonderful season," said Smith, a retired elementary school teacher who is prominent in the Long Beach Peninsula's music scene. "I love Christmas music. I put it on at noon on Thanksgiving," she said.

"I do enjoy the season. Sure, there's going to be commercialism, but with Christmas you have to make it what you want," Smith said.

Friendly

Also onstage are more troupe veterans Ed Ahlers, Karl Johnson, Bette Lu Krause

and Rose Wallace. Joining them are newcomers Evelyn Benenati and Mike Mathis.

"It's a family friendly show," Benenati, an Ilwaco High School senior, said. "At the read-through, some scenes actually brought tears to my eyes. There are a lot of jokes to work out."

Carter finds the script "heartwarming." She directed a production at Ocean Park Lutheran Church 13 years ago — well before the Players secured their current headquarters — with Johnson and Wallace on stage and Ahlers running the lights.

Smith said her husband, Kent, had been

asking for them to perform it again, but the group tries not to repeat shows during any 10-year period. "We all wanted to do it," she said.

As well as Christmas themes, the show features a handful of original songs, a celebration of the winter solstice and a wedding that sparks potential conflict between Jewish and Irish-Catholic families. Through it all, several poinsettias keep appearing to add color to the spectacle.

"It's a challenge and a new experience," first-time actor Mathis, who savors all the scenes, said. "They are very entertaining."

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