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Brent Hinkley (from left), John Tufts, Safiya Fredericks, and Mark Bedard in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival production of "It's Christmas, Carol!"

Holiday Show a Return to Stage

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY
DARLEEN ORTEGA



Shakespeare via the Marx Brothers brings the laughs

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival's indoor venues have been closed since March 2020, an excruciating pause for those of us who love theater. Now that our beloved tradition of nearly year-round theater has been well and truly broken, OSF's return to indoor theater is itself a break with tradition: its first holiday show, a comical send-up of holiday shows and Shakespeare via the Marx Brothers.

"It's Christmas, Carol!" was commissioned by OSF and is enjoying its world premiere in the Angus Bowmer Theater. It was written by Mark Bedard, John Tufts, and Brent Hinkley, the three OSF veteran actors who charmed previous audiences as the Marx Brothers in "Animal Crackers" and "The Cocoanuts." Their task: to employ Groucho, Chico, and Harpo to cheerfully up-end the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, Shakespeare, and the business of theater.

The humor here ranges broadly from terrible puns to slapstick to wordplay to bawdy innuendo to clever choreography to pointed social commentary. Ebenezer Scrooge becomes Carol Scroo-

genhouse (a reliably game Kate Mulligan), a wealthy widow who considers herself generous but gives minimally of her largesse and only for recognition, and who misses most of what anyone tries to tell her about anything. Bob Cratchit becomes Barbara Crotchit (the versatile Lisa Birnbaum, new to OSF and flying through a variety of roles), who is married and Jewish rather than single and Christian as her employer assumes. Cratchit's son Tom is no Tiny Tim, but rather a coddled and impossibly handsome adult man (James Ryen, who specializes in poking fun at handsomeness) who still lives with his parents. And Scroogehouse's niece Freddie (Amy Lizardo, full of good humor) keeps inviting her for Christmas at the household she shares with her girlfriend Rebecca, but Scroogehouse can't compute that they are domestic partners and hears "thespian" instead of "lesbian."

Bedard, Tufts, and Hinkley employ their take on the Marx Brothers to throw the slightly-askew set-up into greater disarray, at first irritating the Narrator (Safiya Fredericks, impressively versatile here). But before long, the narrator loses her own defining concern for sticking to the storyline, which opens lots of fissures for various cast members to notice the holes that have long gaped in the traditional Christmas framing of Ebenezer Scrooge, like the fact that it reinforces a charity model of thinking that leaves capitalism and colonialism insulated from challenge. All with the lightest of touches, of course, along with some playful jabs at time travel, theater, and Shakespeare himself.

This show will be especially fun for people who appreciate the theatrical references and aren't attached to protecting tradition—but it can also be enjoyed at the most surface of slapstick levels. All of it is well-executed

by a cast of 11 versatile actors, all of whom are adept at comic timing and flashes of improvisation, well-directed by Iranian-American director Pirronne Yousefzadeh with flourishes by music director/arranger Dolores Duran-Cefalu and choreographer Jaclyn Miller. Without the show being about inclusion, a variety of backgrounds and communities are reflected and playfully celebrated, and everyone is having fun.

The show plays until Jan. 2, with safety measures appropriate to this stage of the pandemic (see osfashland.org for information and tickets). It's a delightful return to indoor theater in Ashland.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals and the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie and theater review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer. Find her review blog at opinionatedjudge.blogspot.com.