

# Ballet meets Broadway in 'American Christmas Carol'

**B**allet Fantastique's sparkling holiday tradition, "An American Christmas Carol," returns to the Florence Events Center for the first time since 2014. Donna and Hannah Bontrager have re-imagined Charles Dickens' beloved story in iconic post-WWII America with their original choreography set to original arrangements of holiday standards by Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald and Nat King Cole. Actor Adam Goldthwaite joins the company as "Smokey Joe" Marley.

Ballet Fantastique's flagship "American Christmas Carol" is for the young and young at heart, and it promises to charm even the stoniest of humbug hearts.

It plays in Florence on Saturday, Dec. 9, at 7 p.m. at the Florence Events Center, 715 Quince St. Tickets — \$24 adults and \$16 for 18 and under — are available from [www.balletfantastique.org](http://www.balletfantastique.org) and [eventcenter.org](http://eventcenter.org).

"If you imagine what a ballet-Broadway version of Christmas Carol is, that's sort of how I would describe this project," says Ballet Fantastique Co-Choreographer-Producer Hannah. "We look at how to best tell the story and make it fun for modern audiences. We immerse ourselves in the aesthetic and music of the era, we choose songs that tell the story — even tweaking lyrics if needed. We also re-imagine the perspective from which we tell the story."

In this case, Ballet Fantastique's unique new narrative perspective is a 1940s Brooklyn gangster, "Smokey Joe" Marley, a period-inspired re-imagining of the character of Jacob Marley, Scrooge's long-dead slimy

business partner in Dickens's original. The Bontragers and their creative team (including Ballet Fantastique staff Librettist/Historian Genevieve Speer) birthed Joe out of the 1939 Cab Calloway song "The Ghost of Smokey Joe."

"When Genevieve brought us the Cab Calloway song, we knew it was perfect," says Ballet Fantastique Artistic Director and Choreographer-Producer

Donna Marisa Bontrager. "This gravelly song about a really bad guy became our inspiration for a comedic character that drives the drama. And artistically, Smokey Joe's voice also lends our ballet a bit of grit and humor."

Guest actor-singer and regular Ballet Fantastique guest artist Adam Goldthwaite plays Smokey Joe, and audiences will hear him sing a modified version of "Ghost of Smokey Joe," accompanied by his Ghost Brides.

But, Smokey Joe and the Ghost Brides aren't the only playful twists the Bontragers have in store in American Christmas Car-



ol. In fact, Donna Marisa's favorite artistic liberty was her choice to re-imagine the Christmas Spirits as female forces to be reckoned with.

"I wanted the spirits to be women," she said of her choice to re-cast Dickens' ghosts as female dancers. "These are an opportunity to really embody Ebenezer's relationship with his past, present and future. They dance with him, manipulate him, run at him, challenge him."

The Spirits are danced by Ballet Fantastique dancers Tracy Fuller (Christmas Past, to retro jazz hit "Why Don't You Do Right"), Ashley Bontrager (Christmas Present, to Frank Sinatra's "That's Life") and Hannah Bontrager (Christmas Future, to Alfred Hibbler's "After the Lights Go Down Low").

"Our score is 17 iconic standards songs that explore two related musical traditions — big band jazz and the popular tunes of Tin Pan Alley," says Donna.

Traditional songs, including "Winter Wonderland," "Baby It's Cold Outside," "Let it Snow" and "I'll Be Home for Christmas,"

also set the stage for the ballet's choreography.

"An American Christmas Carol" opens with an introduction to Ebenezer Scrooge (Gustavo Ramirez), nephew and new daughter-in-law Fred and Judy (Natanael Leal and Carolin Koepplin), and employee Bob Crachit (Jim Ballard). As Scrooge's pessimistic personality emerges, he has a strange vision in the old clock — not of the clock face, but of Marley, his long-dead business partner. The vision fades and Scrooge drifts to sleep until Marley re-appears, singing "The Ghost of Smokey Joe." Marley and his Ghost Brides warn Scrooge that he will be haunted by three spirits.

As promised, on the stroke of one, Christmas Past arrives in "Why Don't You Do Right," reminding Ebenezer of love gained and lost when he met Marilyn (Ashley Bontrager) at Fezziwig's party way back in the Roaring '20s. After returning to bed — and after the audience returns from intermission — Scrooge is visited by Christmas Present, who shows Scrooge the joys of Christmas through visions of Fred and Judy, and the Crachit family. Here, we will meet Tiny Tim (London Pendleton), who finds joy and delight in the world in spite of adversity in Nat King Cole's "Nature Boy."

Scrooge then meets Christmas Future in an eerie tango to Alfred Hibbler's "After the Lights Go Down Low." Scrooge emerges from his encounters with the Spirits a changed man, "glowing with his good intentions, as light as a feather, happy as an angel and as merry as a schoolboy."

## COAST CENTRAL

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