

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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It's a head-to-toe makeover for 'Carol'

By Pat Craig
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ACT attempts a bold revamping of the classic Dickens holiday tale

OVER THE YEARS, the world has endured more Scrooges and humbugs than it has Bob Cratchits, yet the ongoing yearning for hope and redemption, preached so eloquently in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," is as strong as ever.

That's why the tale has remained such a strong part of many families' Christmas celebrations.

At the same time, the world has continued to spin at a frenetic speed, bringing with each turn new technological wonders that make a simple telling of the story a bit old-fashioned -- slow, even -- in an age of instant access and special effects that can turn your world upside down, or put the planet's treasures in your lap(top).

We yearn for the simplicity of Dickens' story and its clear-cut message, yet we must not be distracted by its quaintness. And that, more or less, is why the American Conservatory Theatre company will drop its almost-30-year-old version of the story for a brand new adaptation, written by Carey Perloff, the company's artistic director, and Paul Walsh.

Since the old production has become such a holiday must for generations of Bay Area residents, changing the show was a tough decision.

"It's been one of the most incredible adventures I've ever had in the theater," said Perloff, whose earliest ACT "Christmas Carol" memory was holding her then-3-year-old daughter on her lap to see it for the first time. "It was really important to do it right, since it has become such a tradition. But (the old version) has been a production designed to run maybe a year or two, and 28 years later, it was still running. It was essentially being held together by spit and glue."

With that in mind, along with the fact that culture has changed dramatically over the past 28 years, and, with it, audience expectations of what dazzles them on stage, Perloff said she realized the show had to be redone. "From top to bottom."

"As a start, we went back to the novel that inspired the show. I took it home and read it aloud with my kids to hear how it sounded as Dickens wrote it," says Perloff. "There were so many things there, so many subtle things that we changed, that it became wonderful to re-explore. At the same time, we want to . . . find ways of honoring some of the traditions."

The story will be essentially the same, although Perloff and Walsh have developed new ways of viewing some of the supernatural aspects of the story, such as the ghosts.

"Over the past 29 years, children have seen 'Lord of the Rings,' and incredible special effects that we cannot do on stage, but we found other ways to create the magic of the ghosts and make it incredibly fun for the audience," she says. "This time, we also want to do without narration (a character playing Dickens narrated the previous version of the script). We made the aesthetic choice to have it told on purely dramatic terms. And we have also put in an intermission, with two acts, each 40 to 45 minutes long. Before, it was just too long with no intermission."

When "A Christmas Carol" was originally staged, ACT's student conservatory was a very small operation. Now, however, it has grown considerably, and having students become "Geary ready" to take part in the production during the final months of their studies for a master's degree in fine arts, is a big part of the conservatory training.

Because of that, Perloff and Walsh gave considerable attention to the roles played by younger actors, so the students would have more opportunities with this version of the script.

Since the play revolves around Scrooge -- a much older character -- much focus was placed on the actor who would perform the role. Perloff says they wrote the script with British actor Giles Havergal in mind.

"If you look at the drawings that accompanied the original story, Giles looks like Scrooge," says Perloff. "And he is an incredible actor I've wanted to work with for a long time. He's taught for us, and directed shows for us before, but this is the first time he's acted here; the first time he was able to get a green card (for acting at ACT), and you won't believe what a nail-biter that was."

Havergal played the role before in the Scottish premiere of the Citizens Theatre production of "Scrooge" in Edinburgh in 2002.

ACT's new adaptation of the story will give audiences something that is completely new, says Perloff. Nothing has been salvaged from the old production, so sets, costumes, music and everything else about the show will be out of the box.

"It really has been an enormous undertaking. Every single corner of the theater has been part of this," she says. "It's a unique opportunity. Where else would you have a show with actors from (ages) 6 to 76, and a play where children actually do play a significant part in the story?"

While this production is filled with music and dance, along with the happy colors of Christmas, Perloff and Walsh have also attempted to give some weight to the cautionary portion of the Dickens story, which talks about the danger and threat of poverty and need, and how if young people aren't well-educated, it will spell trouble for all of us.

On the other hand, the show will also cover the abundance of the holiday season, which, in this version, contains "The Waltz of the Opulent Fruits," which, for the first time in ACT history, will feature a dancing fig.

THEATER PREVIEW

- **WHAT:** American Conservatory Theatre presents "A Christmas Carol," by Charles Dickens, adapted by Carey Perloff and Paul Walsh
- **WHEN:** Tuesdays-Sundays through Dec. 24
- **WHERE:** Geary Theater, 415 Geary St., S.F.
- **HOW MUCH:** \$18-\$80
- **CONTACT:** 415-749-2228, www.act-sf.org