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HOLIDAY STAGE**Out with narration, in with intermission and dancing fruit — it's an (almost) all-new 'Christmas Carol' at the Geary**

- Sam Hurwitt

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There's been "A Christmas Carol" at the Geary Theater every year since the 1976 premiere of American Conservatory Theater's original adaptation by the late Dennis Powers and director Laird Williamson. That original production has become a Bay Area holiday tradition, performed with only minor changes until last year.

But this year Artistic Director Carey Perloff decided to start from scratch. Adapted from the classic Charles Dickens tale by Perloff herself with erstwhile ACT dramaturge Paul Walsh, the new "Carol" features a new script, new songs and a completely new look.

Out is the narration by Dickens, and the show is now split into two acts, to give fidgety kids (and grown-ups) a chance to jump around. And then there's the dancing fruit, inspired by a lush Dickensian dinner-table description in the text.

Lisa Marie Woods is one of 18 kids from ACT's Young Conservatory, ranging from 6 to 12, who play various Cratchit and Fezziwig children, as well as those capering fruits and vegetables.

Staring silently into a mirror, wearing a long red coat, 9-year-old Lisa Marie is trying on various bonnets for her role as Child of Slipping Woman in the play's opening sequence. Or rather, costume designer Beaver Bauer and a few people from the ACT costume shop are trying them on her. Lisa Marie simply stands placidly as they attach the puffy sleeves to her lacy gown.

It's one of three roles Lisa Marie plays in this year's "Carol," along with one of the girls from the Fezziwig party of Ebenezer Scrooge's youth and a Turkish fig, which Lisa Marie says involves "belly dancing a lot."

The youngest of actress, 6-year-old Tobi Jane Moore, comes in for her fitting as the appropriately named Precious, child of Scrooge's former sweetheart and best friend. Also a child model and an ACT veteran from "A Doll's House" two years ago, she's no less stoic than the older girl, standing stock still as scalloped sleeves are attached to her flower-print dress by Kristen Tucker, a costume builder from one of four other shops enlisted to build

costumes for the premiere of this new "Carol."

Lisa Marie and other children will have to come back for the produce fitting, and at a production meeting Perloff asked after the shoes the Spanish onions will be wearing, hoping they'll be noisy enough for some flamenco-style clacking.

"We wanted the design to evoke the nature of what each piece of produce was," Bauer explains, "but that it also kind of look like clothing and the shape of their body, not 'I'm a walking bunch of grapes' -- the nightmare being that it's going to look like a Fruit of the Loom commercial."

One of the most memorable aspects of the 1976 version ("Carol Classic," if you will) was Robert Blackman's imposing industrial-age toy box of a set that gradually came apart during the course of the piece. That's been replaced by a watercolor storybook vision by Broadway designer John Arnone that's more in contrast to Scrooge's miserly psyche than symptomatic of it.

And Bauer's fanciful period gowns and suits, packed with color, replace Robert Morgan's faded Victorian garb, which is still being cannibalized for odds and ends and incidental characters.

It's necessary to make some use of their many sartorial leftovers from the previous production, because unlike the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future, they can't do it all in one night. They've been working since early summer, and even with five shops on the case, they're going right down to the wire to finish the 70 or so costumes.

"It's just prohibitive in time and labor to build this whole show," Bauer says. "Or not start in July -- we would have had to start before that."

Just a few weeks before opening, they're doing fittings every day of nearly completed costumes as a dozen more people work in the next room sewing, staining and stitching gowns as "Glitter and Be Gay" from "Candide" plays in the background. They're also assembling the Ghost of Christmas Present's costume from strips of fabric dyed green and then chemically treated to create large veins to be painted red. The ghost is to be a force of life and nature, replacing the Father Christmas look of past Presents.

Outside the dressing rooms are racks of costumes categorized by actor with a list of the roles each actor plays, with a pile of dirty and dented bowlers on the floor beneath them. A bone pile of top hats lines the sides of a stairway down into the immense basement warehouse, where old costumes are available for rental. Like those of the old production, the "Carol" costumes will be set aside from the general stock, to be reused as long as the production runs.

One of this week's many small crises is that the Ghost of Christmas Past flies in on a swing, and the actress doesn't feel safe with just a seat belt to secure her, so they'll have to adapt her costume to accommodate a light climbing harness from REI as well as a corset-like device reinforced with steel bones to support the heavy battery pack for her headdress, because in this production the ghost is depicted as a candle.

Costume shop manager David Draper has dragged the heavy-duty flying harness Lise

Bruneau wore as the angel in "Angels in America" out of mothballs to illustrate the worst-case scenario of what they might be dealing with.

Things are no less busy in the ACT scene shop, where sparks and sawdust fly and the roar of power tools drowns out the Tori Amos song echoing in the background. Wooden sections of three-story towers are being painted light blue, craggy buildings that lean in from the sides of the stage, their angular faces suggesting Christmas trees or immense looming ghosts.

Next to sections of the metal and PVC skeleton of a 30-foot Ghost of Christmas Future -- a full-stage puppet with six glowing eyes and wings that extend into the wings of the stage, its black and purple cloth "body" currently stored in sacks around it -- design associate James Fenton shows the computer-controlled rolling track that guides "the iris," large black borders that come in from the sides to frame and zoom in on particular scenes. The workload is heavy because not only does everything have to be built from scratch, it has to be built to last.

"Everything built for this show has to live forever, since they're planning on maintaining this production indefinitely," he says. "Everybody says 20, 25 years, because that's how long the last one ran, but who knows?"

A Christmas Carol opens Friday and runs through Dec. 24 at the Geary Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco. Tickets: \$25-\$80. (415) 749-2228. www.act-sf.org.

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