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What the Dickens? A Jewish take on 'A Christmas Carol'

by dan pine
staff writer

Carey Perloff says American Conservatory Theater's new stage adaptation of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," which she co-wrote and directed, has Jewish overtones.

"There's a perception that the story is Christian and not for Jews," says Perloff. "But it's not religious. It's a humanist novel very deeply about community."

Perloff can be very persuasive, which is likely one reason why she has been artistic director of ACT for 12 years running. She is universally recognized as one of American theater's brightest lights.

"A Christmas Carol" is currently playing at the Geary Theater in San Francisco through Dec. 24.

"It's about family and food," says Perloff. "It's about Scrooge losing his connection with his family. And it's also about philanthropy. It's ingrained with Jewish concerns."

The show is actually a musical, with several songs by composer Karl Frederik Lundeberg and lyrics by Perloff. But she admits she had help: She took most of her words directly from Dickens himself.

"His language is so wonderful," she says of the great 19th-century English novelist. "Very kinetic, very descriptive."

ACT mounted its first production of "A Christmas Carol" nearly 30 years ago but over time, Perloff says, the set, costumes and even the script started to grow a little "threadbare." The current production is brand spanking new.

The score boasts song titles like "Waltz of the Opulent Fruit," and if that sounds playful and childlike, it should. "A Christmas Carol" is geared for audiences of all ages, with a cast of 45, including kids as young as six.

Perloff had no trouble finding child actors to fill the roles. ACT has always stressed education in its mission statement and runs a highly regarded theater arts school for young people. "We're like a teaching hospital," she says. "ACT is all about training and mentoring."

As mentor-in-chief, Perloff presides over the Bay Area's premiere theater company. She wears two hats, as both artistic director (an administrative post) and as a director. Among her recent directorial achievements are Constance Congdon's "A Mother," Ibsen's "A Doll's House," Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," Chekhov's "The Three Sisters" and "The Threepenny Opera" by Bertolt Brecht.

Prior to joining ACT, Perloff served as artistic director of Classic Stage Company in New York, which won numerous OBIE awards during her seven-year tenure.

Surprisingly, Perloff came relatively late to the theater. She originally wanted to be, and very nearly did

become, a professional anthropologist.

A native of Washington, D.C., Perloff grew up the daughter of an Austrian refugee who “got out at the zero hour” to escape the coming Holocaust. She says that imbued her with a deep appreciation for her Jewish heritage, though her household was not religious.

She later studied the classics, including ancient Greek, at Stanford and Oxford University, but she gradually became drawn to theater. An apprenticeship with New York theater legend Joe Papp led her to her first directing work. Some of the actors she teamed up with early on include Olympia Dukakis, David Strathairn and Maureen Stapleton.

She later joined the faculty at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, eventually making her way back to the Bay Area to take the ACT helm. Perloff is also the proud mother of two kids, including son Nicholas who has already shown great interest in following his mom into the theater.

After the run of “A Christmas Carol,” Perloff looks forward to a busy 2006 season at ACT, including new productions of David Mamet’s “Sexual Perversity in Chicago,” August Wilson’s “Gem of the Ocean” and Richard Sheridan’s classic Restoration comedy “The Rivals.”

But first up, Scrooge, Tiny Tim and the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future.

“A Christmas Carol” plays 7 p.m. with some 2 p.m. matinees, Tuesdays through Sundays, through Dec. 24 at the Geary Theater, 405 Geary St., S.F. Tickets: \$25-\$80. Information: (415) 749-2228.

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