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Entertainment

Review: A fine 'Carol' from A.C.T.



Georgia Rowe, The Examiner

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SAN FRANCISCO -

If there's a sure bet on the San Francisco theater scene, it's "A Christmas Carol" at American Conservatory Theater. The company has been staging Charles Dickens' evergreen classic for over 30 years, and its productions have become the gold standard for theater groups around the Bay.

(Courtesy photo)

The cast of A.C.T.'s "A Christmas Carol" includes, from left, Axel Avin Jr., James Carpenter, Caitlin Talbot, J. C. Ernst, Tovah Suttle, Shannon Parker Taing and James Wagner.

With the revival that opened Friday, the tradition continues. Using an adaptation created for A.C.T. in 2005 by artistic director Carey Perloff and dramaturg Paul Walsh, a large cast directed by Domenique Lozano brings this timeless tale of redemption and renewal to life in vibrant theatrical terms. And actor James Carpenter, reprising his role as

Ebenezer Scrooge, gives the production a wonderfully human center.

The best reason to see this "Christmas Carol" is Carpenter, who gives a moving, beautifully detailed performance as the old miser. Rigid and spiteful in his early scenes, his face twisted in a curdled sneer, he articulates his disdain for mankind — and his contempt for holiday cheer — in furious outbursts. In subsequent scenes, Scrooge's youthful hurts are exposed and the layers of anger peel away, with Carpenter registering every emotional jolt. His Scrooge undergoes a complete transformation, from anguish to remorse and childlike wonder at the gift of a second chance; his awakening on Christmas morning — expressed by an astonished "I'm alive!" — is a moment of pure joy.

There are fine performances throughout the supporting cast, including Jud Williford's kindly Bob Cratchit, J.C. Ernst's exuberant Fred, and Jack Willis's chilling, chain-draped Jacob Marley. Sharon Lockwood does an amusing double turn as Mrs. Dilber/Mrs. Fezziwig; Dan Morrison's gilded Christmas Past, and B.W. Gonzalez's regal Christmas Present, add luster. The production boasts a large contingent of assured child actors, headed by adorable 8-year-old Kai Nau as Tiny Tim.

Perloff and company never forget that "Christmas Carol" is a ghost story: the looming London skyline (sets by John Arnone), eerie lighting (Nancy Schertler) and mix of 19th century and fantasy costumes (Beaver Bauer) contribute to the sense of otherworldliness. Original music by Karl Lundeberg, and choreography by Val Caniparoli (restaged by George Thompson) are effective, although a number for dancing vegetables feels oddly out of place. So does the future scene with Ignorance (James Wagner) and Want (Caitlin Talbot), played by hard-edged teenage thugs instead of the usual small children.

With a running time of just under two hours, the production feels slightly compressed; Scrooge's final encounters with Bob Cratchit, Fred and the Christmas turkey, for example, are telescoped into a single scene played on the street. But Carpenter hits all of the notes on Scrooge's journey. And the familiar lines are all there z- from "Bah, humbug" to "God bless us, everyone."

IF YOU GO

“A Christmas Carol”

Where: American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco

When: 2 p.m. Dec. 11-13, 15, 19 and 22; 7 p.m. Dec. 13-15, 18-22; 1 and 5:30 p.m. Dec. 16 and 23; closes Dec. 23

Tickets: \$18 to \$82

Contact: (415) 749-2228 or www.act-sf.org

Examiner

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