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REVIEW

Classic tale gets a breath of fresh air

Rendition: In 'Ebenezer!' the Spotlighters Theatre adds a few new, lively touches to Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol.'
Theater

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Article Text:

Probably no tale gets staged more often than Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol at this time of year. I've seen spoofs. I've seen musicals. I've even seen a drag version.

The Audrey Herman Spotlighters Theatre, which has produced its share of Christmas Carols, now has a new musical version, Ebenezer! with a book by Bryan Zochar and a tuneful score by Baltimorean PS Lorio and Linda Lee Bennett.

The large-cast production, directed and choreographed by Deborah Newman, is a pleasant holiday diversion with a few nice interpretive touches. The most effective is the portrayal of the title character. As played by robust (and appropriately named) Noel Schively, Ebenezer Scrooge is relatively young and visibly prosperous - read "rotund" - as opposed to the usual wizened old skinflint.

Nor does this Scrooge confine his intimidation to adults. In our first glimpse of Shively's Scrooge, he's bullying a little girl. He's a man accustomed to getting his way; taking orders from anyone, even a trio of ghosts, does not come easily to him.

Most of Newman's staging of the musical numbers is lively and makes full use of the Spotlighters' stage, aisles and even the far corners of the theater. Two awkward exceptions are the second act opener, "Ebenezer's Dream," in which two women attempt to dance with the sleeping Scrooge, and "Ignorance and Want," in which three children make vague gestures reaching into thin air.

The songs, performed to recorded accompaniment, are melodic, although the stand-out number "Time is the Healer" has an overly pop sound, reminiscent of Frank Wildhorn. In addition, the message conveyed by this song's title and lyrics seems at odds with Dickens' moral. After all, time alone would not have cured Scrooge of his meanness.

Shively is supported by an able cast, including pretty, gold-clad Lisa Swann, jolly Bill Henry and tall, funereal Bob Perry as the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future; white-faced, wild-haired John Sadowsky as Scrooge's dead business partner, Jacob Marley; Mikal G. McCrudden as Scrooge's nephew; and Ryan Murphy as Scrooge's over-worked and under-paid employee, Bob Cratchit.

All in all, it's a decent rendition of a timeless story - certainly nothing to "bah humbug" about.

Show times at the Spotlighters, 817 St. Paul St., are 8 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays, tonight and Dec. 20, and 2 p.m. Dec. 16, through Dec. 22. Tickets cost \$12. (The late-night show, at 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through Dec. 22, is a double bill of The Early Monday Morning Show and Jeff Goode's The Eight: Reindeer Monologues. Tickets cost \$12.) Call 410-752-1225.

Theater gets interim director

Nancy K. Roche has been named interim managing director at Center Stage after last week's resignation of Thomas Pechar. Roche served as president of Center Stage's board of trustees from 1991 to 1998, and was chairman of the search committee that selected Pechar. She also headed the theater's recent strategic planning initiative, which examined the theater's future, and she helped steer the Century Campaign, which raised \$14.2 million in four years.

"I have for many years lived and breathed this institution and am very honored to be chosen to play this role," Roche said earlier this week. "My goal is to offer a steady, consistent presence, as well as strong decision-making so that we move forward with the business of the theater."

A former teacher who holds two master's degrees from Johns Hopkins University, Roche has been a panelist with the National Endowment for the Arts theater program, and was a 2000 critic fellow at the O'Neill Critics Institute.

Roche will continue to serve on the search committee, but when asked if she would consider making the interim managing director position permanent, she replied, "I don't see that down the road."

EveryYouth Theatre

For the past four years, Everyman Theatre's educational outreach program has introduced Baltimore city high school students to the theater through student matinees and pre- and post-show activities and discussions. This year, for the first time, Everyman added a hands-on, middle school performance component called EveryYouth Theatre.

In after-school sessions under the guidance of professional actors and African drummer Moziah Saleem, more than two dozen students at Lemmel Middle School have created original works that will be presented at the theater, 1727 N. Charles St., at 3 p.m. Saturday. Admission is free. For more information, call 410-752-2208.

Just in time for the holidays

It's gift-shopping time again, and the Baltimore Theatre Alliance has come up with a nifty idea for that theater-loving friend who has everything. For \$22, you can purchase a \$20 Stage Money gift certificate good for one year at any of a dozen area theaters ranging from AXIS to the Theatre Project to Theatre Morgan. (The extra \$2 is for postage and handling.)

The gift certificate program is modeled after similar campaigns in Atlanta and San Diego. So far, the Alliance is only offering the certificates through December. But if Stage Money catches on, it could become available year-round.

To purchase Stage Money, call 410-342-4416, fax 410-342-0513 or e-mail baltimoretheatrealliance@msn.com.

Grant for performance series

Washington's Kennedy Center has received an impressive, \$10 million grant from the Virginia-based **Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation** to fund a 10-year performance series. Each year for the next decade, the Catherine B. Reynolds Series for Artistic Excellence will present a world-class production in the area of opera, theater, dance or music. The first of these will be a collaboration between the Bolshoi Opera and Bolshoi Ballet in May 2002.

Caption:

Miser: Noel Shively stars in Spotlighters Theatre's "Ebenezer!"

Photo(s)

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