

'A Christmas Carol' by Syracuse Stage and SU offers plenty of bright, entertaining spectacle



The London street ensemble in *A Christmas Carol*, a Syracuse Stage/SU Drama co-production running through December 29. (Photo by Michael Davis)

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By [Neil Novelli](#)

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Time and again over the years, Syracuse Stage, collaborating with the Syracuse University Drama Department, has shown its ability to mount bright, sumptuously entertaining holiday shows. One thinks, for example, of last year's "White Christmas."

But this year's production, Romulus Linney's adaptation of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," may top previous shows in taut pacing, depth and sharply-created spectacle.

Linney's script and Peter Amster's direction bring out the wit and warmth of Dickens' classic, and the opening night audience responded with the kind of easy, rolling laughter that means an audience is staying deeply connected with a production.

Steven Hendrickson is the best Scrooge I have ever seen, in any medium. Hendrickson never lets the role slip into a caricature of insane pennypinching. This Scrooge is a well-dressed gent, intelligent and not insensitive. But he's a hard-headed man of business who lives by an extreme code and expects others to do the same.

Scrooge can't help but be bugged by young lads who chirp "The First Noel" (one is played by Gerald B. McCrohan) or by his ebullient nephew Fred (Dan Reardon) who bursts into the office inanely shouting all kinds of Christmas cheer.

"Humbug!" Scrooge responds.

More than any version I have seen, this one emphasizes that the source of Scrooge's miserliness and misery is in his sad, lonely childhood. We see Scrooge as a boy (Michael Hill) left alone at a boarding school over the holidays. The source of that, of course, is in Dickens' original.

That's one reason, perhaps, that this production -- very effectively -- uses a lot of area youngsters to establish a sense of what Scrooge missed; and Scrooge realizes that he has to re-connect with his own childhood to free himself.

In some of the most powerful scenes, Scrooge tries to talk to the people from past, present and future that the Ghosts are showing him, and in just a few words we hear how radically Scrooge is changing.

Fezziwig (Peter Van Wagner) is the wonderful boss who loves to throw parties. Young Scrooge (Doug Pemberton) falls in love with Belle (Avery Bryce Epstein), but Belle rejects him when she realizes that he is more in love with wealth than with her.

Nick Corley as Bob Cratchit is very much the underdog at work, but in his crowded home he is the strong father. There, Leslie Noble as a purposeful Mrs. Cratchit keeps things cheerful and moving in orderly fashion.

This "Christmas Carol" is not a musical, but it is bathed in music, a dozen or so carols from various countries. Not that the performers are spotlighted. More often than not, the ensemble is offstage, singing softly or perhaps humming. Under Dianne Adams McDowell's direction, the sound shapes mood and action just as Thomas C. Hase's lighting designs do.

Linda Buchanan's freely-shifting set designs feature a surround of translucent dark-blue panels, and structures formed by huge, mahogany-toned girders. Marvelous special effects create illusions like that of Scrooge taking flight.

A word of caution -- the scene where Marley's gruesome ghost comes from the grave is a bit harrowing. Marley is colored in hues of greenish black, and there's a lot of yelling and rattling of chains. Younger kids might find it nightmare-inducing.

Anthony Salatino provides lively choreography for the ensemble's hi-jinks, as at Fezziwig's parties. Tracy Dorman's costume designs provide a wealth of color and style for the cast of 32.

If you go, don't miss the lobby display (*prepared by Onondaga Historical Association*) about Dickens' 1868 visit to Syracuse, where he read from "A Christmas Carol" and "The Pickwick Papers" to an audience of 1,500.

Details:

What: "A Christmas Carol," co-produced by Syracuse Stage and the Syracuse University Drama Department.

When: Seen on Friday, November 29, 2013 (opening).

Where: Archbold Theatre, Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

Length: One hour, 45 minutes, including intermission.

Attendance: Virtual capacity.

Performs through: Dec. 29.

Family guide: OK for the whole family, but younger kids might be upset by the graphic scene where the gruesome ghost of Marley appears to Scrooge.

Information: 443-3275 (groups 443-9844) and syracusestage.org.

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