



December 27, 2017

Theater: A Christmas Carol gets a new retelling



James Ludwig, Don Stephenson, and the Company appearing in "Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Holiday Show" at Bucks County Playhouse.

By Ted Otten

Hot on the heels of the world premiere musical "A New World," an unconventional retelling of the first American Thanksgiving story, New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse unveils that theater's third brand new show of the year, yet another variation on the Charles Dickens' holiday story of Ebenezer Scrooge's redemptive encounter with three ghosts, this time entitled "Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Holiday Show," a zesty variation on a familiar but beloved theme, which will run through New Year's Eve when it closes with a 2 p.m. matinee.

The show was created by Gordon Greenberg and Steve Rosen, two acknowledged masters of the unique musical, as a treat for those who love the Dickens story but also for those who enjoy watching theatrical magic unfold.

Both Greenberg and Rosen are BCP veterans. Greenberg directed two previous BCP holiday productions, "It's a Wonderful Life: A Live Radio Play" and "Plaid Tidings," and Rosen delighted audiences as Nathan Detroit in the heralded staging of "Guys and Dolls" last summer. Their hand-picked cast of five - Tracey Conyer Lee, James Ludwig, Evan Alexander Smith, Don Stephenson, and Kate Wetherhead - bring enough experience and adaptability to play the entire cast of Dickens' tale with only one actor playing a single character. Stephenson plays the title character who has as many interior changes as the rest of the company has in exterior changes.

Stephenson is no stranger to holiday classics. He and his wife Emily Loesser created and recorded the roles of two young lovers who sacrifice their dearest possessions to buy the other the perfect Christmas gift in "Gift of the Magi," Peter Ekstrom's musical version of O. Henry's story, and that show plays annually at Actors' Theatre of Louisville where it had its premier. In recent years, he is more in demand as a director at regional theatres like Paper Mill and Goodspeed than as a musical actor although he cites his recent Broadway experiences playing multiple roles in "The Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" among his favorites. Last summer, he directed "Attack of the Elvis Impersonators" off-Broadway which he describes as "a new musical, a comedy, silly and funny with all original songs without a single actual Elvis song in it. I grew up with Elvis constantly present in my world with my mother a big Presley fan."

"My kids have been encouraging me lately to act in another show so they can see me onstage again although I've been doing TV lately. They were here for opening night and gave their approval, I'm happy to say," said Stephenson who said that he loved playing Leo Frank in "Parade" and Leo Bloom in "The Producers."

"I think directing has actually made me a better actor because, having been a director, I can better tell what's needed. I see Scrooge as bitter and angry and a tragic guy, and his story is really a cautionary tale. He's been hurt, and he closes himself off so that won't happen again. Since he's done that for a long time, he's ended up alone, and what happens here shows him that he doesn't have to be alone." This show has a heart, a poignancy to it, but what happens around Scrooge and the way things happen are what can also make it funny. If you try to do it all as a comedy, it will have no pull, no depth," said Stephenson, "but I have four remarkable actors around me who, with a change of voice or costume or posture, can make all those around Scrooge come alive. They really do the heavy lifting here, and the four of them are amazing. I watch them with admiration, transporting the story from place to place and from time to time."

One of those praised actors is Kate Wetherhead who was in the cast of BCP's 2016 staging of "Company" and who has worked before with many of those involved in this show including playwright Rosen. In 2014, she was in the Paper Mill Playhouse cast of "The Other Josh Cohen" which Rosen both wrote and starred in.

"It's great fun, but in spite of the silliness of some of what we do, the heart of the story comes through and still resonates. I play one of the charity-seeking women whom Scrooge refuses, a schoolmate of Scrooge's from the past, his intended, the girl Scrooge wanted to marry, the Ghost of Christmas Present, the boy who's asked about the prize turkey and others, but it's hard to pick a favorite. I do have fun as Scrooge's schoolmate who also happens to be captain of the cricket team," said Wetherhead who's also the creator, writer and star of a web comedy called "Submissions Only."

"It was tiring in rehearsals when we were getting the timing of all the set and costume changes down, but it's so exhilarating to do that the actual performance of a show like ours that's done straight through isn't as exhausting as it might seem," said Wetherhead who has found New Hope with its holiday decorations an ideal place to work.

For director Josh Rhodes, the challenge was to keep the heart of Dickens' story while shepherding what could be called "a panorama of the actor's art."

"Audiences get 'A Christmas Carol' through the lens of someone from Bucks County. This town has become Scrooge's world, and it's a word that people already know with many familiar place references. Audiences also get to witness magic happening. The actors tell as well as show you the entire story, and watching them move seamlessly from one character to another by a change of costume or voice, moving furniture or lighting changes at breakneck speed, is a kind of hyper-theatricality that's kind of amazing to watch because they really make it work," said Rhodes.

"Those transitions are the magic," said Rhodes, "and they were our biggest challenge. Audiences we've had already tell us we've done our job and done it well."

IF YOU GO: "Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Show"

WHERE: Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, PA

WHEN:through December 31: Tuesday to Thursday at 7:30; Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. with matinees at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. How much: Tickets are \$40 to \$75; group rates for 10 or more

CONTACT: (215) 862 - 2121 or at buckscountypayhouse.org.