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Bucks County Playhouse marks the season with a laugh-filled and touching take on 'A Christmas Carol'

- By Anthony Stoeckert
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From left: Evan Alexander Smith, Tracey Conyer Lee, Don Stephenson, Kate Wetherhead and James Ludwig in "Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Show."

Photo by Joan Marcus

There are so many Scrooges to choose from — Alastair Sim, George C. Scott, Patrick Stewart, Jim Carrey, Mr. Magoo, Fred Flintstone, the list goes on and on. No way we need yet another version of "A Christmas Carol," right?

Wrong!

A genuine Christmas miracle is taking place at the Bucks County Playhouse with its take on Charles Dickens' oft-told tale of Ebenezer Scrooge and the Christmas Eve that changes his life. "Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Show" is a fast-paced, funny and surprisingly touching version of "A Christmas Carol." It's playing in New Hope, Pennsylvania, through Dec. 31 and missing out on this would be a real humbug.

The show is set at the Playhouse itself. In addition to seeing Scrooge's story, we also find out some "history" about New Hope and the Playhouse. Five actors welcome us to the theater, which is bare of sets, save for a backdrop and a few mobile pieces.

They tell us we're about to hear the ghost story that's referenced in the song "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year." It turns out that story took place in New Hope, which is known for its haunted spaces — The Logan Inn, The Aaron Burr House, the ladies room at The Raven.

One of the actors, Don Stephenson, takes on the role of Scrooge, the other four will play every other part.

The script by Gordon Greenberg and Steve Rosen gets lots of laughs through those references to New Hope and surrounding towns, and also through the conceit of four actors playing dozens of actors. The jokes come at a fast and furious pace. Characters throw snow and make swooshing noises to represent the wind when opening the door of Scrooge's business. Evan Alexander Smith plays a roaring fire in Scrooge's fireplace, Kate Wetherhead plays a picture hanging on a wall, and when playing the Ghost of Christmas Past, Tracey Conyer Lee does a bit where she acts like a modern-day flight attendant.

But here's the thing, those antics don't get in the way of the story. Watch Stephenson during the heartbreaking scene when Scrooge is shown the moment where his younger self lets the woman he loves leave him. She kisses young Scrooge on the cheek, and the older Scrooge, watching from above, touches his cheek as if he could still feel her lips pressed against his face.

Another great moment involves Tiny Tim. Smith plays the young boy hysterically, by putting his head in the middle of a tiny puppet-like costume. But later, when the child dies, we feel the suffering of his parents — gags don't get in the way of heart here.

James Ludwig is another of the actors. He was a regular in McCarter Theatre's production of "A Christmas Carol" for years, playing Cratchit, Scrooge's nephew Fred, and other characters over 12 productions in Princeton. It's nice to see him in this story again, and he gets lots of big laughs while also getting the audience to shed a few tears.

Stephenson is a fine Scrooge, and delivers some biting lines. He tells the women collecting money to help the needy (Lee and Wetherhead play the women and are hysterical in the scene) that if the destitute die, "The world won't miss another poor person." When Bob Cratchit gives him a present, an imperfect toy made by Tiny Tim, Stephenson viciously snaps, "A gift is nothing more than an invitation for gratitude, and I have none to give."

The show is an absolute delight. Other jokes involve Scrooge blaming his first ghostly visit on his dinner — an egg from Wawa. A group of carolers is named Sons of Pitches, Fezziwig's business is making wigs. When Scrooge asks what's wrong with Tiny Tim, he's told it's the worst thing possible — a pre-existing condition.

One of my favorite moments is Wetherhead as the Ghost of Christmas Present — staring at her phone, snapping her gum, displaying an attitude that tells Scrooge to get over himself.

The scenic design, by Michael Carnahan, is simple but beautiful and effective. A backdrop creates a moody scene of shadowy doors and windows, two dark wooden staircases take on as many roles as the actors and are swiftly moved around the stage to create various settings.

The director Josh Rhodes, along with the cast, has created a perfect balance of big laughs and genuine emotional moments. It's a brisk show, less than 90 minutes, and it wraps up with Scrooge opening the Bucks County Playhouse itself, to establish a place that reminds us that there is more that connects us and divides us. That's an evergreen message and the perfect way to celebrate the holidays — and theater itself.

"Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Show" continues at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope, Pennsylvania, through Dec. 31. Tickets cost \$45-\$75; buckscounty