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Unorthodox Retelling Of 'A Christmas Carol' At Bucks County Playhouse A Cause For Joy



Don Stephenson as Ebenezer Scrooge (Photo: Joan Marcus).

By John Dwyer

The miracle of Christmas is just not a tale of Baby Jesus. The celebration of Chanukah is not just about the re-dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem after it had been profaned and the miracle of a one-day supply of oil lasting eight days.

The miracle of these days in our lives is transformation — how everyone during this period tries to be kind, loving and good, despite a fractious world. This miracle of spirit that occurs in December is no better exemplified than as in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."

This story is much done — there is a musical production at Music Mountain Theatre that has a cast of more than that is tuneful and fun. There is the traditional production at Princeton's McCarter Theater. But The Bucks County Playhouse executed a "hat trick" that blew me away when I saw this show last Sunday.



Evan Alexander Smith, Tracy Conyer Lee, Don Stephenson, Kate Wetherhead, and James Ludwig.

With the title “Ebebezer Scrooge’s Big Playhouse Christmas Show,” my expectation was that I would be getting a sophomoric hodgepodge of cutesy. It would be Pee-Wee Herman’s version with some holiday songs thrown in, and it would be “family” entertainment that would be, at best, palatable as theater.

There also was a hook that the show would have a local connection as Scrooge became an immigrant to America and was now living in New Hope. I almost expected that the Ghost of Christmas Future would be ICE to take him away to his own personal Hades for not having his green card.

But lo and behold: A miracle happened! This show is so full of good will and cheer, and it is one of the best things I have seen at the Playhouse, bar none. I was in no mood to be entertained. But, the indisputable talent on stage and off was undeniable and you come away from this saying “Yes! The Bucks County Playhouse is Broadway.”

The hat trick (I looked up the word) is a hockey term referring to a player scoring three goals (not necessarily consecutive) in a single game. The three goals accomplished in “Christmas Carol” are 1) a smart re-telling of the story that stays true to the general plot line, regardless of a shift in locale.; 2) the decision to tell the new tale with only five actors who creatively take on both characters and inanimate objects, allowing the audience to create, through imagination, a stronger reality for the audience than if everything was done in a more standard and naturalistic way; and 3) a brilliant cast and production crew that allows all the moving parts to make the story go off like clockwork.



James Ludwig and Don Stephenson.

If you are as old as I, you may remember “The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby,” an eight-hour adaptation of the Charles Dickens’ novel that was an impossible ticket to get when it opened back on June 5, 1980 in London. Its success, both there and here with the Broadway production, was due to its theatrical ingenuity in telling a tale that traveled so much time and space and used so little set and cast to tell such an expansive story. It instead, like this piece, used the audience’s imagination which carried you on a more involving journey than you had ever experienced in a theater. That is what is happening in this intermission-less adaptation that keeps to the mid-Victorian period, when “Christmas Carol” was originally written. But Ghosts know no timeframe, as they are not like you and us, and they bring modern references.

I am not going to tell you all the differences and all the jokes. That deserves buying a ticket, which I urge you to do. Playwrights Gordon Greenburg and Steve Rosen have given us a holiday treat, that is only good if one partakes in it, and not just hear a breakdown of its ingredients. Greenburg’s work includes the highly acclaimed “Irving Berlin’s Holiday Inn” produced recently by The Roundabout in New York and featured several weeks ago on PBS’s “Great Performances.” Rosen is a Renaissance man whose talents include writing, acting and music. He was most recently seen at Bucks County Playhouse in “Guys and Dolls” as Nathan Detroit, and has had multiple Drama Desk and Lucille Lortel Award nominations for his work as a writer.

Don Stephenson embodies the pinched, soulless Ebenezer in an effortless performance that bespeaks to the depth of this actor’s talents. His Broadway credits include playing Leo Bloom on Broadway, Charles Clarke in “The Titanic,” and Renfield in “Dracula,” among many other fine performances. As an interesting aside about the collaboration of this ensemble with the creative team, Stephenson is married to the daughter of Frank Loesser who was the composer of “Guys and Dolls,” Rosen’s most recent success at the Playhouse was “Guys and Dolls,” and one of Mr. Greenburg’s biggest hits was

directing a marvelous production of the same at the Chichester Festival Theater in the U.K., as was director Josh Rhodes for San Diego's Old Globe Theatre.

Stephenson is the only actor whose role remains the same. Just as was true in "Nickleby," and in "A Christmas Carol," the title character has the focus and its actor only plays him. The rest of the cast does what most actors yearn for. They are an ensemble. And one that, I swear, the Royal Shakespeare Company (producers of "Nickleby"), would envy. Evan Alexander Smith (Actor 1: Nephew Fred, Young Scrooge etc.), Kate Weatherhead (Actor 2: Ghost of Christmas Present, Emily etc.), Tracy Conyer Lee (Actor 3: The Ghost of Christmas Past, Mrs. Cratchit) and James Ludwig (Actor 4: Bob Cratchit, Mr. Marley etc.) are incredible.

Kudos to the director Josh Rhodes, whose background includes working with classic material on Broadway and elsewhere. A director who's a choreographer, as is Rhodes, brings a special talent to the project. The actors' transitions from character to character and the constant movement on stage needs an eye that can create a whirlwind of magic, and Rhodes succeeds.

As such an amazing accomplishment only occurs when all are working hard, congratulations to Michael Carnahan (Scenic Designer), Brian C. Hemesath (Costume Designer), Cory Pattak (Lighting Designer), Mathew Given (Sound Designer, Director of Production), J. Jared Janas (Wig & Hair Designer), Christopher Flores (Production Stage Manager) and Michelle Viteri (Assistant Stage Manager).

Experiences last; things do not. If you want to give joy and amazement to family and friends, and experience an unforgettable theater experience, see "Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Show." A "humbug" if you don't.

Tickets are available [online](#).