



Reprinted from the December 13, 2017, issue of U.S. 1 Newspaper

BCP Review: 'Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Play'

by Neal Zoren



Don Stephenson as Scrooge.

'Smart' seems to be the watchword at Bucks County Playhouse. It follows last month's exhilarating world premiere of "The New World" with a sharp and breezy take on Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," "Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Play."

This holiday show is not on the level of "The New World." It has neither its daring nor depth, but it does have its loopiness. Writers Gordon Greenberg and Steve Rosen manage to give a comic, sardonic tone to Scrooge's ghost-fomented reformation while retaining the sweet sentimentality that makes Scrooge's awakening to life and participation in it so movingly enchanting.

Within the laughs, there is heart. Despite some hijinks, Dickens' original story does not get lost or, worse, steamrolled by an inclination to put yuks ahead of the elements that make "A Christmas Carol" so beloved. If only theater folks would treat Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie with the respect Greenberg and Rosen accord Dickens.

"Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Play" has a lot to recommend it. For one thing, Greenberg and Rosen transport Scrooge from his native England to New Hope. Their script is peppered with aptly used local references that entertain the knowing while not confusing

an out-of-town crowd. Farley's Book Shop, Logan Inn, and new Ferry Market all receive shout-outs, just as the presence of a Dunkin Donuts on New Hope's Main Street gets the snob treatment.

The role of a theater, any theater, is brought into play as carolers and performers bemoan the fact they must entertain on the New Hope streets because no structure dedicated to presenting the arts exists. Conveniently, Greenberg and Rosen have Scrooge's counting house lodged in what is now Bucks County Playhouse, so it's not hard, from the get-go, to guess how that community deficiency is rectified once Scrooge becomes civic minded.

Then there is Don Stephenson's portrayal of Scrooge. Even though Scrooge is referred to as old, and Evan Alexander Smith endows Scrooge with decrepitude when imitating him during a game of charades, Stephenson seems relatively young and spry, a man who could benefit for a long time from his acceptance of festivity and joy.

Stephenson's is a vibrant Scrooge. He is capable of the wry smile attributed to him by the Ghost of Christmas Present and can break into a jig or hip-hop step without causing wonder.

Sarcasm is part of Greenberg and Rosen's arsenal. They used it with 21st-century abandon whether providing smart answers to stupid questions or making fun of Yardley, Pennsylvania, by New Hope standards a staid suburb. The authors derive humor from making the Ghost of Christmas Past (Tracey Conyer Lee) an airline hostess who guides Scrooge through his youth using the hand gestures and announcement language of a stewardess.

Even better is turning the Ghost of Christmas Present (Kate Weatherhead) into a snarky commentator who takes no prisoners and would rather roll her eyes drolly at Scrooge's responses than pretend to be sympathetic to them or caring about him.

Best is when comedy and pathos come simultaneously, such as when Smith dons a bin with pants attached on the bottom and sports crutches to enact Tiny Tim, a bit made funnier when six-footer Smith sits so his bib dangles over a table in a way that belies its height and emphasizes Tim's debility. Despite laughing at director Josh Rhodes' ingenuity at setting up Smith's transformation to Tim, you feel true worry and genuine angst regarding Tim and his dire condition. As pointed out, "A Christmas Carol" shows its details and themes clearly even as it is being lampooned.

Music generally comes in the form of curtailed carols begun by a harmonizing quartet that quakes into silence upon any entrance by Scrooge. More show biz razzmatazz comes when Scrooge converts his bank into a theater, and Stephenson, Smith, Weatherhead, Conyers Lee, and James Ludwig go into some bright Christmas numbers with a glitzy tree, wreaths, and bows in the background.

"Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Show," is fast, funny, and frothy. Word is the show is designed to be presented in any venue just by changing New Hope references with some in Wichita or Stowe should Greenberg and Rosen's work appear there. Local theaters would be shrewd to pick it up.

They get a "Christmas Carol" with a new twist while keeping the main and touching points of Scrooge, Cratchit, and Scrooge's nephew's stories intact.

Even Scrooge's romance remains, though the name of his girlfriend is changed. Greenberg

and Rosen play loosely with other parts of Dickens' story as well, but none of their changes matter much to their rendition of Scrooge's reclamation.

Michael Carnahan's easily movable set provides senses of place and features a jolly background for the holiday numbers. Brian C. Hemesath's costumes are fun, especially his red and blue flight attendant get-up for the Ghost of Christmas Past.

Ebenezer Scrooge's Big Playhouse Christmas Show, Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, Pennsylvania. Through Sunday, December 31. \$40 to \$75. 215-862-2121 or www.bcptheater.org.