

Sun Gazette

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On Stage: Traveling Players score with 'Commedia Christmas Carol'

By Matt Reville /Sun Gazette December 7, 2022



Shown from left in the Traveling Players' production of "Commedia Christmas Carol" are Charles Fisher as nephew Fred, Ani Bailin as Scrooge, Grace Araya as Mrs. Cratchit, Owen Suglo (with puppet) as Tiny Tim and Donovan Wheelock as Bob Cratchit. (Photo by Alex Mountfield)

The holiday hubbub was in full swing at Tysons Corner Center Saturday evening, but tucked away in a less hectic cranny of the mall, the Traveling Players were engaging an audience with a holiday adaptation, "Commedia Christmas Carol."

The one-act show, featuring an (almost) all-youth cast, was not without some first-weekend drawbacks, but provided a tour-de-force opportunity for its lead and plenty of strong performances throughout.

You thespians (and those who love them) already have surmised based on the title that the show is a take on the classic Charles Dickens holiday novella, with a commedia

dell'arte twist – in other words, almost like a musical-hall rendition, with some wild antics and humor thrown into the mix. One doubts Mr. Dickens envisioned a frenetic duck running amok on stage, honking vociferously and nipping at everything and everyone in an effort to avoid having its goose cooked, so to speak, over the holidays.

(For those who say that nobody should mess with a Dickens classic, keep in mind that every stage/movie/TV production of the show dating back a century seriously reworked the original plot and myriad details. Go back and read the original book if you desire proof.)

Anyhoo, you know the story: The miserly Mr. Scrooge finds himself redeemed by the ghosts of Christmases past, present and future.

“And then he does the thing that is so brave: He changes,” said Jeanne Harrison, the director. “He lets people laugh at his newfound zest for life. And he is so much happier. He is renewed.”

The show largely holds true to the gist of the traditional plot line, although in order to cut it down to an 80-minute production a few threads were left dangling. For instance, two of my favorites of any “Christmas Carol” – the jolly but ill-fated Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig – made a brief appearance but were never seen again.

Ani Bailin portrayed the title role with a zestful chewing of scenery as the grumpy Scrooge at the start, the terrified Scrooge in the middle and the redeemed, playful Scrooge at the end. Truly a bravura performance.

Bailin was assisted by a host of solid supporting personnel. To cite a few: Donovan Wheelock as the put-upon clerk Bob Cratchit; Grace Araya as both the younger Scrooge’s fiancée and, later, Cratchit’s wife; Charles Fisher as nephew Fred, trying to bring his uncle Ebenezer out of his irascible shell; and Sam Abbruzzese as the ghost of business partner Jacob Marley as well as the aforementioned Mr. Fezziwig.

(Aside: I’ve always thought the Fezziwig couple – in this show Abbruzzese and Jude DeWitt – deserves the equivalent of a spinoff series. Dickens provided inklings of their back-story but never fleshed it out. Any aspiring playwrights want to take it up?)

Ellie McLaughlin, the previously mentioned DeWitt and Ryann Schmid took Scrooge on the journey through space and time as the trio of ghosts.

COVID is still causing challenges for local theater troupes; when actor Owen Suglo (the younger Scrooge and Tiny Tim) tested positive last week, assistant director Ryan Fields stepped in to portray Scrooge’s young self. Fortunately, it proved a false positive; Suglo was back for Sunday’s matinee.

Director Harrison fashioned a taut production (the kind I like best), while Wallace Crehan (costume design), Rae Mearns (lighting) and Jeffrey Hales (scenic design) showed their talents.

The only true down side to this show was one that afflicts many productions involving young performers – unequal vocal capabilities. Some are able to enunciate their lines to reach the back row (where I was), while others have their words disappear along the way, or arrive as a whisper.

The venue is small enough that miking of cast members would be superfluous, but its lack means all cast members need to channel their “inner Ethel Mermans” (‘member her?) and belt out their lines.

The show wraps up its two-week run this weekend, and is a delightful holiday treat whether or not one already is headed to the mall for some pre-Christmas shopping. Reserve tickets in advance; every seat was taken at the show I attended.

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“Commedia Christmas Carol” continues with performances Dec. 9-10 at 8 p.m. and Dec. 11 at 3 p.m. at Tysons Corner Center, and is suitable for ages 8 and up. Tickets are \$15. Audience masking is required.

For information, see the Website at travelingplayers.org.