

Kwame Checks out TNB's Production of "A Christmas Carol"

A CHRISTMAS CAROL
Reviewed by Kwame Dawes
Directed by Michael Shamata
Adapted for the stage by Michael Shamata
Music composed by Geordie Haley
Lighting by Kevin Fraser
Designed by John Ferguson
Choreographed by Leslie Dell

A Christmas Carol has become for many as elemental to the season as the baby Jesus, the three wisemen and Santa Claus. Productions of this classic cannot afford to stray from the spirit of the original for the sake of discovering fresh interpretations otherwise it will not be welcomed by audiences who have come to rely on the tried and true version. However, theatres stand the chance of appearing stagnant and dull if they take no chances in a restaging of such a production. It is this that makes TNB's decision to stage the play a calculated risk. From all indications it was a risk worth taking. The audiences were appreciative and Shamata managed to achieve a freshness without losing the sentimentality of the piece.

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Theatre New Brunswick chose to grant the natives of the region something more than the tired film versions of the story which were inevitable musts on the television screens, by staging the Dicken's classic. Michael Shamata managed to inject some clever theatrical work into the "feel-good" story to produce a commendable and entertaining piece of theatre. If the piece was supposed to be a genie and scary ghost story, it doesn't work at all. There is nothing frightening about the ghost of Jacob Marley in this production. In fact the play is more about Scrooge's attempts to cope with his past than about the transformation brought on by the appearance of a ghost.

Shamata's staging of the play is meticulous with careful regard for details. The result is an efficient and smooth running production that is energized by the strong performance of Douglas Campbell as Ebenezer Scrooge. His performance portrays this rotund, good-natured, and cuddly old fogey who has the capacity for remorse (albeit unbelievable and sudden) and a full appreciation of the miraculous when it does occur, with charm and control. Shamata chooses wisely to focus the drama almost exclusively on the



Bah humbug! Douglas Campbell as Scrooge in TNB's production of A Christmas Carol.

performance of this actor such that the other performances appear to be well orchestrated back drops for the central action.

The movements of the actors on this bare open stage often has the quality of ritualized choreography which lends to the magical quality that the ghost story needs. In one of these moments in which Scrooge is taken back to his childhood days, a lively dance ensues and the ensemble work of the actors is entertaining. Scrooge, in the mean time begins to participate in the scene, at first reluctantly and then with uninhibited abandon. Interestingly, his movements ape the movements of the younger version of him. The result of this doubling is touching in its simplicity. Here, Shamata displays his use of simple theatrical devices to effect very moving

images in the play.

The other players in the drama were quite competent but are inevitable void of any depth. But this is more a problem of the narrative than anything else. Jenny Munday is stoic and good in her portrayal of Mrs Cratchit, while Deann de Gruijter plays a lively and slightly bawdy Mrs Fezzwig and an appropriately invisible housekeeper to Scrooge. Randy White, a New Brunswicker is sometimes stiff and colourless in his portrayal of the young Scrooge, but his boyish wide-mouthed wonderment at the miracle of Christmas redeems him of his weaker moments. The younger actors in the production are cleverly used by Shamata who allows them to look cute and vulnerable while keeping them away from moments that may be too challenging. As a

part of the series of well-timed tableaux that are used throughout the piece to locate it within time and place, the young actors work efficiently and with confidence. The music, composed by Frederictonian Geordie Haley enhances the magical and ghostly moments in the piece while maintaining a certain nineteenth century quality through out. John Ferguson's set is not particularly original but there are a few magical moments, as, for instance, when the huge imposing grey walls that depict gothic images of what one assumes to be nineteenth century London, are removed to reveal a funeral procession against a rich blue backdrop. Apart from that, the set is functional and somewhat heavy-handed.

TNB's production of *A Christmas Carol* managed to

present a cliché with a modicum of freshness. For skeptics who are not moved by Scrooge's transformation into a benevolent good hearted individual, the production had good professional direction to impress. For others who are all too aware of the society of squalid poverty and disease among the working classes, *A Christmas Carol* appears to be a trivialization of a serious social dilemma. But a story about that would probably hurt the sweet emotions of Christmas. The story of Scrooge may no longer (or may never have) transform the lives of theatre goers in today's society, but it still remains a mythic reenactment of the Christmas ritual which must remain true to its original spirit to be what it is intended to be - a good-feeling drama about hope.

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