

*A Christmas Carol at Syracuse Stage: Guru Review*  
Michael Rotella, November 30, 2013

At this point there are few who don't know the celebrated and iconic story of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. I'm pretty sure *Ghost of Christmas Past, Present, Etc.* all ring a bell. Today the 1843-published novella is the most influential Christmas story but in its time was also a scathing critique of 19th century industrialization and capitalism. It was adapted for stage almost instantly in February of 1844. Syracuse Stage's version is based on the newer Romulus Linney adaptation, first produced at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in 1995. Since the story is so well known and practically ingrained in the public consciousness, it takes a lot for a specific production to stand out. I'd argue that Syracuse Stage's definitely does stand out—and in several different ways.

The large cast of characters that includes favorites like Tiny Tim, Scrooge, and—of course—the several ghostly figures like the Ghost of Christmas Past and company, was excellent. The acting felt so natural even when the British accents sounded just slightly off.



There were several standouts but **Steven Hendrickson's** masterful portrayal of Scrooge was by far the highlight of the show for me. He embodied the exact bitterness that audiences expect of Scrooge but went a few steps further. Even in his most nasty moments, you could feel

the cracks building in his bah-humbug façade. Theatre often moves too quickly to see such deep character development, but this production and Hendrickson's acting really pulled it off. Scrooge even provided some comic relief as he snapped his head out of the bed curtains, glancing left and right. It was the perfect amount of physical humor that didn't overshadow the seriousness of the story or Scrooge's moving change of heart that would later arrive in an excellent, tear-jerking moment of modern theatre. Honorable mention for Peter Van Wagner's lovely portrayal of the jolly but formidable Ghost of Christmas Present as well. Another highlight of the show was the caroling. It was pulled off as if the cast was also a full choir. The opening carols sounded great and even the solo caroling went well (Gerard B. McCrohan, for one).

Part of what makes *A Christmas Carol* work is the juxtaposition of the caroling with Scrooge's greed and hatred. If you've got bad caroling or half-way-there singing, it isn't going to happen. Throughout this production the carols seemed to carry the play from scene to scene, adding a human element to the otherwise technical transitions. You'll have to see it to fully understand.

Syracuse Stage's *A Christmas Carol*—much like the book of the same name—wasn't just entertainment. It was actually quite a powerful, heavy, and dark experience. Scrooge huddled in a corner screaming as two caroling children closed in on him before the stage lights went black

wasn't exactly pleasant. Nor was the intense introduction of Jacob Marley as he ascended onto the set bathed in green light and smoke before noisily rattling his chain and outright yelling with an echo effect on the microphone. These moments were incredibly powerful, the latter of which will likely scare small children. But they were also incredibly well done, providing a stark contrast from the heartwarming memory of a young Scrooge dancing with his future love, Belle. Together the elements of warmth and absolutely frigid darkness and even terror empowered this classic work of theatre and tied it all together.

The technical scope of the production, not to mention that it was all built in Syracuse, was almost mindboggling. Watching the play it seemed that every set piece was mechanically rigged up to move with ease and automatically. The windows of Scrooge's office slid down from above the curtain, ceiling columns shifted to create Scrooge's bedroom, and an entire highly realistic bed complete with red curtains came together in seconds. All of these elements (and many more) removed the distraction of standard set transition, in turn allowing the audience to never leave the experience of the plot. I



haven't quite seen anything of this magnitude at Syracuse Stage. The fluidity of the amazing set was astonishing to me. The introduction of the few Christmas Ghosts, which I won't spoil for you, made such innovative use of the highly adaptable set that it left the audience clapping mid-play. Look for the Ghost of Christmas Past and Present's unique

entrance.

The plot of *A Christmas Carol* has some pretty demanding scenes and this is where Syracuse Stage shined the most. For example, Scrooge meets the Ghost of Christmas Past and is told to grab its arm. As Scrooge's hand comes in contact, starlit sky projections instantly bathed the stage in a rich

dusk blue with twinkling stars. Intense sound effects coincided with the projections. A dozen lamps slid from the ceiling and gracefully cascaded up and down in the background giving the feeling of flight as Scrooge and his various spectral companions traveled. It was stunning and happened several times throughout the plot. Each time Scrooge's "bedroom" folded up and vanished in seconds leaving viewers amazed but still engrossed in the play. The level of technical detail, especially in such a classic play, might be a turn-off to those looking for minimalism but it doesn't come off that way at all. It was very innovative but really let the beauty of the play take over.

As an entire experience *A Christmas Carol* was a powerful, moving, and heartwarming production. The extremely high quality of all aspects—cast, set, story, etc.—guarantees a great experience and I was not disappointed in anything. I was hoping to see the intact classic plot combined with the innovative approach Syracuse Stage always brings to the stage and I got just that. It's hard to call any piece of theatre or art "perfect", but Syracuse Stage's amazing production is about as close to it as I've seen in a long time.