

Curtains Up ... with Camille Bounds: Limelight's 'A Christmas Carol' cleverly takes on beloved classic

In their twist on the classic story, the role of Scrooge is not fixed to any one cast member

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By Camille Bounds

There is “The Nutcracker,” “It’s a Wonderful Life,” and “How The Grinch Stole Christmas.” Even “Mr. Magoo” and “The Muppets” make it on our traditional Christmas entertainment toddies. Well, you must add “A Christmas Carol,” if you haven’t already. This delightful story written by Charles Dickens is served up with holiday turkey somewhere, someplace every year everywhere in the world.

Limelight Theater puts a fresh spin on the timeless tale of “Ebenezer Scrooge’s” transformation in its version of the beloved Victorian novelette. Their show, however, waves off the regular route and gives a different path to the original plot of three spirits guiding an accountant to redemption one Christmas night in London.

Adapted by Patrick Barlow and directed by Andrew Cummings, this pared-down production uses an ensemble cast of just five to bring the numerous characters to life. What makes this version unique is that the central role of Scrooge is chosen at random by drawing an actor’s name from a hat before each show, adding an element of surprise and relatability. This means the audience gets to see a variety of interpretations, from young Scrooges to old, female to male.

On the night I attended, South Valley acting talent Roberta Vinkhuyzen portrayed Scrooge with a spiky harshness that made the old miser’s journey all the more profound. As her Scrooge weathered visions from spectral guides, her emotional transformation by the play’s end was impactful for the audience.

The remaining cast members — Mason Bell, Denee Lewis, Bruce Pember, Stacia Stuart, and Christy Wright — shifted nimbly between roles, injecting humor and heart into each character. Of particular note was Mason Bell’s sweetly fragile take on the handicapped child “Tiny Tim.”

The sparse staging puts the focus squarely on the actors’ physicality and vocal characterizations. Clever prop work aids the quick transitions from scene to scene. While staying faithful to the essence of Dickens’ tale, the overall tone is irreverent and even chaotic at times. Yet this works to keep a familiar story feeling fresh. Ultimately, one can’t help but root for these various Scrooges and their redemption.

What could come across as gimmicky in less skilled hands instead works beautifully here. Somehow this “Christmas Carol” manages to feel unpredictable, hilarious, and relevant all at once. Even the coldest heart will melt as this production sneaks up on you. Far from a tired rendition of a holiday classic, Limelight has crafted a Scrooge and a show worth cheering for.

Through Cummings’ direction, Limelight’s “A Christmas Carol” succeeds as a funny, lively adaptation that still tugs at the heartstrings. He and his versatile cast have crafted an inventive take perfect for kicking off the holiday season. With its unpredictable casting and brisk pacing, this show feels less like an old chestnut and more like a spiked eggnog — familiar flavors punched up to offer some extra spice.

“A Christmas Carol” is a wholesome, pleasant story as well as a moment in time that should be seen and savored. Children and grown-ups will adore it. Cynics might even get a little warm twinge in their heart — and, God knows, a warm twinge might be just the thing we need in these uncertain times.

Entertainment: Limelight's 'A Christmas Carol' is a timeless tale of redemption

Ensemble cast will rotate roles randomly between shows

<https://morganhilllife.com/2023/11/21/limelight-christmas-carol/>

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By Calvin Nuttall

The ghosts of Christmas past, present and future will haunt the Limelight Theater in downtown Gilroy starting Dec. 1 — but exactly which performer will embody the cold-hearted “Ebenezer Scrooge” is anyone’s guess.

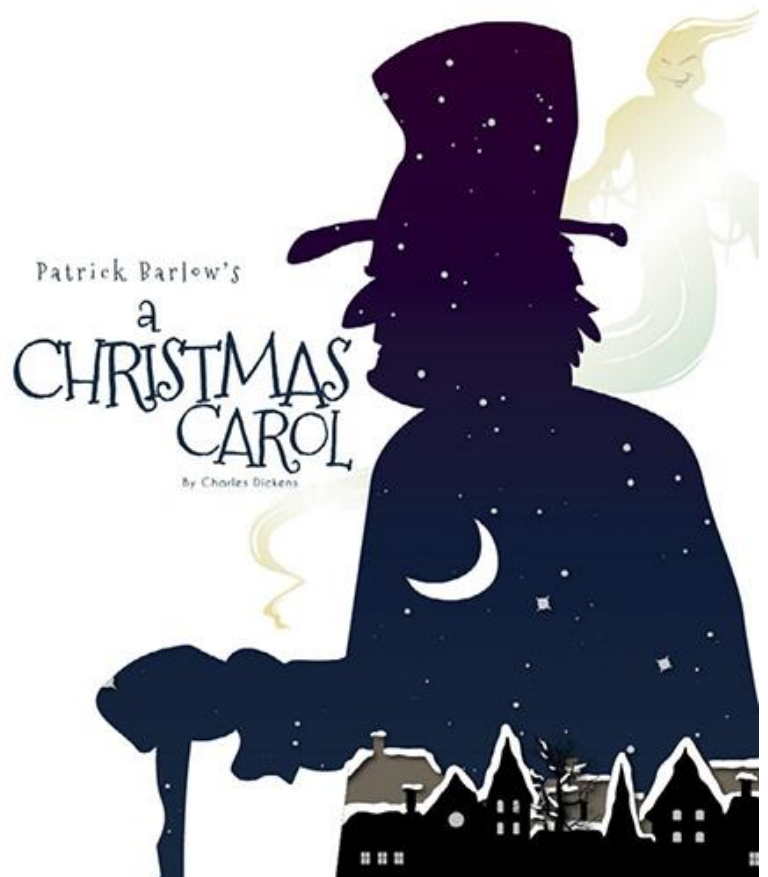
South Valley Civic Theatre's gift to local audiences this holiday season is a clever twist on "A Christmas Carol." The cherished story is reimagined in the script by Patrick Barlow, writer of the Broadway and West End hit "The 39 Steps."

Audience members who arrive early will be treated to special pre-show performances, including Christmas carols and other live music.

"This particular version is really fresh and different," said director Andrew Cummings. "Somehow it is simultaneously irreverent and also faithful to the original text. The heart of the story is very clear."

The original story by Charles Dickens is almost 200 years old and has been performed countless times. It follows the tale of Scrooge, an elderly accountant with an extreme distaste for Christmas. On Christmas Eve, three spirits visit him in his dreams to lead him through a reflection of his miserly life — and encourage him to change his misanthropic ways.

"Anybody who comes to see this show should see themselves in Scrooge," Cummings said. "That is the question of the play: are we, in our own lives, making choices that are not for the good of others? Are we making any choice that are leading us down a selfish path where we block off connection to other people? How can we choose to instead value our relationships and the people around us?"



In their twist on the time-honored classic, the five actors play hundreds of roles, and the central role of Scrooge is not fixed to any one cast member — instead, before each performance, the actors will put their names into a hat, and the one that is drawn will play Scrooge.

"There is a domino effect," Cummings said. "If one actor is chosen to play Scrooge, then all of the other actors shuffle around to cover the other roles. Anybody should be able to see themselves in this story. There are young Scrooges and old Scrooges, and male Scrooges and female Scrooges."

Scrooge switching between actors is central to the fresh feeling of the script, Cummings said. The added element of chaos allows each performance to feel distinct from the others.

"It's hilarious," said Roberta Vinkhuyzen, a member of the ensemble cast of five. "And it's frankly terrifying, but so exciting. It's also true to the spirit of the Dickens version. The message is very powerful, but I never feel like it is heavy-handed. It is all done in a very fun way."

The randomization of Scrooge's casting is central to his relatability, said actor Christy Wright. By allowing the audience to see a variety of actors taking turns in the central role, it underscores an important point: Scrooge could be any of us.

"I would never be cast as Scrooge, normally," Wright said. "Having a 34-year-old blonde female play this character is really unique. Each of our Scrooges are so drastically different. And in our other roles, we get to interact differently with each Scrooge."

Because of this random element, it is possible that no single casting of the show will be repeated during its run of 10 performances.

"I'm amazed at how well it works," Vinkhuyzen said. "At the beginning I thought, 'Okay, it seems exciting and innovative and I'll give it a try.' But the way that it has come together has been really magical. It's such an interesting project, it's unlike any play I've ever done, and I have done a lot of plays."

The idea to shake up the casting this way came from a performance of "Hamlet" at Shotgun Players in Berkeley, Cummings said. They used a similar method by rolling dice to decide who would play each role, as a way to freshen it up.

"The energy that the actors and audience describe is palpable," he said. "There is an energy that almost verges on panic at the beginning of the evening, but that just blossomed into this really beautiful production where the moments in the play were spontaneous in a way they never were before because they truly were fresh and different."

The traditional image of Scrooge is a character who audiences love to hate. But in SVCT's "A Christmas Carol," viewers may find themselves rooting for Scrooge and his redemption, in spite of his misdeeds.

"The thing that interests me in this particular version is that I find myself really caring for Scrooge and for his outcome," Cummings said. "He is so relatable, and even though he is a grumpy old guy, you really do care about whether he is going to turn it around. It sneaks up on you. You can laugh at Scrooge, you can look down on Scrooge, but by the end you will realize that you're on his team, and so his redemption is really meaningful."