



SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: Another "Christmas Carol," God Bless 'em

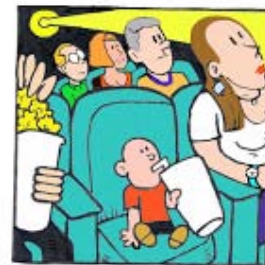
A CHRISTMAS CAROL ** out of ****
LYCEUM THEATRE

Who wants to be a Scrooge when reviewing *A Christmas Carol* in any form? Not me, hence the generous two stars and a shout outs to some of the pluses in this holiday production imported (much like our modern conception of Christmas) from Merrie Olde England. It's a warm, inviting stage on display, with lots of lamps casting a cheerful glow, the cast appropriately garbed (by and large) and some Christmas snow (that's not a spoiler; you know there's going to be snow) that's quick melting and fun rather than boring confetti.

Campbell Scott is a fine Scrooge that can hold his head high next to his dad's solid work in the same story. He harrumphs and galumphs and melts just as quickly as that snow. But it's a real performance, not a panto bit of fun winking at the audience and not too hard-edged either. Indeed, Scott has a twinkle when dismissing his nephew early on that hints at an even fuller characterization he might tackle someday in a better version.

But here's the main thought I had upon leaving *A Christmas Carol*. The story is endlessly malleable of course and has been done in every setting from TV sitcoms to lavish feature films. But the vast majority of them remain pretty darn faithful to the details of the novella by Charles Dickens. From versions starring Mr. Magoo to Alistair Sims to Patrick Stewart, they know the bones of a good story when they see it and leave well enough alone.

So the many, many diversions and additions by Jack Thorne this time out are all the more notable. And unnecessary. And harmful. A story that's larded with well-earned sentiment doesn't need more. of it. A



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tale positively full of lessons -- as full as a child's stocking by the fire on Christmas morning -- does not need those lessons repeated again and again. A show with warmth to spare does not need bonus hugs.

What it does need is a black box space or a theater in the round. This *Carol* was conceived in the round and Broadway desperately needs more spaces that can accommodate immersive productions. They can't all be squeezed into Circle In The Square, after all. Lincoln Center would be the other ideal space for this, but shows like *Hadestown* deserve an ideal setting, not a compromise. So if you go, sit close and on the side to glimpse the in-the-round pleasure of being amidst the fun that director Matthew Warchus charmed up in London.



In general, the vibe is the winner here and you can overlook the silly changes and enjoy yourself. Carolers and musicians begin playing long before the show begins. Cast-members and others like Tim (one of the gift givers wandering the aisles in good cheer, not the lad in the show) cheerfully hand out clementines and cookies before it begins. Bells are rung. The entire space of the theater is used, an echo of the London staging but a poor substitute when Scrooge's nephew must shout his lines from the upper level. And at the very, very end they play a lovely carol on the handbells that is sweet and simple and just right for the evening's end.

Scott is quite good and that counts for a lot. But as much as I want to applaud the generally fine production design and costumes (both by Rob Howell), the lighting (Hugh Vanstone) and sound design (Simon Baker), they also make some odd choices. The stage is littered with piles of old, discarded lamps, giant piles of junk that menacingly capture the ugly spirit of the miserly Scrooge. I assumed these would rise up and out of the way or be transformed into something nice or do...something. But those inert piles remained throughout most of the show, serving no purpose and ultimately proving a distraction. And did the Spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Future have to be garbed in bathrobes quite so garish and awful? (Andrea Martin and LaChanze embody two of them with good grace if little effect.)

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My guest rebelled when the Spirit of Christmas Future was embodied by Scrooge's sister Little Fan. I found it unbearable when Scrooge literally hugged his inner child. And no one needed to see Scrooge's funeral where his employee Bob Cratchit (a fine Dashiell Eaves), his nephew and his lost love all repeated their sad feelings we'd already heard before. All these lardings onto the classic tale have a modest pay off when Scrooge speaks to his one-time love Belle. Sarah Hunt gins up some genuine emotion and her talk with him at least covers some new emotional ground, rather than rehashing what Dickens did so much better before. One can almost overlook Thorne turning the delightful, jovial Mr. Fezziwig (her father here) into an undertaker of all things.

Oh dear, I'm bah humbugging again. The tale is indestructible, though Thorne takes some awful mighty whacks at it. Say rather it's indestructible if you leave it alone. But god bless 'em for trying. God bless them.... See, you wouldn't change that line would you? Why change anything? You should have a darn good reason and they don't. Still, God bless Jack Thorne and indeed, everyone.

THEATER OF 2019

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Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public ***

Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public ** 1/2

Choir Boy ** 1/2

White Noise ** 1/2

Kiss Me, Kate ***

Ain't No Mo' *** 1/2

Ain't Too Proud **

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Mrs. Murray's Menagerie *** 1/2

Oklahoma! (on Broadway) ** 1/2

Socrates **

The Pain Of My Belligerence *

Burn This **

Hadestown *** 1/2

All My Sons * 1/2

Tootsie ** 1/2

Ink ***

Beetlejuice **

Estado Vegetal ***

Hans Christian Andersen * 1/2

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Unchilding **

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Betrayal *** 1/2
Fifty Million Frenchmen ** 1/2
Freestyle Love Supreme ** 1/2
Derren Brown: Secret ***
(A)loft Modulation * 1/2
The Great Society **
I Can't See *
Heroes Of The Fourth Turning ** 1/2
Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz ***
The Glass Menagerie (dir Austin Pendleton & Peter Bloch) **
Terra Firma (debut of The Coop theater company) **
Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation ***
Dublin Carol ** 1/2
Soft Power **
The Decline and Fall of The Entire World As Seen Through The Eyes
Of Cole Porter ***
For Colored Girls ** 1/2
Scotland, PA **
The Sound Inside *** (great cast, clumsy ending)
User Not Found **
Enchanted April **
DruidShakespeare: Richard III * 1/2
Broadbend, Arkansas **
Einstein's Dreams * 1/2
The Crucible (by Bedlam) *** 1/2
Pump Girl ***
A Christmas Carol (Bway w Campbell Scott) **

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