



A CHRISTMAS CAROL TRANSFIGURED BY ELEMENTS THEATRE COMPANY

by Nancy Grossman, *Broadway World*

Chestnuts roasting on an open flame, bell ringers fervently toiling in the courtyard tower, and carols emanating from a sonorous brass quintet were among the panoply of sensory stimuli surrounding the Elements Theatre Company presentation of *A Christmas Carol* at the Church of the Transfiguration at Rock Harbor in Orleans that ran for two weekends in December. Under the direction of Sr. Danielle Dwyer, a chorus of eight and nearly a dozen actors played multiple roles in the Readers' Theatre format of John Mortimer's adaptation of the venerable story by Charles Dickens. Set in London in 1843, the timeless tale was the thirty-one year old Dickens' Christmas gift for the world; more than a century and a half later, it endures, and it virtually glittered in Elements' dramatic interpretation. Could there be a more appropriate setting for the transformational journey of Ebenezer Scrooge than the sanctuary of the Church of the Transfiguration?

Uniformly dressed in outfits of simple black and white or only black, the ensemble sat behind music stands draped in black on a tiered platform flanked by two lamp posts and two Christmas trees strung with white lights. London scenes from the story were projected on the rear wall and a modicum of props was used, such as chimes to indicate the passing hours, a pair of hats to suggest the Spirits of Christmas Past and Present, and a wooden bench for the Cratchit family's hearth. However, the dearth of set pieces was made up for by atmospheric effects – foggy mist oozing down the tiers, lighting, and sound – all in service to the ghostly aspects of the story, and the rich layer of musical underscoring by the brass quintet and a harpsichord. Most importantly, Sr. Dwyer's narration and the storytelling talents of the cast gave life to the words of Dickens with vivacity unexpected in a staged reading. Brad Lussier brought nuance to his portrayal of Scrooge, screwing up his face and spitting out his lines to show his irascible nature at the outset, and gradually softening as he accepted the lessons from the Spirits. By the time he awoke on Christmas morning as a changed man, Lussier's

Scrooge appeared to be lighter on his feet, spoke in a higher tone of voice, and stretched his smile from ear to ear. His joy was on a par with that shown by Kyle Norman as Scrooge's nephew Fred, undeterred by his uncle's utterings of "Bah, humbug!" and the optimistic Bob Cratchit, warmly inhabited by Br. Stephen Velie.

The Spirits were appropriately funny or scary as played by Chris Kanaga (Jacob Marley's Ghost and The Spirit of Christmas Present) and Ellen Ortolani (The Spirit of Christmas Past); The Spirit of Christmas Future was a mournful, moaning group effort by the chorus octet, donning black hoods to add to the effect. Ortolani's cheerfulness made her a good match with Velie as Mrs. Cratchit, but she also offered some authentic harsh feelings about Mr. Scrooge. Peter Haig was masterful in a variety of roles, distinguishing the First Portly Gentleman from Fezziwig, the Headmaster, and Belle's Husband, among others. In a brief appearance, the tenderness of Scrooge's sister Fan was shown by Sr. Phoenix Catlin, and Heather Norman conveyed the heartbreak of Belle when she broke off her engagement with young Ebenezer (Jeremy Haig). The chorus used a multitude of inflections, gestures, and facial expressions, and they each portrayed individual characters, as well. Sr. Dwyer even got into the act as the Charwoman and seemed to relish every moment.

One might think that there's nothing left to discover in A Christmas Carol, but experiencing it in a stripped-down, minimalist production allows the focus to shift to the dialogue and the emotions expressed by the author's choice of words. In the Readers' Theatre format, the actors are looking at and speaking to the audience rather than each other, including us in the conversation, making us feel as if we are part of the action. If Ebenezer Scrooge is Everyman, then his journey is our journey, his lessons are our lessons, and his redemption is our redemption. This idea may have hit home before, but Elements Theatre Company's rendition felt different, more compelling, and more transforming. Perhaps it was the requirement that we use our own imaginations to fill in the pictures as we listened to the words; we've heard them all before, but not quite like this, and not in these hallowed surroundings.

The Barnstable Patriot

“GOD BLESS US, EVERYONE!”

Written by Barbara Clark, *Barnstable Patriot*

Elements Theatre Company rings out the old year with a Readers' Theater presentation of A Christmas Carol followed by a thrilling ringing of the bells at the Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans.

If you get the impression from this review that Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol is one of my favorite holiday stories, you've got it right. It's way above most of the rest. Does it withstand the simplicity of a Readers' Theater performance, without stage sets and costumes? You betcha...with bells on.

Elements Theatre Company in Orleans is performing a Readers' Theatre version of A Christmas Carol, adapted by John Mortimer (creator, by the way, of Rumpole of the Bailey) from the original 1843 Dickens classic, performed at Church of the Transfiguration in Orleans.

The cast, dressed mainly in black, accented with one row of white-shirted actors, is positioned orchestra-like behind easels holding their scripts. Characters occasionally walk to center "stage" to speak lines or, as with the Cratchit family, appear as a group sitting together on a bench. The only costuming is in the creative headgear worn by the Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present.

But "plainness" of setting just accentuates the play itself. Impeccably directed by Sr. Danielle Dwyer, it reverberates with every bit of the color, humor, pathos and atmosphere of any version you've seen on stage or in film, and it's brought to life with all the effusive glory of Dickens' words

Brad Lussier as Scrooge is a standout, moving effortlessly from mean old skinflint to whiny uncertainty (to the first ghost: "Ah...will you be staying long?") to the fear and horror of recognition (he begs the ghost, "No more!") and on to the childlike joy of his Christmas Day awakening. The rest of the cast, several taking multiple roles, is equally spot-on, with nary a false note in the Brit accents, though occasionally a line or two vanishes out of hearing in the church's upper recesses.

A huge screen backdrop above the players projects a slide show of affecting images, from grainy impressions of London streets to Scrooge's bowl of gruel, to Jacob Marley's face on the door knocker, to a panoramic London skyline.

Scrooge's dreamtime is effectively conveyed, with chimes ominously sounding at the one o'clock hour and the white-shirted cast in sync with arms conveying the ticking of the clock.

In Readers' Theatre format we can take flights of fancy, as past images of Scrooge's ghosts blend in our minds, allowing the imagination to create its own phantom faces. When the specters finally vanish, there's a much-anticipated sense of relief on Christmas morning as we, along with Scrooge, cast the bed curtains aside and throw wide the windows to call out to the boy below:

"What's to-day, my fine fellow?" We know the answer! And we wait for the turkey action – "Do you know whether they've sold the prize turkey?" shouts Scrooge, then adding, "Go and buy it!" and our Christmas is complete.

Speaking of BELLS: the performance concluded with a triumphant bell ringing live from the tower across the quad as a group of change ringers perform their marvelous skill. Ringing out into a cold and moonlit night, it turned the winter evening magical.



CAPE COD TIMES

ELEMENTS FOCUSES ON LANGUAGE IN “CHRISTMAS CAROL”

By Kathi Scrizzi Driscoll, *Cape Cod Times*

The Orleans-based Elements Theatre Company performed “A Christmas Carol” two years ago, and the show was so well-received that members were asked about doing it again.

But director Danielle Dwyer didn’t want an exact repeat, so she found a new way to present the well-known Dickens story.

This year’s production is an expansion on Readers Theatre, in a version created by the Royal Shakespeare Company. The cast is dressed all in black, though with some headpieces, and the story of miser Ebenezer Scrooge reformed by ghostly visits is read through some key characters, a chorus (with transformations that include them becoming people on the London streets and gargoyles) and a narrator to fill in some of the blanks.

There is music, including a harpsichord, caroling and tower bells; sound effects; and projections of images that connect with what is happening in the story.

The somewhat spare result puts the spotlight squarely on Dickens’ language, and Dwyer thinks the timing is right considering Elements’ upcoming launch of a celebration of Shakespeare, whose work influenced Dickens. This style “gives us the chance to sink into the language and listen to (Dickens’) words, and find the soul of what he’s trying to say with his words,” she explains.

This “Christmas Carol” production also emphasizes the themes of light and darkness in the story — “the idea of bringing light into a darkened place and what a difference it can make” — which Dwyer believes particularly appropriate at this solstice time of year. That light/dark theme extends to where this show is set: in the Church of the Transfiguration, between the wall of light, or Transformation Wall, and the baptismal font — with both transformation and the font’s connection to rebirth representing what happens to Scrooge.

Elements members were not content to simply tell the story, though. They’ve turned the production into an event by connecting it to a Christmas dinner, with a Dickensian-style feast

and a brass band playing carols at Paraclete House. The pre-show will include a 10- to 15-minute talk on Dickens and what was going on in his life and in England when he wrote his most famous piece. There will also be a marketplace and a chance to roast chestnuts before entering the church to see the show.

Dwyer refers to the entire evening as “a feast for the senses,” noting that Readers Theatre is also known as “Theatre of the Imagination” and the various parts of the production fire up imaginations through the different senses. “I think it’s sort of a lovely way to usher in the Christmas season,” she says.