

'Christmas Carol' merrier than ever this year

By Tim Keller
Special to The Chronicle-News

RATON — Director Gail Dixon-Willden obviously coached her actors to stoke the merriment in this year's 10th annual Shuler Theater production of Charles Dickens's classic "A Christmas Carol." The production evolves each year; last weekend's three shows had been tweaked to provide the audience more laughs than ever.

Willden provided many of her actors, in both major and minor roles, with their own scenes, and more often than not she found ways for them to bring generous laughter to the appreciative holiday audience. Sometimes it was a clever sight gag, other times a funny bit of dialog. The result was closer to a comedy than the iconic tale of redemption has been before, and all the better for it.

Joe Zink returned for his fifth season as the cold-hearted miser Ebenezer Scrooge, easily earning his top billing. Zink gets better in this role every year; it's now hard to imagine a better Scrooge.

The rest of the featured roles were spread pretty evenly between a dozen or so other actors — this is an ensemble community theater musical production now grown to more than 60 actors on stage. Matt Fleming was a welcome addition to the local theater scene, with his history of acting that had ended 17 years ago. He returned to the stage as patriarch Bob Cratchit, perfectly cast with his elastic face that shifts easily from despair to a huge warm grin. Shuler regular Mark Jansen continues to



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Veteran actor Joe Zink plays Ebenezer Scrooge as a miser never content with his money in Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" at Raton's Shuler Theater.

improve through his many roles; in this year's "A Christmas Carol" he had not one but two featured roles, as Fred and as Marley's Ghost.

Carol Crary returned as a gentler Ghost of Christmas Past, bringing with her a pair of Snow Sprites played by young Asia Gentry and Autumn Archuleta, who were a delightful addition to the play.

If there's a role asking for an actor to go over the top, "chewing the scenery," then Michael Porter is the

man for the job. Here he returned as the Ghost of Christmas Present with a performance that was a Christmas present for the audience.

Chicky Lee Gomez played both young Scrooge and the masked Ghost of Christmas Future, shaking up the elderly Scrooge in both cases. It was good to have John and Sue Martin back as Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig; they bring infectious zest to their roles and add their rich voices to the song-filled musical. The Cratchit family was

more endearing than usual, close-knit and lovely, with matriarch Desiree Martinez and kids played by Marisa McCarty, Clair Willden, Nathaly Torres, Lijah Medina, and a fine Tiny Tim Cratchit played by Zebediah Medina. The muted brown colors at the family's Christmas dinner were an effective part of a charming set design.

Young Jeff Redlick and Kristina Jansen, both Shuler veterans, enjoyed their playful dance romp. Newcomer Kelly Jones was good as Millie, especially

when her wonderful singing voice emerged in the layered harmonies.

Elizabeth and Sarah Record came close to stealing the show in their turn as charwomen come to steal away Scrooge's things after his death — witnessed by the living Scrooge thanks to the magic of the Ghost of Christmas Future. As the two women stripped away the sheet from under Scrooge's dead body, then the red woolen socks from his cold feet, the audience repeatedly erupted in laughter in a scene that per-

fectly illustrated director Willden's amping up of the comedy this year.

As the production has grown, the number of costumes has had to grow, too. Costumers Misty Gomez and Ursula Garcia, assisted by Janese Little and Ashley Atwater, really upped their game this year: the costumes looked splendid, and markedly improved from the past. Attention to detail paid off with all of the play's women wearing warm scarves against the winter cold — this is London in December 1884 — and much of the footwear fit the setting as well, so that Scrooge's ridiculous bedroom slippers of rubber-soled moccasins were the exception rather than the rule.

The production featured 18 carols and songs conducted by music director Michael D. Higgins, who joined in one musical highlight when he turned to add his own deep resonant voice to a mix of male harmonies. The "Box Carolers" in the balcony sang a transcendent featured carol along with many harmony accompaniments.

This year's smooth scene changes reminded that it's best for a stage manager's work to be unnoticed: that means everything is going well. Mariah Fleming invisibly directed seven assistants and crew chiefs as they all kept more than 60 cast members exactly where — and when — they were supposed to be.

The Santa Fe Trail School for the Performing Arts produces most of Raton's local theater. Their annual "A Christmas Carol" is always eagerly anticipated; this year's production stands out as perhaps the best yet.

Home Free jingles bells with a cappella concert

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RATON — Less than two years after its triumphant first show at the Shuler Theater, the world-touring Minnesota a cappella band Home Free returned to a packed house for a concert devoted entirely to Christmas songs, all produced with no instruments beyond five remarkable human voices.

Once again the first impression was that they must be cheating. Their opening song was so big, bolstered by loud throbbing electric bass and a drum kit complete with cymbal crashes, that you just knew they had to be cheating. And you were right, but only partially.

Later in the show they revealed an electronic looping device that allowed them to sing a rhythmic

pattern and then have it keep repeating while they added layers over it. It was right there in front of the audience the whole time, but used for only two or three songs.

All eyes were on vocal percussionist Adam Rupp, beat-boxer extraordinaire, because it was so hard to believe that he could produce such room-filling drums, cymbals, percussion, and more with only his mouth. He did.

Bass singer Matthew Tvey filled out the rhythm section emulating both electric and upright basses when he wasn't singing the featured lead vocal.

That left Matt Atwood, Adam Rupp, and Rob Lundquist to layer vocal harmonies around the well-known Christmas melodies the band brought on its 6500-mile, second annual Christmas concert tour.

When they're not booked

to provide entertainment on luxury cruise ships around the world, the singers tour the Midwest with a highly-polished professional show that includes a truck with two technicians which arrives on site several hours ahead of the singers to set up sophisticated sound and lighting equipment.

Musically, the songs are seldom straightforward; instead, the musicians have rearranged them to show off their vocal talents and increase the entertainment value. They sometimes switch time signatures in the midst of a song, or combine two songs.

They changed "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" from its standard 4/4 time to 5/4 time, giving it a new feel, and then they inserted a section of Dave Brubeck's jazz instrumental "Take Five" into the middle of the carol. Citing their love of



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Home Free brought its highly professional show to the Shuler Theater Saturday for a night of a cappella Christmas music.

the TV show "Glee," they did a mash-up of "Let It Snow" and "Winter Wonderland."

It was a short show — two 40-minute sets — the five singers had so much infectious fun that the audience was unlikely to feel shortchanged. The onstage fun was so convincing that

it seemed likely that these guys actually laugh a lot on their 300-mile jaunts across the plains to reach the next show. They were great at bringing the audience into their circle, with lots of playful banter back and forth, while their vocal accomplishments were often simply astonishing.

It was no wonder, then, that long lines formed in the lobby after the show to buy the band's CDs and have them autographed. The singers seemed to like the Shuler Theater as much as its audience liked them, so it's a good bet that they'll all meet again in a year or two.

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Woman ready to end friendship

DEAR ABBY: I am a gay woman. My partner, "Jenny," and I have been friends with another couple



Dear Abby
Jeanne Phillips

for 15 years. Over the last year I have come to realize that I no longer want to be friends with them. One of them has been particularly unkind to me, and frankly, we don't have a lot in common. Jenny is uncomfortable with my decision and wants me to talk to them to discuss my feelings. They have already asked her if there's a problem. If I talk to them, I'm sure they will be offended by what I have to say because I didn't say anything when the issues first arose. I'm not good at con-

frontation, and it's hard for me to tell someone my feelings are hurt.

The bottom line is, I want out of this couple's friendship. But I need to do it in a way that's OK with Jen. I met the couple through her, and she wants to continue her friendship with them. Please help. -- MOVING ON IN GEORGIA

DEAR MOVING ON: It would not be confrontational to tell them that while you have known each other for a long time, you feel you have grown apart. You should also mention that your feelings were hurt when one of them said "()." At least that way they will understand why you have disappeared, and Jenny won't be left with the responsibility of explaining it to them.

DEAR ABBY: I love the holiday season, but I often feel the blues and get a little depressed. I lost my father on Christmas Day several years ago and have since lost a brother to cancer. I'm

tired of feeling this way when this is the season to be merry. What can I do? -- ANOTHER BLUE CHRISTMAS IN SOUTH CAROLINA

DEAR BLUE: I am sorry for your losses. Because of your father's death on Christmas Day, it may always bring some sense of loss. However, an effective way to distract yourself would be to spend time in the company of friends who understand your feelings. Another would be to volunteer at a senior center, shelter or food distribution program. Helping someone else through a difficult time is the surest cure for the blues. Please give it a try.

Dear Abby is written by Abigail Van Buren, also known as Jeanne Phillips, and was founded by her mother, Pauline Phillips. Write Dear Abby at www.DearAbby.com or P.O. Box 69440, Los Angeles, CA 90069.