

A Christmas Carol: Tweaking the tradition turns this holiday classic inclusive

It's as if Director Aileen Wen McGroddy threw out the rule book when coaxing her vision of the classic "A Christmas Carol" to life at Trinity Repertory Company this year.

And we are all so much better for it.

The Charles Dickens' powerful Christmas tale of greed, penitence, and second chances is an annual treat at Trinity, and each year audiences wait for the spin the cast and director give to the story. This year, McGroddy opted for several key adaptations that prove enlightening and heart-warming.

First, Ebenezer Scrooge and Jacob Marley, the two friends and miserly business owners, are portrayed by women, Phyllis Kay, and Rachael Warren, respectively. Secondly, the family of Bob Cratchitt, Scrooge's faithful employee, is Hispanic. Thirdly, Scrooge's nephew Fred is gay.

The end result is an infusion of great depth and relatability to a story that has been ushering in the holiday season since the Victorian era. At one point, when Scrooge is observing life in the Cratchitt household on a journey with the Ghost of Christmas Present, the family is speaking in Spanish. The character complains that she can't understand them, and the ghost replies, "All you had to do was ask" and English translations appear on a towering screen. The message is powerful and timeless in its simplicity.

Kay is wonderfully charming as Scrooge, able to summon a snarl or sneer, while peppering the dialogue with comments that sound like an old, resigned grandmother. Warren's appearance as Marley, portending the visit of the three ghosts, is another interesting take on the classic chains as she tugs a train of shopping carts laden with scrap metal.

Other treats in the cast include Dereks Thomas as an ebullient Fezziwig, the humor and joy brought by Luis Ra Rivera as Bob Cratchit, and the freewheeling performance of Jenny Nguyen Nelson as the Ghost of Christmas Past, who descends from the rafters in an airman's outfit.

Many, many of McGroddy's touches add to the story. She includes much-overlooked scenes in which a ghost takes Scrooge by miners toiling deep in the earth, lonely lighthouse keepers, and sailors aboard their ship. The message is that whether poor, destitute, or far from home, people can know the spirit of Christmas.

The first 80 minutes of the 90-minute production, performed with no intermission, are drably colored on a Spartan stage to represent the repression and depression cloaking Scrooge's life. At the end, when Scrooge begins to soften, colors and decorations are brought out to brighten the set. For the end, the oddly-shaped stage is turned into a huge dining table and everyone - including crew members and the musicians from the loft - gathers around for a feast at Fred's.

Few choices, however, add little. Because the set is sparse, McGroddy utilizes the cast to create furniture in Scrooge's bedroom. As Scrooge gets ready for bed, the furniture, one by one, announces that there are no ghosts hiding there. It's too abstract and unnecessary. But, the goal of "A Christmas

Carol," on stage at Trinity through January 1, 2023, is always to remind us of the true spirit of the season and this it does beautifully. By drawing in diverse groups, the message is inclusion and appreciation for each other. What better gift is there? For more information, go to www.trinityrep.org.