

Jacob Marley takes turn in classic tale's new spin BARE-BONES PRESENTATION BEST PART OF PLAY ON HEAVEN, HELL

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Mercury News
Article Launched: 11/19/2007 01:32:20 AM PST

If Ebenezer Scrooge can be redeemed in Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," his late partner, Jacob Marley, deserves no less. That's the premise of "Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol." Unlike Scrooge, his former business associate has the handicap of having arrived in Hell, but isn't stuck there if he can spark Scrooge's rehabilitation within 24 hours.

Although this ride on the heaven-hell continuum takes us too far past the more earthly aspirations of Dickens' not-so-short story of 1843, it's an interesting enough place to make for sterling theater, if not stirring literature, at City Lights Theater Company of San Jose.

It's one of those adventuresome, bare-bones productions that make small theaters so bracing in big cities. The four actors don't even seem to be wearing makeup. We don't see Marley's chains - as they are described in Dickens' classic - but they are made palpable. Early on, three zombies descend on Marley before a well-timed blackout makes them look briefly supernatural. With a minimal set and few props, unless you count the faintly annoying soundtrack from the 1998 original production of Tom Mula's play, director Jeff Clarke spins straw into gold in his City Lights debut.

That's more of a reason to see the play than Mula's script, although the playwright is an admirable technician who, in this play, has found several interesting riffs on Dickens' original themes and has condensed them to a tight 90 minutes of mostly witty repartee.

The actors handle that flawlessly, even the one oddity of having to recite several narrative passages in the third person, such as "The poker went through Marley." They relate those narratives with their own American accents but otherwise render a tour de force of English accents that are pitch-perfect.

As Marley, there's something too upright about Michael Jerome West to make him perfect for the part of the "dry old spider" who was otherwise Scrooge's twin in their bleak earthly existence. West is more of a Patrick Stewart type. But he compensates admirably, whether showing how he "waggled his tongue horribly" at Scrooge, or giving his desperate quest an everyman quality as his mission morphs from Scrooge's redemption to his own. When it takes him back to a miserable childhood, he moans, "Can't we go back to Hell? It wasn't as bad as this."



Robyn Winslow, Amanda Folena, James Mantell, Michael Jerome West in Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol. (Photo by Kit Wilder, courtesy of City Lights Theater Company of San Jose)

James Mantell is a suitably curmudgeonly Scrooge, more sad and resigned than evil. But he's funny, too, when he says Marley has descended upon him "tricked up like some fourth-rate Hamlet" and "I'm sure you didn't just drop by to be social."

The other two actors are saddled with describing all the rules and regulations that invariably seem to clutter comedies set in the afterlife. As the apparition who guides Marley through his mission, Amanda Folen has a light touch that keeps the procedures from getting in the way.

As the crotchety old "record keeper" who keeps a hellacious bureaucracy humming, Robyn Winslow solidifies her stronghold among favorites in the City Lights troupe by also playing several characters that parallel those in the original story. Those range from a touching young woman who resembles the one who got away from Scrooge to a teenage bully version of work house colleague Dick Wilkins and even to old Fezziwig from the feast of Christmas past. Thanks to Winslow, City Lightness prevails even when the play gets surprisingly heavy at the end.

The original story was a little gem about Christian charity and living an exemplary life. The revival is so caught up in the heaven-hell struggle that the spirit ultimately takes hold too literally for the play's own good.

Those who can suspend disbelief successfully may admire that too, but there is no quarrel that the production is an admirable part of this holiday season.

"Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol"

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Presented by City Lights Theater Company of San Jose.

The upshot: An admirably economic production of a rather ecumenical play.

Where: 529 S. Second St., San Jose.

When: Thursday, Friday, Saturday evenings at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 7 p.m. (Nov. 25, Dec. 2) or 2 p.m. (Dec. 16, 23).

Through: Dec. 23.

Tickets: \$25-40. Call (408) 295-4200 or visit www.cltc.org.

Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes with one intermission.

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