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Review: 'A Christmas Carol'

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Madison Square Garden wants a slice of the Christmas pie pretty much owned, until now, by Radio City Music Hall. Recognizing that it probably wouldn't make sense to replicate the revue format of Radio City's "Christmas Spectacular," the Garden and its partner, Nickelodeon Family Classics, along with executive producer Dodger Prods., put together a team of A-list talent headed by composer Alan Menken to create a musical adaptation of "A Christmas Carol."

The result is pretty much what you'd expect of a musical built for 5,500 people at a sitting. The show begins with a thunderous percussive explosion — rumbling organ, crashing cymbals, blaring brass — on Tony Walton's wraparound London cityscape set that's so big you could park Norma Desmond's mansion in there and never notice it.

Spectacle is the operative word here: Everything is very big, very colorful and very loud. But it's also extremely difficult to follow (despite being quite faithful to Charles Dickens) and almost totally devoid of warmth. For much of its 90-minute duration, it may as well be a football game going on up there.

Well, a football game staged by director Mike Ockrent and choreographed by Susan Stroman, the hand-in-glove duo behind "Crazy for You."

With a cast of more than 70 (plus a couple of children's choirs thrown in for good measure), staging this monster is more akin to traffic control. Still, it is done fluidly and — an Ockrent/Stroman trademark — with considerable humor, especially in the first big dance number, "Link by Link," in which a very animated Ghost of Jacob Marley (Jeff Keller) and a platoon of ectoplasmic accomplices outline for Scrooge (Walter Charles) the many ways in which his life has gone wrong.

With all its clanging clamor, the scene giddily recalls darker moments from both "Kiss of the Spider Woman" and "Grand Hotel."

For a later dance number, a Christmas ball stunningly set in Fezziwig's Banking House, costume designer William Ivey Long (another "Crazy" alum) has outdone himself, which is saying something, as gown after wildly colorful gown makes its entrance and has its spin, though the scene itself feels constipated.

And in “Abundance and Charity” and “Christmas Together,” with their dancing presents and loopily syncopated revelers, there’s more than a tip of the hat to the Rockettes.

Menken and lyricist Lynn Ahrens (“Once on This Island”) have written several lovely tunes for “A Christmas Carol,” but you’d hardly know it from the production.

This is arguably the show’s chief failure: Not a single ballad is developed fully and really showcased, none is driven home.

This may be the inevitable result of a show so amplified and so removed from the audience that we may as well be watching robots out there.

The score is overwhelmed by the gimmickry, and that’s a shame, because Menken has no equal in writing accessible tunes, and Ahrens is an intelligent, sentimental writer perfectly suited to the assignment.

So you’ll have to wait for the cast album to get a true sense of the songs.

And while Ockrent and Ahrens’ book is faithful to the original, it’s so subordinated to the special effects as to be all but impossible to follow, especially for youngsters.

Smaller kids also may be overwhelmed by all the scarier elements. (Those looking for a “Christmas Carol” that challenges the imagination more than the senses should head for the Richard Rodgers Theater and Patrick Stewart’s solo performance, which has itself become a new holiday tradition.)

Neither Charles nor Nick Corley make much impression as Scrooge and Cratchit, respectively, while Robert Westenberg is wasted as Scrooge’s nephew Fred.

And it does seem odd to cast a Tiny Tim (Matthew Mezzacappa) who can’t sing and then give him a key number.

But in truth, it’s those costumes that do most of the acting; they include white tie and tails for an impish Christmas Past (the always lovable Ken Jennings) and a blinding red number for Christmas Future (Theara J. Ward).

There is some splendid flying (by Foy, of course). The lighting by Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer rarely strays from a harsh Day-Glo palette.

So consider “A Christmas Carol” a \$12 million work in progress with a \$55 top. Nickelodeon and the Garden are counting on it as a holiday perennial, and there probably is a good show in there. Somewhere.

A Christmas Carol

Madison Square Garden, New York; 5,500 seats; \$ 55 top

Production

A Nickelodeon Family Classics and Madison Square Garden presentation of a musical in one act with music by Alan Menken, lyrics by Lynn Ahrens and book by Ahrens and Mike Ockrent, based on the story by Charles Dickens; director, Ockrent.

Creative

Choreography, Susan Stroman; musical direction, Paul Gemignani; orchestrations, Michael Starobin; dance arrangements and incidental music, Glen Kelly; sets, Tony Walton; costumes, William Ivey Long; lighting, Jules Fisher, Peggy Eisenhauer; sound, Tony Meola; projections, Wendall K. Harrington; flying by Foy; production supervisor, Gene O'Donovan; executive producer, Dodger Prods.; producer, Tim Hawkins. Opened Dec. 1, 1994; reviewed Nov. 29. Running time: 1 hour, 30 min.

Cast

Mr. Smythe - Joseph Kolinski

Scrooge - Walter Charles

Cratchit - Nick Corley

Fred - Robert Westenberg

Ghost of Jacob Marley - Jeff Keller

Ghost of Christmas Past - Ken Jennings

Ghost of Christmas Present - Michael Mandell

Ghost of Christmas Future - Theara J. Ward

With: Andrea Frierson Toney, Joy Hermalyn, Michael X. Martin, Michael Christopher Moore, Bill Nolte, Darcy Pulliam, Emily Skinner, Mary Stout, Gerry Vichi.

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