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THEATER REVIEW: A CHRISTMAS CAROL

THEATER REVIEW: A CHRISTMAS CAROL; A Famous Miser, Tiny Tim And a Tap-Dancing Chorus

By DAVID RICHARDS
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THE latest entry in the annual holiday entertainment sweepstakes, the musical version of "A Christmas Carol" at the Paramount, makes for a pleasant 90 minutes. But it never quite delivers the uplift you want from the story of the world's most famous skinflint and how he rediscovers his conscience.

Would you settle for a sleigh piled high with fruit and oversize Christmas gifts that break apart to reveal 12 chorus girls in red velvet, who tap dance and sing about "Abundance and Charity"?

While the creators of this extravaganza, which opened last night, belong to Broadway's A Team (among them Alan Menken, the composer; Mike Ockrent, the director, and Susan Stroman, the choreographer), they appear to be operating less on inspiration than on assignment. Give them a B for their considerable efforts and hope that in years ahead the show's heart will grow stronger.

The mandate was to fashion a family attraction to rival the lucrative Christmas spectacular at Radio City Music Hall. To that end, they have taken Charles Dickens's tale and thrown a great deal of money (a reported \$12 million) at it. A lot has stuck. As in most musicals these days, there is more than a suggestion of Las Vegas about "A Christmas Carol." The eye is courted at every turn, the special effects come on a regular basis and the street scenes don't lack for warmly dressed bodies and the odd beggar. At the end, snow falls in the hall as well as onstage, which so thrilled an incredulous 8-year-old boy seated near me that he got up and danced in the aisle.

The evening's heroes, in fact, are the costumer, William Ivey Long, who has supplied rack upon rack of picturesque costumes; the versatile lighting team of Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer, and the set designer, Tony Walton, who faced the toughest challenge of all. Unlike Radio City Music Hall, with its huge, dramatic vertical spaces, the Paramount has a relatively low ceiling, a stage considerably wider than it is deep and an auditorium in the shape of a generous wedge of pie. Political conventions or revival meetings might adapt to the quarters well enough.

A musical is going to have a harder time of it, especially if it features, as this one does, Marley and his fellow ghosts levitating in black light, their interconnecting chains forming

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





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an eerie Day-Glo spider web; or Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Future taking flight and tracing graceful S patterns over the audience. Mr. Walton has done the logical thing; he emphasizes the horizontal dimensions of the Paramount by extending the houses and shops of 1880's London along both sides of the auditorium.

"Christmas Together," the joyful production number that comes two thirds of the way through, offers nothing less than a panoramic view of the city in full celebration. Stage left, you have Tiny Tim and the Cratchits; stage right, Scrooge's nephew Fred and his family. Meanwhile, the sorts of windows you find in Advent calendars are being thrown open everywhere. Behind some, actors are singing; behind others, cardboard cutouts are dancing. At "The Phantom of the Opera" or "Miss Saigon," you tend to look up a lot. At "A Christmas Carol," you look around.

Of course there is still Dickens's story to tell in all this. Mr. Ockrent and Lynn Ahrens are responsible for the adaptation, which is clear and concise but emotionally flat. "This is your life," announces the Ghost of Christmas Past, a pudgy Ralph Edwards pretender in a white satin tux and top hat, as he presents Scrooge with an ornate scrapbook. The musical then proceeds to show the familiar high points: Scrooge's miserable childhood and his abortive romance as a young man; the Fezziwigs' Christmas gala and hoedown; Tiny Tim's generous blessing upon the world, and Scrooge's last-minute repentance after viewing his own tombstone, which is several stories tall in this production and lapped by the fires of hell.

The individual scenes, however, have little weight. Although Walter Charles, who portrays Scrooge, is onstage constantly, you can forget for long patches that "A Christmas Carol" is about his conversion to goodness. Perhaps so as not to frighten younger spectators, he's largely a benign scoundrel. If you end up liking him, it's partly because the reasons for fearing him have been held to a minimum.

After the spectacle, the score by Mr. Menken (with lyrics by Ms. Ahrens) is the production's major drawing card. The composer is riding high on Broadway right now with the success of "Beauty and the Beast," and he's written similarly pretty music for "A Christmas Carol": a succession of ballads, waltzes and anthems that, whatever the circumstances, never forsake a basic spriteliness. Musically speaking, Mr. Menken is an optimist, which sometimes puts him at odds with Dickens but probably makes him the right man when it comes to spreading good cheer. Ms. Ahrens keeps her lyrics simple. To the extent that I could hear them, they are not unintelligent.

Counting the actors, the children's chorus and the horse, the cast numbers nearly 100. Locating who, among the multitude, is talking or singing at a given moment is not always an easy task, and the performers' body microphones don't make it any easier. Near the finale, I lost Scrooge entirely, only to discover after scouring the stage that he had ventured down into the audience and was personally wishing people a happy holiday. While it is commonly said that actors chew up the scenery, scenery can chew up actors just as often. It's becoming a problem.

Mary Stout and Gerry Vichi manage nonetheless to stand out as the Fezziwigs, rotund and jovial. Emily Skinner makes a gracious fiancée for Scrooge, and Robert Westenberg's inherent decency goes a long way toward defining Fred. Still, it would be ill-advised to head off to this "Christmas Carol" expecting great performances, unless you're expecting them from the stagehands.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL Based on the story by Charles Dickens. Music by Alan Menken; lyrics by Lynn Ahrens; book by Mike Ockrent and Ms. Ahrens. Directed by Mr. Ockrent;

choreography by Susan Stroman; sets by Tony Walton; costumes by William Ivey Long; lighting by Jules Fisher and Peggy Eisenhauer; sound by Tony Meoloa; musical direction by Paul Gemignani; executive producer, Dodger Productions; producer, Tim Hawkins. Presented by Nickelodeon Family Classics and Madison Square Garden. At the Paramount, Seventh Avenue and 33d Street, Manhattan. WITH: Walter Charles (Scrooge), Nick Corley (Cratchit), Matthew Mezzacappa (Tiny Tim), Michael Mandell (Ghost of Christmas Present), Robert Westenberg (Fred), Ken Jennings (Ghost of Christmas Past), Jeff Keller (Ghost of Jacob Marley), Gerry Vichi (Fezziwig), Mary Stout (Mrs. Fezziwig) and Emily Skinner (Emily).

Photo: A new Scrooge: Walter Charles in "A Christmas Carol," at the Paramount. (Joan Marcus) (pg. C1); Emily Skinner and Michael Christopher Moore. (Joan Marcus/"A Christmas Carol") (pg. C26)

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