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FAMILY FARE

Laurel Graeber

Some Ghosts Worth Reviving

While many aspects of the holiday season can seem excessive, there is one Yuletide tradition to which I'll never say "Bah, humbug!" — "A Christmas Carol."

Theaterworks/USA has devised yet another musical interpretation of the tale, and it's a thorough delight: inspired, funny and far more intimate than the enjoyable extravaganza that comes to the Theater at Madison Square Garden every year.

The pleasure begins with the score. Although Dick Gallagher's music and Mark Waldrop's lyrics can be heartwarming, their Christmas pudding has enough spice to keep it from ever becoming treacle.

"Break the Chain," for instance, sung by Jacob Marley's ghost and a chorus of his fellow damned, has plenty of soul (no pun intended), emerging as a combined jazz lament and spiritual. And "Guess Who Kicked the Bucket Last Night," a hilarious vaudeville number, includes the sound effect appropriate to the title. (It begins, of course, the visit by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.)

David Armstrong, who also directs the production, has written a book that hews closely to Dickens. He has, however, added a few clever embellishments, like the scene in which Scrooge's nephew and his family play "20 Questions," and the unseen, observing Scrooge tries to take part. (He learns belatedly that the monstrous creature being hinted at in the game is himself.)

Recommended for children 6 and up, the production offers a few chills but no ghoulishness. Marley, swathed in black netting and chains, looks enveloped in cobwebs, and the ghost of the future consists of a huge, scarecrowlike frame whose black draping easily hides the actor manipulating it.

The members of the fine ensemble cast take on multiple roles, except for Stewart Gregory. Always a convincing Scrooge, he is to be congratulated for having a smile that looks as genuine as his sneer.



Charles Hull/Theaterworks/USA

Stewart Gregory, left, and Bradley W. Bussdieker in "Carol."

"A Christmas Carol," Sunday at 12:30 p.m.; Dec. 12 at 10:30 a.m. and 12:30 p.m., and Dec. 18 at 12:30 p.m., at the Auditorium at Equitable Tower, 787 Seventh Avenue, at 52nd Street, Manhattan, (212) 627-7373. Tickets, \$19. Reservations advised.

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