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A Capitol Carol

00:00 am 12/02/05
JAY RATH For the State Journal

An all new "A Christmas Carol" comes to the Capitol Theater beginning tonight. The question is, will it be haunted by ghosts of "Christmas Carols" past?

For its 40th anniversary, CTM Madison Family Theatre has chosen Madison Square Garden's long-running version of the holiday classic. It's a huge undertaking, with a live orchestra and a cast of 80 performing 99 roles requiring 250 costumes - plus a dog. CTM is one of the first companies to stage the work outside Manhattan.

"I looked at a variety of versions of the show," says CTM artistic director Colin Douglas. "There are as many versions of this show as there are people walking the streets of Madison. I listened, I read. The board was interested in something that was proven."

And something bigger, too. For CTM's 30th production of "Carol," the company gets the big stage, the Capitol Theater, formerly the Oscar Mayer Theatre of the Madison Civic Center. With "Nutcracker" over in Overture Hall, CTM can leave its traditional Christmas home, the Civic Center's Isthmus Playhouse. CTM is also leaving its traditional script by former, longtime artistic director Nancy Thurow.

"Nancy's production was so appropriate to the smaller space," says Douglas, who's in his second year as artistic director. But, "we're in a brand new venue. We felt this larger, magnificent space demanded a larger production, something a little extra, a little new."

For her part, Thurow says, "I feel that it's worked out well, because I really couldn't do it with my health this fall. But it's over and done! And now I feel wonderful. It will be interesting to see this version."

The new "A Christmas Carol" was scripted by Lynn Ahrens and Mike Ockrent, with lyrics and music by Ahrens and Alan Menken. It's a powerhouse team: Ahrens' credits include "Seussical" and "Ragtime," and Menken's scores include Disney's "Beauty and the Beast," "The Little Mermaid," "Aladdin" and "Pocahontas."



CTM Madison Family Theatre Company presents a musical version of "A Christmas Carol" as it moves into its new home at the Capitol Theater. The show, opening tonight, features (from left) Julia Banchik-Lesniak as Tiny Tim; Bobby Goderich as Ghost of Christmas Present; and Eddie Marion as Scrooge. (Andy Manis -- State Journal)



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Bobby Goderich plays Ghost of Christmas Present in the musical version of "A Christmas Carol" presented by the CTM Madison Family Theatre Company in its new home at the Capitol Theater. (Andy Manis -- State Journal)

But their "Carol," first produced in 1994 by Nickelodeon and Madison Square Garden, was greeted by the entertainment newspaper Variety as "difficult to follow ... 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."

Still, a script and score are just the starting point for a production. The size of Madison Square Garden's theater - 5,500 seats - almost requires impersonal, three-ring staging. "We're still going to have a lot of that spectacle," says Douglas, "but that's not all it is about."

And the Ahrens/Menken "Carol" has already proven flexible enough to be adapted to the far more intimate medium of television; NBC's 2004 adaptation starred Kelsey Grammer, Jason Alexander and Jennifer Love Hewitt.

Edward Marion, last year's and this year's CTM Scrooge, isn't concerned.

"It's going to be a lot more fun for the audience," he says. "There's more overt humor in Scrooge than in the other text, which I thought was very good."

"It's hard, because I know the old show so well," says Joe Thompson, veteran of a dozen CTM "Carols" since 1983, and this year's understudy for Bob Cratchit. This version is exciting, he says. "It has a lot more magic, and all original music."

Other differences include "great opportunities for dancers, all sorts of little specialty numbers," says Douglas.

A highlight will be Marley's ghostly, dancing warning to Scrooge, a dark but humorous turn that calls for the orchestra to rattle real chains. And, since the Ahrens/Mencken "Carol" was created to challenge Radio City Music Hall's "Christmas Spectacular," there's a Rockettes-style number, too.

Just finding rehearsal space for the mammoth production has been a challenge. Meriter Retirement Services fortunately has been providing space free.

Old or new, it's still Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." And this particular version, Douglas says, still emphasizes Thuro's and CTM's twin emphases on education and performance.

Says Douglas, "We feel that the script takes Nancy's philosophy into the 21st century."

If you go

What: "A Christmas Carol," CTM Madison Family Theatre Company.

When: 7:30 tonight, 1 and 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; 7:30 p.m. Thursday and Dec. 9; 1 and 4 p.m. Dec. 10-11; 7:30 p.m. Dec. 15-16; 1 and 4 p.m. Dec. 17-18.

Where: Capitol Theater in Overture Center, 201 State St.

Tickets: \$24; \$16 for children ages 12 and under and senior citizens. (Thursday shows are half price.) Tickets available at the Overture Center box office. Call 258-4141 or go to www.overturecenter.com.

Contact Jay Rath through daybreak@madison.com.



The cast of "A Christmas Carol" has more room to spread out this year in the Capitol Theater. CTM's production usually was staged in the former Isthmus Playhouse of the Civic Center. (Andy Manis -- State Journal)

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