

Theatre Review
Sierra Lodestar

Published November 23, 2011

When bad ghosts go good

by Mike Taylor

Remember the first time you saw “A Christmas Carol” and Jacob Marley’s ghost scared the silver bells off of your holly? Well, Mr. Marley gets a chance to prove he’s not such a bad guy in Sierra Repertory Theatre’s “Jacob Marley’s Christmas Carol,” playing through Dec. 18 at the East Sonora Theatre in Sonora and he’s actually a swell dude.

Jeffrey Edward Peters, as Actor 1, plays Marley to the rollicking hilt. He’s all over the stage and can do anything from pounce menacingly to cower as a child. But, as usual when I really like a show, I’m getting ahead of myself.

This delightful tweaking of the Dickens tale by Tom Mula is a fascinating look at an intensely familiar Christmas classic. We all know about Scrooge and his night of spirits frightening him into changing his miserly ways. In fact, Actor 3, Sierra Rep’s Ty Smith, gets to play Ebenezer Scrooge in this show, too, and he does so with typical enthusiasm – and trademark yelping laughter!

That’s all fun, but the way Mula turns the tale on its ears and makes it all about Marley is downright brilliant. I must warn you, however, that it’s a little odd at the start. After all, the set is a ramshackle warehouse kind of place with ramps and catwalks and perches all over the place. Throughout the show the actors come onstage and play brief roles as they take turns delivering the story.

The show starts as Peters and the other actors remind us that Marley is, in fact, dead. From there we follow his descent into a kind of purgatory for penny pinchers. It seems that he signed a document some ages ago and now must act to save himself from this awful place. The discovery and discussion of this contract is the stuff of an Abbott and Costello routine, but remember, Marley has all those chains he must lug around with him. My description is much drollier than the whip smart and frenetic enactment the cast delivers in introducing us to Mula’s version of the afterlife with utterly eloquent dialogue. John C. Brown is perfect as the bookkeeper (well, Actor 4), especially after he dons the green eyeshade with stark white hair and adopts a forced Dickensian accent for the character; he’s officious, fastidious and hilarious.

Anyway, the bookkeeper tells Marley he just might be able to escape his purgatory if he can make Scrooge see the error of his ways. Marley knows that’s like asking the 1 percent to care about the 99, but he agrees to give it a shot and The Bogle shows up to help him. Kevin Shewey is terrific as Actor 2 (who is The Bogle, a kind of assistant sprite); his face has moments of incredible emotional connection and care for Marley as his elfin helper. The Bogle is also the one who reminds Marley that “the inspiration and perspiration must be yours.” Peters and Shewey share the stage for a lot of the show and they’re a pair to draw to, easily sharing space and convoluted shimmies through all of the spaces in the Dennis Jones set.

But really, this is Peters' show. He's astounding in the range he must portray (that cowering child is the most striking and wrenching scene in the show and Peters' expressions are a marvel). You know how the first tale of Christmas Eve ends, but for Marley, there's a different story to be unearthed and the actors do so perfectly; it's as if they all take audience members' hands and encourage them to come along. For a time in the second act, Mula gets a little verbose, but overall the men keep the audience riveted to what might happen next. It's like seeing "A Christmas Carol" without the main characters, and we genuinely wind up caring for Marley as he rallies toward his own redemption.

Director Jones has the pace set to stun for most of the show and his lighting design fits the stage perfectly. There's no "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" here, but all the sensations of the parent text are present. And while it is at moments as dark as Dickens would probably prefer, I felt this was a wildly imaginative and very refreshing show.

Considering "Carol" plays every year here and there, this is a much-welcome diversion from the humbugs. This is a story told well, very well. God bless us, every one.

Contact Mike Taylor at mtaylor@sierralodestar.com.