When you hear director Kevin Pieper describe the Quad City Music Guild's production of *A Christmas Carol* as "a new show to the area," it's easy to be skeptical. Haven't we already seen this holiday chestnut – and in this area, no less – more times than we can count? (Hell, I've been in it twice since 1994.)

But the Music Guild veteran is indeed correct. Despite our familiarity with the story, we haven't seen a version of Charles Dickens' classic quite like this. *A Christmas Carol: The Musical* will be making its area debut at Moline's Prospect Park Theater from December 2 through 4, giving local audiences the chance to experience the production that has played to New York theatre-goers annually since its premiere in 1994.

With music by multiple-Academy-Award-winner Alan Menken (*The Little Mermaid, Beauty & the Beast*) and lyrics by Tony-winner Lynn Ahrens (*Ragtime, Once on This Island*), this *Christmas Carol* has, for the past 11 holiday seasons, been produced for sold-out audiences at Madison Square Garden, and inspired a 2004 TV-movie adaptation starring Kelsey Grammer, Jason Alexander, and Jane Krakowski.

Reviews of the New York production haven't all been positive; Adrienne Onofri, in the online theatre magazine *CurtainUp*, wrote that "the show suffers from a serious case of over-producedness" and "the flamboyance that makes this production such a crowd-pleaser dissipates the story's emotions and morals."

Yet even Onofri ceded that "this *Christmas Carol* seems to bring tidings of comfort and joy to those making their first acquaintance with Scrooge and his spirits," and several of the reviews were glowing ones; writing for *Theatre Reviews Limited* , Carolyn Albert opined, "This is the sort of grand spectacle that leaves us with our eyes wide open and our mouths agape," and ventured that "you will want to go again every year as a magnificent way to celebrate the season with loved ones."

That's the sort of recommendation Pieper and his collaborators at Music Guild are hoping to generate with their production, which the not-for-profit organization has planned to produce for more than a year.

Pieper, a veteran Music Guild performer whose recent credits include Petruchio in 2003's *Kiss Me, Kate* and Captain von Trapp in 2004's *The Sound of Music* , is helming his second show at the Prospect Park theatre, his first being this past June's production of the musical comedy *Sugar*

. He also served as the group's president for nine years, currently serves as its director of marketing, and has been a member of the Music Guild board, and its play-selection committee, since the early 1980s.

That play-selection committee, Pieper says, consists of "as many Guilders as are interested in being a part of that process," and explains that Music Guild productions are chosen based on the talents of the organization's participants and the wants of its guests. "We look for a lot of input from people involved in directing, in scenic design or costume design, [and] performers, and we try to get a consensus on what would be interesting for them to do. And we also have to look at the other side of it: What will our patrons want to *see*?"

And Music Guild's decision to produce *A Christmas Carol* was, to hear Pieper tell it, a no-brainer. "We'd been trying to find holiday-type shows that we could do, and this one was out there, a big one that became available through [licensing company] Music Theater International." This musical take on Charles Dickens' classic tale appeared to be just the sort of production Music Guild was searching for. "This is a new version ... and the play-selection committee read it and really liked it. It's got a real beautiful score and some real interesting songs. So that was the thing that sold it to *me*. I really liked the music in it."

Pieper and the committee also liked the fact that this particular *Christmas Carol* allowed for the participation of a great many area performers – Music Guild productions are famed for their suitably grand vocal ensembles – and this production features a cast of four *dozen*, led by Music Guild veteran Harold Truitt as Scrooge, whom Pieper calls "a very talented man and a great actor."

No matter the talent assembled, Pieper does recognize that, for many, Dickens' holiday perennial is as familiar, and as comfortable, as an old pair of sneakers, and that any new version of *A Christmas Carol* can't diverge from its source material too extravagantly. "There are some aspects of the show that *have* to be there," he says, "because people are gonna expect to see Marley, they're gonna expect to see Tiny Tim, and all those things.

"But I think the freshness of *this* version," he continues, "is in the presentation. It's very fast-paced, there's virtually no scene-change music, it goes from one vignette to the next to the next. It's almost constantly moving, and it has lots of different styles."

The style of Music Guild's *Christmas Carol* will even be slightly different from the Madsion Square Garden presentation, as Pieper reveals that he, choreographer Jayne Ploehn, and cast members have been subtly tweaking the material during the show's five-and-a-half-week rehearsal process. "This show has ghosts that come in with Marley," Pieper says, "and we added a bit of humor with that. The ghosts aren't scary – they're not going to scare the kids – but we're keeping it interesting and fun. And I've added some moments into the show that are, I think, very touching, that weren't necessarily part of the production as it was presented. We're

adding some light-hearted moments, some very sweet, delicate moments."

Yet Pieper says the basic *Christmas Carol* outline is still intact, and that no matter the version produced, Dickens' material always resonates with audiences. "I think the appeal for the show," Pieper says, "is in the underlying hope in the goodness of man. That somebody who has built a life on the suffering and misery of others – like Ebeneezer Scrooge – can be changed into somebody who's willing to help his fellow man or woman. That's the uplifting thing about the story."

Quad City Music Guild will present performances of A Christmas Carol: The Musical *on December 2 and 3 at 7:30 p.m., and December 4 at 2 p.m. Tickets are $12.50 for adults and $8 for children, and are available by calling (309)762-6610 or visiting (http://www.qcmusicguild.com)*
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