

Circa '21's "Christmas from the Heart" Rates a Holiday Cheer

Written by Mike Schulz

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Christmas from the Heart, which opens the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's 29th season, is a holiday-themed musical revue, and as such, it has a built-in advantage that many stage works don't: Audiences don't make many demands of it. When presented with a piece of this sort – in which the production is essentially an excuse for linking together a diverse group of carols and holiday hits – no one really cares what the story is about or whether the characters have any depth; all we ask is that the numbers are well-sung and that the show maintains a lively pace, and if it's funny or touching or particularly well-designed, those are just added bonuses.

And it's my pleasure to report that, in *Christmas from the Heart*, the numbers *are* well-sung, the show *doe*
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maintain a lively pace, and it's funny and occasionally touching and always well-designed. The show gives you exactly what you want from a holiday revue and, with the cast assembled for this production, often quite a bit more.

So let's get the pesky matter of the plot out of the way. It has something to do with a set of Christmas chimes that have gone missing from Santa's North Pole digs. Unless the chimes are found, it seems, there won't be a Christmas, so Santa (Peter Soderberg), Mrs. Claus (Jean Liuzzi), and a pair of squabbling elves named Snicker and Doodle (Mark D. Lingenfelter and Brad Hauskins) travel through time in search of them, beginning in a multi-cultural neighborhood in 1903 – which is the first place *I* look whenever I lose something – and continuing through the 1930s, '40s, and '70s.

If you think this sounds like the sort of thing that only works in Claymation form, you're not exactly wrong. But *Christmas* writer/director Ty Stover puts minimal emphasis on the plotting – it's easy to forget there even *is* plotting – and wisely focuses on what the story *allows* for, namely a series of vibrantly colorful costumes from different eras (beautifully designed by Gregory Hiatt), sketch-comedy characters that hit their appropriate marks and promptly vanish, and a great many wonderful songs of the season, performed by a group of talents whose voices blend in spectacular fashion. (The ensemble sets the bar high during its prelude number – an *a cappella* “Carol of the Bells” – and, for the next two-plus hours, never falters.)

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With nine performers enacting some 38 characters, *Christmas from the Heart* nearly demands that its actors be as stylistically varied as they are vocally assured, and the entire cast here gives performances above and beyond the call of musical-revue duty. Soderberg and Liuzzi make a wonderful pair of Clauses, knocking out a lot of their roles' built-in sentimentality; they're less holiday elves than sweetly bickering marrieds at a shuffleboard tournament. Bret Churchill, with his dynamic, youthful energy, is a constant joy to watch, as is Kim Furness, whose talents are slightly underused here, but whose Act I hayseed routine – in full angel regalia, no less – is hilarious enough to bring tears to your eyes.

And the cast members who have less to do comedically are always in terrific musical-comedy form: Chris Bell displays a divine bari-tenor and has a dancer's graceful physicality, and Sara Weibel and Staci Anne Jacobs, singing trio with Furness, perform their three-part harmonies with dazzling confidence and skill; their Act II rendition of "Jingle Bells" is as strong a performance of that chestnut as I've heard.

Portraying a series of appropriately over-the-top caricatures, Lingenfelter is a constant hoot – his aping of Carol Channing is a burst of pure gaga inspiration. And while I've seen (and often worked alongside) Brad Hauskins in numerous productions over the past two decades, I'm not sure that I've ever seen him more relaxed – or more deservedly confident – than he is in *Christmas from the Heart*; in addition to being fantastically funny in his more overt comedic routines, Hauskins' Act I performance of "Silent Night," which he sings with clarity and true emotion, stands as the show's most magical number.

Sharply staged and jovially performed, *Christmas from the Heart* is a near-triumph of talent and personality over material. Its storyline might be beyond dopey, yet you'd be surprised by how little that matters; the weather outside may be getting frightful, but this show, at least, is truly delightful.

Tickets to Christmas from the Heart are available by calling (309) 786-7733, ext. 2