

## Spirited Away: "A Christmas Carol," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through December 23

Written by Mike Schulz

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When the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse last produced *A Christmas Carol* in 1998, the family musical's daytime performances ran concurrently with evening performances of *Miracle on 34th Street*

. I was a member of *Carol*

's cast at the time, and as I recall, we kind of thought the shows should have swapped positions; the chipper, candy-colored

*Miracle*

seemed ideal for kids, while the frequently dark Charles Dickens tale, with its themes of regret and mortality, appeared better-suited to a more mature crowd.

Perhaps remembering this, director Tom Walljasper (who played Bob Cratchitt in both '98 and

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'94) has, for Circa '21's latest *Christmas Carol*, considerably lightened its tone. He hasn't sugar-coated Dickens' story - Phil McKinley's and Suzanne Buhrer's serious, first-rate adaptation remains intact - yet there's a sense of adventure, of happy mischief on display here that's rather inspiring. On Saturday, there must have been more than 200 grade-schoolers in attendance, and they composed one of the least restless, most engrossed family-show audiences I've sat amongst in years. (One of the children appeared *especially* engrossed; when the house lights came up for the intermission, a disappointed young voice exclaimed, "Aw, *man* ... !")

Much of the overall mood can be found in its Ebenezer Scrooge, played by Adam Michael Lewis. A felicitous comedian with dynamic stage energy, Lewis, in a gray wig, doesn't do much to convey the character's age, but he does something that's more beneficial for a young audience: He suggests the old man's life force. Lewis makes Scrooge a roaring caricature of miserliness and greed - his exuberant "Money" solo finds the actor kicking up his heels while pinching pennies - and he stretches his aggrieved "*Bah!*"s into three or four syllables; in Lewis' hands, Scrooge is enjoyably hateful, and his torment by the visiting spirits causes the kids in the crowd to laugh delightedly.

For a goodly part of *A Christmas Carol*'s length, though, Scrooge is a mere spectator, and Walljasper has done a fine job of guiding his supporting ensemble to portrayals that exude a friskiness of spirit without sacrificing the tale's gravity. With the exceptions of Lewis and the solid, amiable Don Hepner, whose Charles Dickens narrates the tale, the other performers each assume more than one role - this *Christmas Carol* could be described as Dickensian vaudeville - and on occasion, Walljasper's shrewd casting minimizes the story's built-in solemnity and gloom.

