

Written by Thom White

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While I like David Turley's work as a director – with this year's *Chicago* at the District Theatre and *Gypsy* with Countryside Community Theatre among his most notable efforts – I'd like to see more of him on-stage. I was wowed by his John Hinckley Jr. in 2008's *Assassins* at the Green Room Theatre, tickled pink by his William Barfee in 2010's *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* at the Harrison Hilltop Theatre, and amusingly intrigued by his Vladimir in that venue's 2010 *Waiting for Godot*.

With the District Theatre's current offering, *A Tuna Christmas*, Turley more than makes up for not acting for almost a year by portraying 11 characters through the course of the almost two-hour show. Having enjoyed watching him flesh out so many characters in truly funny ways during Friday night's performance, I hope he doesn't wait another year to act again.

This second in a series of plays written by Jaston Williams, Joe Sears, and Ed Howard, *A Tuna Christmas* also marks Paul Workman's directorial debut. And what's somewhat obvious about his effort is the production's lack of polish; in particular, the telling of the mysterious "Christmas Phantom"

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tale, featuring a character who vandalizes holiday displays throughout third-smallest-town-in-Texas Tuna, could be tightened up a bit in terms of pacing. However, I would also argue that the rough edges and somewhat incongruent pacing are actually appropriate for these endearingly satirical stories of 22 characters living and interacting in this little town.



With Turley taking on 11 of the Tuna townsfolk, the other half are left to his capable co-star, James Fairchild. And what's perhaps most interesting about both actors' portrayals is that, while their male characters are notably nuanced and believable, their female Tunites (Tunans?) are far more dynamic and interesting. Turley uses his baritone voice, with an added rasp, for his Didi Snavelly, the woman who owns Didi's Used Weapons. With a (pantomimed) cigarette in hand, Turley gives her a laugh-worthy, no-nonsense, tell-it-like-it-is attitude. His Charlene Bumiller, however, deserved more stage time than the few minutes she appears in the play. Dressed in a bright green "*Wicked: The Musical*" T-shirt over a gray plaid skirt and under a gray cardigan – and wearing a curly blonde wig – Turley's self-absorbed, self-important, snobby, annoyed-at-the-world-she's-forced-to-endure teen (you know, pretty much a *typical* teen) had me in tears with laughter.

In contrast, Fairchild's Bertha Bumiller plumbed the play's depths of emotion, eliciting sympathy for how hurt she is by her never-home, philandering, fresh-out-of-jail husband, and hope regarding her love for local disc jockey Arles Struvie. Fairchild's Pearl Burras – Bertha's elderly aunt – is similarly endearing, with a soft heart and gentle laugh that are sweet even when she's trying to shoot bluejays with a slingshot. And her concern for her great-nephew, Stanley Bumiller – who has just finished reform school and is almost done with his court-ordered community service and probation – is the most touching part of the play.



The most impressive element of the production, however, is how quickly some of the costume changes are made. There are points in *A Tuna Christmas* in which either Turley or Fairchild seems to merely step backstage, take a breath, and return to the stage, outfitted in different clothes from head to toe. Some of these clothing changes seem impossible to pull off, and yet,

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much to my amazement, the actors and their wardrobe assistants do the impossible. That, alone, would be almost enough to warrant seeing the District's latest show. As would Turley's Charlene. And Fairchild's Bertha. And Turley's Didi. And Fairchild's

For tickets and information, call (309)235-1654 or visit DistrictTheatre.com .