I had high expectations for the District Theatre's musical version of *A Christmas Carol*, given my knowledge of Tristan Layne Tapscott's and Danny White's talents. But Tapscott's book and White's music and lyrics actually exceeded my expectations during Friday's world-premiere performance, as the two have conceived a musical that I can see being produced by theatres across the country without requiring workshops and major rewrites. While their piece could still use some minor refinement, their version of the story of Ebeneezer Scrooge is remarkable for Tapscott's handling of the narrative, and White's cleverly crafted lyrics and gorgeous instrumentation.

Directed by Tapscott, this familiar holiday tale unfolds with the character of Papa (Lonnie Behnke) writing down his recollections of Scrooge's spirited experiences under the pen name Charles Dickens, and recounting these tales to his daughter Claire (Kayla Veto) and wife Anna (Sara King). In Tapscott's production, the family sits in the theatre's balcony – designed, by Susan Holgersson, as a classic living room of deep browns and reds – while the main action takes place on the stage, with the actors sporting stunningly detailed period ensembles by costume designer Lora Adams. (Her greatest triumph is the costume designed for the ghost of Scrooge's business partner Marley, whom actor Mark Reubling plays while clad and made up in whites and grays nearly from head to toe; with money boxes dangling from thick chains around his neck, the look complements Reubling's haunting performance.) Lighting designer Matthew Carney's work is also excellent, with the light changes adding to the musical's atmospheric eeriness, and even atmospheric brightness. (Although, on Friday, a technical problem about halfway through the first act caused a distracting strobing effect for several minutes before the lights went out entirely, the issue was eventually corrected.)

With a character count of 29, some of *A Christmas Carol*'s actors, including Ruebling, take on multiple roles, with Dickens' main characters among the standouts. James Fairchild's Bob Cratchit is warmhearted and doting toward his son Tiny Tim, played by Regan Tucker; one of Fairchild's best moments is his tender delivery of the fatherly love song "Tim's Lullaby," which is one of White's most gentle, lilting tunes. In her role as Mrs. Cratchit, Dolores Sierra gets to deliver the song most likely to be performed outside the context of the musical – "Keep Moving on" – which she sings to her husband after Tiny Tim's death in the Spirit of Christmas-Yet-to-Come sequence, and which is especially notable for its comforting, uplifting

lyrics. As for the main character, Doug Kutzli makes Scrooge more than a curmudgeonly caricature. He's a joyless grump, no question, but Kutzli adds other layers to the character; it's apparent that this Scrooge has become withered by anger over time, with hints of the more genial gentleman he once was occasionally showing through the cracks.

It's Tapscott's and White's work, however, that is the main appeal here, even though their adaptation isn't perfect. Tapscott's book still requires a touch more exposition, so those who might be unfamiliar with the story could better follow along, and White's lyrics sometimes fall on the side of his trying too hard to sound lofty (which might be a result of rhyme-scheme confines). Many of his songs also sound slightly, overly similar in tone, even when their meters and moods are different, which results in their blending together. But this isn't to say that any of White's music is less than noteworthy, with his composition style – in terms of favored chord progressions and melodic phrasing – apparent and his magical accompaniments, especially on the piano, particularly strong. While I'd like to see Tapscott and White revisit and refine their work after taking some time away from it, their musical is, as is, definitely ready to be made available for other theatres to produce. And while their *A Christmas Carol* screams for a bigger stage and grander production value, the District Theatre's production is a worthy, not-to-be-missed staging.

A Christmas Carol *runs at the District Theatre (1611 Second Avenue, Rock Island) through December 23, and more information and tickets are available by calling (309)235-1654 or visiting DistrictTheatre.com .*