

# 'Commedia Christmas Carol' Brings Holiday Joy

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The holiday hubbub was in full swing at Tysons Corner Center Saturday evening, but tucked away in a less hectic cranny of the mall, the Traveling Players were

## ON STAGE

engaging an audience with a holiday adaptation, "Commedia Christmas Carol."

The one-act show, featuring an (almost) all-youth cast, was not without some first-weekend drawbacks, but provided a tour-de-force opportunity for its lead and plenty of strong performances throughout.

You thespians (and those who love them) already have surmised based on the title that the show is a take on the classic Charles Dickens holiday novella, with a commedia dell'arte twist – in other words, almost like a musical-hall rendition, with some wild antics and humor thrown into the mix. One doubts Mr. Dickens envisioned a frenetic duck running amok on stage, honking vociferously and nipping at everything and everyone in an effort to avoid having its goose cooked, so to speak, over the holidays.

(For those who say that nobody should mess with a Dickens classic, keep in mind that every stage/movie/TV production of the show dating back a century seriously reworked the original plot and myriad details. Go back and read the original book if you desire proof.)

Anyhoo, you know the story: The miserly Mr. Scrooge finds himself redeemed by the ghosts of Christmases past, present and future.

"And then he does the thing that is so brave: He changes," said Jeanne Harrison, the director. "He lets people laugh at his newfound zest for life. And he is so much happier. He is renewed."

The show largely holds true to the gist

of the traditional plot line, although in order to cut it down to an 80-minute production a few threads were left dangling. For instance, two of my favorites of any "Christmas Carol" – the jolly but ill-fated Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig – made a brief appearance but were never seen again.

Ani Bailin portrayed the title role with a zestful chewing of scenery as the grumpy Scrooge at the start, the terrified Scrooge in the middle and the redeemed, playful Scrooge at the end. Truly a brava performance.

Bailin was assisted by a host of solid supporting personnel. To cite a few: Donovan Wheelock as the put-upon clerk Bob Cratchit; Grace Araya as both the younger Scrooge's fiancée and, later, Cratchit's wife; Charles Fisher as nephew Fred, trying to bring his uncle Ebenezer out of his irascible shell; and Sam Abbruzzese as the ghost of business partner Jacob Marley as well as the aforementioned Mr. Fezziwig.

(Aside: I've always thought the Fezziwig couple – in this show Abbruzzese and Jude DeWitt – deserves the equivalent of a spinoff series. Dickens provided inklings of their back-story but never fleshed it out. Any aspiring playwrights want to take it up?)

Ellie McLaughlin, the previously mentioned DeWitt and Ryann Schmid took Scrooge on the journey through space and time as the trio of ghosts.

COVID is still causing challenges for local theater troupes; when actor Owen Suglo (the younger Scrooge and Tiny Tim) tested positive last week, assistant director Ryan Fields stepped in to portray Scrooge's young self. Fortunately, it proved a false positive; Suglo was back for Sunday's matinee.

Director Harrison fashioned a taut production (the kind I like best), while Wallace Crehan (costume design), Rae Mearns (lighting) and Jeffrey Hales (scenic design) showed their talents.



Shown from left in the Traveling Players' production of "Commedia Christmas Carol" are Charles Fisher as nephew Fred, Ani Bailin as Scrooge, Grace Araya as Mrs. Cratchit, Owen Suglo (with puppet) as Tiny Tim and Donovan Wheelock as Bob Cratchit. PHOTO BY ALEX MOUNTFIELD

The only true down side to this show was one that afflicts many productions involving young performers – unequal vocal capabilities. Some are able to enunciate their lines to reach the back row (where I was), while others have their words disappear along the way, or arrive as a whisper.

The venue is small enough that miking of cast members would be superfluous, but its lack means all cast members need to channel their "inner Ethel Mermans" ('member her?) and belt out their lines.

The show wraps up its two-week run

this weekend, and is a delightful holiday treat whether or not one already is headed to the mall for some pre-Christmas shopping. Reserve tickets in advance; every seat was taken at the show I attended.

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"Commedia Christmas Carol" continues with performances Dec. 9-10 at 8 p.m. and Dec. 11 at 3 p.m. at Tysons Corner Center, and is suitable for ages 8 and up. Tickets are \$15. Audience masking is required.

For information, see the Website at [travelingplayers.org](http://travelingplayers.org).

# Synetic's 'Snow Maiden' Proves a Romp for All Ages

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From ballet to pratfalls – punctuated by a cast-vs.-audience snowball fight

## ON STAGE

– Synetic Theater throws in just about every theatrical effect absent the kitchen

sink in "Snow Maiden," its winter family show that hit its mark with the younger audience and held its own with the older, too.

The two-person cast performs in Synetic's trademark style – mostly wordless pantomime with a focus on movement, mimicry and music – and does so effectively.

How effective was it? The five girls, roughly 7 years old I'd wager, down the aisle on a recent matinee performance were transfixed in rapturous attention, with nary a fidget to be observed. Espe-

cially impressive, considering they'd been downing candy before the show began!

Every culture, absent those in tropical or desert locales, has its version of this story: A young boy in wintertime constructs a snowman (in this case, snowwoman), and through some magic the creation comes to life.

Irina Tsikurishvili, who directed and choreographed the show, kept things moving and largely lighthearted.

"Previous adaptations of this legend all feature dark and complex themes . . . but our version explores something much simpler: Our need for companionship, the heartbreak when it's taken away and the joy of having it returned," she wrote in the playbill.

Vato Tsikurishvili stars as the boy and Maryam Najafzada his creation, and over the course of roughly 50 minutes that constitute the single act they own the stage, aided by a lovely set and appropri-

ate (and for the most part recognizable) music, largely of the holiday variety.

The pantomime is broad and works effectively for all ages; nobody is left out of the loop in understanding what's happening as the plot unfolds.

Both performers occasionally break the fourth wall; a little past halfway in the show there's a riotous audience-participation moment, something that, with the exception of jokes about flatulence, is the surest way to endear a production to little kids.

Whether intended or not, I picked out moments that paid homage to Charlie Chaplin, Lucille Ball, the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges and Benny Hill, among others. So indeed, there is comedy mixed in. And there is also exceptional athleticism; some of the pratfalls and the pas-de-deux interplay between the performers rightly elicited gasps from audience members.

Director/choreographer Irina Tsikurishvili keeps the action moving. Also worthy of praise behind the scenes: Koki Lortkipanidze (resident composer), Aleksandr Shiriaev (production designer), Kasey Brown (costumes), Peter Leibold VI (lighting designer and Matthew Datcher (sound engineer).

Nobody's going to call me an old softie – "old" yes; "softie" never – but it was indeed heartwarming to see a number of families of three generations: children, parents and grandparents.

And I suspect each generation came away happy with the show.

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"Snow Maiden" runs through Dec. 23 at Synetic Theater in Crystal City. The show is suitable for all ages; masking is required but Synetic has dropped its vaccination requirements.

For tickets and information, see the Website at [www.synetictheater.org](http://www.synetictheater.org).