

Published December 9th, 2009

## Every Christmas Needs a Scrooge

By Lou Fancher



Scrooge and friends (L-R): Samantha Martin (Tiny Tim [Cast A]), John Blytt (Scrooge), Aiden Behrendt (Tiny Tim [Cast B]) Photo by Stu Selland

There may be 3,000 productions of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* playing at the same moment across the continent, but there is one, just one, playing at the Town Hall Theatre (THT) in Lafayette. And each night, after *Scrooge*, the musical retelling of the classic Victorian tale is finished, that particular performance is over, done, fini. Live theater is a thing to be held, but impossible to grasp; rendering the experience simultaneously fleeting and breathtakingly important.

The story of *Scrooge* is familiar: Man with scars from a rough upbringing grows up to be a stingy, bitter man. Takes it out on innocents. Spirits come and show him the wrong paths he has chosen. Man's confrontation with mortality wakes him up to a new life of gratitude and generosity.

All well and good, if a bit obvious, yet the THT's production leaps and bounds beyond a lesson in morality. Speaking with the show's director, Jessica Richards, and its leading man, John Blytt, reveals the play's true meaning and transcendent value.

"Part of the magic is that it gives you an opportunity to experience another world," says Richards. "Plus, there are so few opportunities to come together as a community to experience something live," she adds. Richards, The Associate Artistic Director of Cal Shakes, was eager to direct THT's production for professional and personal reasons. Familiar with staged versions, but not having seen the musical film adaptation, she was surprised to discover *Thank You Very Much* in the song list. "My mother used to sing it to me," Richards explains, "it was a song, never attributed, that had lived inside of me for 20 years." That, combined with the chance to direct an authentic, traditional period classic drew her to THT.

Blytt, in the role of Scrooge for the third time - the first at THT - thrills at the challenge. "For some reason, I'm seeing more sadness underneath everything," he says. Attributing the difference to the intimacy of a small cast and to the director - "She's very hands-on

when she needs to be, but knows when to back off, too" - Blytt feels lucky. "I'm as old as Scrooge now, so that helps too." "John is great fun to watch," says Richards, "he does nothing half way." An actor in the role must portray a full person: recognizable to the audience as the same person before and after, but somehow irrevocably altered. Life teaches an actor this depth of character, as much as theater, and Blytt recalls a particular performance years ago. Just two days after 9-11, the cast and audience wondered if the show should go on. It did, and afterwards, he recalls audience members: thankful, glad, and touched by the healing experience of coming together. "I know it's the audience that makes the difference," he says now, "The instant feedback of live theater is vital." Richard, mindful of today's culture and steeped in theatrical tradition, eloquently describes her purpose: "I'm not personally a believer in ghosts, but I am a believer in the parts of the subconscious that draw your attention to the paths not taken." With an equal conviction that "no one is beyond a second chance," Richard has shaped a production that is uplifting, visually compelling and loaded with local talent. Several members of the cast, both children and adults, live in Lamorinda. Blytt, who stopped acting for over 20 years at one point in his career, resumed upon moving back to Contra Costa County. "I think it's something in the water," he suggests, with a soft laugh.

If indeed there is magic in Lamorinda water, let's all drink deep. Then find our way to *Scrooge* and a one-of-a-kind night at the theater.

*Scrooge* runs December 3-20 at the Town Hall Theatre in Lafayette. For tickets, contact Town Hall Theatre Box Office at (925) 283-1557 or purchase online at [www.TownHallTheatre.com](http://www.TownHallTheatre.com).

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA