

REVIEW

'David Alford's Christmas Down Home' Makes Welcome Return

By: Evans Donnell, *ArtNowNashville.com*

December 12, 2011

Tennessee Repertory Theatre's presentation of *David Alford's Christmas Down Home* in more ways than one marks the return of a friend one has longed to see.

David Alford, the group's former executive artistic director, brings along some talented collaborators as he hosts a warm, informal work of music and storytelling topped by his justly celebrated rendition of Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory*.

Alford has done that piece several times over the years, adapting Capote's largely autobiographical short story of his childhood relationship with his elderly cousin Sook into a one-man rendition. It became a staple of the *A Southern Christmas Sampler* programs Alford did for the now-defunct Mockingbird Public Theatre when he and Tennessee Rep producing artistic director René D. Copeland ran that troupe.

But Alford stopped doing performances of *A Christmas Memory* following the death of his father. For a time it seemed the piece – accompanied with beautiful original music by Alford's longtime friend and colleague Paul Carrol Binkley – would live only in the memories of those who'd been lucky enough to see it in years past.

Alford was asked to perform it again in Springfield last year, though, and happily he did. Along with Binkley, he then expanded the offerings of the *Sampler* to create the current program.

Christmas Down Home is also about memories that don't include Capote's 1956 loving recollection of his best family friend. Alford weaves stories of his family, including his grandparents Big Daddy and Little Mama, great-grandparents Ma and Pa and Uncle Henry, into the show. Those sweet vignettes offer a welcome personal touch to the fine songs and stories that accompany them.

Alford and his stage-mates – Binkley, actors/vocalists Kahle Reardon and Erin R. Ramsey, and musicians/vocalists Brad Albin and Toni Ferguson – kicked-off the proceedings with a lively country-infused take on the spiritual "Children, Go Where I Send Thee" followed by "Go Tell It On the Mountain." The latter song, we later heard, was the first selection a young Alford publicly performed when he delivered it in high-pitched fashion to a church congregation.

Reardon, Ramsey and Alford provided their considerable acting skills to a lovely rendition of Gloria Houston's beloved children's book *The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree*. There's a good helping of humor, too, as Ramsey related a section of T.R. Pearson's *A Short History of a Small Place* dealing with a disastrous church Christmas pageant and Reardon recited Ogden Nash's poem *The Boy Who Laughed at Santa Claus* with Alford playing the offending youngster Jabez Dawes.

The performers offered a warm musical embrace with the aforementioned selections, a look at the history and lyrics of "Jingle Bells" and some original Binkley arrangements of yuletide classics. A particular favorite was an instrumental performance that among other inspirations included passages from the hymn "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

Alford and Binkley's guitar play, along with Albin's bass and Ferguson's violin, were terrific throughout (as was the mandolin Binkley strummed from time to time). And everyone's vocals – highlighted by a harmonic *a Capella* rendition of The Roches' "Star of Wonder" – went down as well as cups of hot chocolate on a cold December night.

The second half of the show was primarily occupied with *A Christmas Memory*. Having seen Alford do the piece with Binkley beside him in years past I certainly expected something wonderful, but the performance exceeded even those high expectations.

Why? Alford's considerable talent and decades of experience certainly make the piece come alive; from Buddy and Sook to Queenie and Mr. Haha Jones we see the characters vividly as he relates the story. But now I think he's come to surrender himself so completely to *A Christmas Memory* that while doing it he is the story and its characters.

I've known Alford for years, and I realize actors draw upon their life and work to inspire interpretations of writers' texts, but I couldn't see any aspects of him as the tale unfolded; actors aspire to that complete transformation, but they know it's rarely achieved. It was a real privilege to witness, and I am thankful for that remarkable gift from Alford's hands.

Christmas Down Home indeed marks a welcome return to Nashville for *A Christmas Memory* and the performer who has made that piece so masterfully his own. It also showcases music and performers who both complement and expand on the enjoyment Alford brings. What a beautiful present they all give us.

Tennessee Repertory Theatre's presentation of David Alford's Christmas Down Home continues with performances today (Dec. 12) at 6:30 pm and Sunday, Dec. 18 at 2:30 and 6:30 pm at Tennessee Performing Arts Center's Johnson Theater (505 Deaderick St.). For tickets and more information please visit www.tennesseerep.org and www.christmasdownhome.com.