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Review
Nashville Scene

Shackled Spirit

Local production focuses on Scrooge's ghostly business partner

by Martin Brady

If the local theater scene has been in need of something fresh in the way of a holiday show, then it's found it in *Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol*, which opened last weekend at Tennessee Repertory Theatre. Tom Mula's literate and magical script is rooted in the key elements of the Dickens classic. But it also breathes new life into the inspiring tale with its focus on Ebenezer Scrooge's not-so-dearly departed business partner.

We all know Marley, who appears in ghostly form, shackled in chains, destined to roam the netherworld forever. He's the one who clues in Scrooge to the errors of his ways and initiates the old misanthrope's journey of spiritual awakening. What Mula attempts with great success is a heartfelt glimpse into Marley's own redemption, as the man comes to grips with his earthly shortcomings and then, in order to pay his dues to humanity, accepts the challenging task of leading Scrooge to enlightenment.

Director Scot Copeland, on loan from Nashville Children's Theatre, displays a keen grasp of this material. He has gathered a versatile cast of local talent, and his technically efficient and imaginative staging provides a classy showcase for the four players Henry Haggard, Brian Webb Russell, Peter Vann and Sam Whited who work the script with a committed ensemble feel.

Haggard (Marley) is his usual commanding self on stage, bringing his character from cold cynicism to believably warm renewal. Russell (Scrooge) is his able foil, and their scenes together cleanly remind us of the Dickens original without losing sight of this work's new theme. Vann (Bogle) plays the role of Marley's spiritual facilitator (akin to the Clarence figure of *It's a Wonderful Life*), and he's youthful, funny, sometimes lovably unaware, but never dim. The versatile Whited brings his elegant tenor voice to his primary role as the afterlife's Record Keeper, and he's both whimsical and appropriately serious as he makes Marley's options clear; make amends or face oblivion.

This marvelous production is played out on Gary Hoff's brooding fantasy set, which hints at filmmaker Tim Burton's stylistic sensibility, with its oversized ledgers and grandly imposing Tower of London clock-face looking down ominously on the proceedings. Chris Wilson's lighting design also adds immensely to the atmosphere, its flickering stars and cool-colored touches of floor lighting enhancing the constant play of light with shadow. Sometimes the stage is completely dark, save only for the large candles hoisted about by the actors, which adds the effective glow of low-tech eeriness.

Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol is consummate professional theater, but younger audiences will likely appreciate its smart writing and canny theatrical craftsmanship.