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Talented ASF cast drives 'Carol'

Montgomery Advertiser - Montgomery, Ala.

Subjects: Set design; Ghosts; Christmas

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"Bah, Humbug!" These are the famous words of Ebenezer Scrooge, Charles Dickens' hugely popular reprobate, as he rages against the poor and the spirit of Christmas before his reclamation with the help of a few ghosts.

Returning to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival stage as Scrooge, Philip Pleasants immediately makes Scrooge a character everyone loves to hate. He abuses his impoverished but ever optimistic clerk, Bob Cratchit, his happy-go-lucky nephew, Fred, two harried businessmen attempting to get him to donate to the poor, an unfortunate street urchin begging for pennies and a host of other Victorian Londoners.

But true to Dickens' objective, the man is reclaimed as he learns in a journey taking him through the stages of his life that "I am not the man I was," and that his stinginess, greed and misanthropy must be put aside in order to find the true meaning of Christmas: Joy, compassion, love, kindness and giving.

Pleasants is the quintessential Scrooge, by turns crotchety, morose, miserly, phlegmatic, humorous, clever, frightened, daring and ultimately loveable. He takes us on Scrooge's life journey, savoring all the ups and downs, engaging our sympathy as well as our annoyance, and by the end, our deeply felt applause for finding and admitting his true worth.

He is abetted in this production by a large cast of ASF resident professionals, graduate actors and local children, who each play numerous roles.

Rodney Clark is riveting as both Jacob Marley and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Paul Hebron and Sonja Lanzener are delightfully effervescent as Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig.

Kathleen McCall is both compassionate and aggressive as the Ghost of Christmas Past. Peter Macklin and Kate Dawson provide engagingly innocent portrayals of the young Scrooge and his sweetheart, Belle, whose relationship is destroyed by Scrooge's growing quest for gold.

Greg Thornton gives a wickedly clever performance as Old Joe. Matt Young is a shy and pathetic Tiny Tim. John Tillotson returns to ASF after too long an absence providing a rollicking star turn as the Ghost of Christmas Present.

And Sam Gregory almost steals the show as Bob Cratchit, whose stalwart insistence on "hope" as the answer to one's success in life, despite life's obstacles, is the key to this production.

Vicki Smith's set design continually changes location by deftly tracking in or lowering set pieces, and provides a Victorian atmosphere with false proscenium pieces gilded and decorated with children's toys. Costumes by Elizabeth Novak re-create Dickensian London with all its class distinctions, and provide the "spirits" with distinctly ghostly attire.

There is a lot of music in this adaptation, composed by David de Berry. While it enlivens much of the play and is accomplished with enthusiasm and expertise by the cast, at times it intrudes on the story by focusing attention onto itself at the expense of the characters.

Characters often narrate their story using the words of Dickens' novel, and frequently are on stage to both comment on the action and assist audiences in maneuvering through the complexity of the plot.

In all, this is a thoroughly engaging production with a few necessarily scary moments that parents of young children ought to be aware of. It is a perfect way to celebrate the holiday season.

In the words of Tiny Tim: "God bless us, every one."

WANT TO GO?

What: Charles Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol' produced by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival

When: Runs through Dec. 29; show times are 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday; 8 p.m. Friday; 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday; 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Sunday

Where: Alabama Shakespeare Festival

Cost: Tickets range from \$12-\$45, depending on seats and dates; Anyone younger than 25 can get tickets to any show for \$10

Information: 271-5353

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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