

Play review

'Christmas Carol' a tasty chestnut

By Steve Carlson moorpark@theacorn.com

"Chestnut" is the best term for a play like "A Christmas Carol—The Musical," playing 8 p.m. tonight and tomorrow, Dec. 22 and 23, at Moorpark's High Street Arts Center. And "chestnuts roasting on an open fire" is the warm and fuzzy stuff that makes this season.

Musically, this play is a tender addition to the myriad of versions of the Charles Dickens classic. The music was created by Alan Menken, who scored Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" and "Aladdin." Lyrics were skillfully written by Lynn Aherns.

Making their efforts pay off is lead character Ebenezer Scrooge, expertly portrayed by community stage veteran Damian Gravino, who has led many a production on the Moorpark stage during the years and brings experience in both musicals and melodramas.

As Scrooge, he uses everything in his arsenal. Gravino acts, sings and dances with style while he pantomimes like Chaplin. Considering the sour nature of his character, it seems strange to say that he was a joy to behold.

The ensemble cast, most pulled from the Simi Valley Cultural Arts Center circuit, was a passionate reflection of holiday spirit. The biggest question regarding the troupe is, "Is this, indeed, the largest cast to ever grace this 80-year-old Moorpark stage?" Honestly, if anybody out there knows of a time when 30 people fit on that 20-by-20-foot stage, please let this writer know.

A number of great character actors, who played more than one role in this show, were outstanding. Looking as if they strode directly from the movie musical "Moulin Rouge" were two actors in particular, Eric Harris and John Sarkela.

Harris, in the opening street number, immediately took command of the stage as a simple sandwich board man. His charisma is infectious, and he helped the audience buy into the story.

He appears a second time as the Ghost of Christmas Present, and that's what he is—a perfect Christmas present, delivered early.

The energetic Sarkela, who played an original interpretation of Christmas Past as a

French gentry man, sparkles like champagne. He delivered the wellknown message Scrooge needed to hear in, believe it or not, a fresh fashion. That takes guts.

A tip of the hat goes to codirectors Jan Glasband and George Kralemann.

Developing new characters in “A Christmas Carol” is a challenge, but the Arts Center met the challenge head on. New treatments are a refreshing treat.

The lithe Tori Cusack used interpretive dance to successfully present the themes of death and celebration of life. Cusack’s presence enhanced Kelly Wilkinson’s choreography, which benefited from the sensibilities of a classically trained dancer.

Other standouts include Ken Johnson and Peggy Johnson as Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig, George Kralemann as Jacob Marley and the petite Kayla Slack as little Tiny Tim.

Slack even maintained character in the final number when she almost slid off Gravino’s shoulder. It was one of those unplanned moments, but still, quite an accomplishment for a young lady premiering in her first play.

Overall, this musical is a little gem and would be a tasty holiday confection for any playgoer’s menu.

For more information or tickets, call the High Street Arts Center box office at (805) 529-8700.