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Making Merry, Theatrically

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BY RICK PENDER · DECEMBER 5TH, 2012 · CURTAIN CALL

It's time for mistletoe and holly, when theaters entice folks in search of holiday cheer (and occasional parodies thereof) to celebrate the season. Many theaters need December ticket revenues to present shows onstage for the rest of the year.

I have joked that Charles Dickens is the patron saint of American theaters since countless renditions of his classic tale of Ebenezer Scrooge's redemption are mounted annually and sell thousands of tickets. Some theaters just go through the motions, putting enough onstage to satisfy occasional theatergoers with a cheery version of the familiar story. The Cincinnati Playhouse gets major kudos for being the exception to the norm.

The production of *A Christmas Carol* at the Mount Adams theater is one of the best anywhere, more technically sophisticated than many the Playhouse's regular productions. It's a feast of subtle technology and dazzling spectacle: Victorian buildings pirouette from position to position, opening out as Scrooge's business office, his spartan home, the Cratchits' meager household and the many scenes where Scrooge learns the error of his miserly ways. Trap doors open to reveal some of the ghosts, bring forth Christmas feasts, a vision of Scrooge's grave and more. Sometimes they billow smoke or ghostly light. A lot of the action is steered by computers, but the result never feels mechanical — in fact, it's all in service of swift storytelling.

The heart of *A Christmas Carol* is the actor who plays Scrooge, and Bruce Cromer is a marvel to watch. This is his eighth year in the role; before that, he spent seven years as Bob Cratchit. Cromer's interpretation is antic and amusing; he cavorts with characters from his past and is surprised by the way he's perceived by the Cratchit family and friends of his nephew, Fred.

Director Michael Evan Haney has staged the show for most of its 22-year run (he played Cratchit in the early years), and he attracts many of the same actors every year.

For 2012 Michael Keyloun gives Cratchit a scarecrow look with heartfelt emotions, and Kelly Mengelkoch, a nine-year veteran at Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, is playing his pragmatic wife. Scenes bustle with kids and young adults who enliven street and party scenes. In fact, from start to finish, *A Christmas Carol* feels like a Victorian Christmas card with a bit of a sense of humor about its story. I've watched this production every year since the first, and I never grow tired of it. (It's onstage through Dec. 30.)

I can't say the same for *The Santaland Diaries*, which New Edgecliff Theatre is presenting again, this year in a new venue, the Aronoff Center's Fifth Third Bank Theater (through Sunday). Brian Andrews-Griffin is essaying David Sedaris' sardonic monologue about serving as an elf in Macy's Santaland. It's not an easy piece, since the tone is intentionally the antithesis of holiday spirit. It was darkly amusing when Sedaris first did it for public radio, but familiarity has worn it thin. Andrews-Griffin mines the nastiness occasionally, but more often he seems a tad too nice.

NET has paired *Santaland* with a new piece, and Ginna Hoben's *The 12 Dates of Christmas* is refreshing in the hands of charming Annie Kalahurka as Mary, a struggling New York actress contending with her abruptly terminated wedding plans (her fiancé showed up on national TV during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade kissing someone else) by stumbling from one Christmas through a dozen bad dates with doctors, bartenders, fix-ups by a meddling aunt, random wedding guests and more. The piece ends with a modest promise of better things to come (thanks to a connection she makes while performing in a production of — what else? — *A Christmas Carol*), but it's not all tied up neatly. Kalahurka handles the monologue with a lot of variety and spark, making this piece very entertaining.

Most of Cincinnati's theaters have holiday shows onstage. Check out Falcon Theater's radio-play version of *It's a Wonderful Life* (Dec. 7-15) for

a nice take on a familiar story. If you're looking for something family-friendly for kids, you can't go wrong with ETC's annual fairytale musical — this year it's *Alice in Wonderland*. The Covedale Center has a chipper production of *Cinderella* (through Dec. 23), a stage musical expanded from a 1957 TV special that featured a young Julie Andrews and music by Rodgers and Hammerstein. If you want a few Sedaris-like shots of darkness, try Know Theatre's improv piece, *The Naughty List*, at Arnold's Courtyard (through Dec. 30) or Cincinnati Shakespeare's *Every Christmas Story Ever Told (and then some)* at their Race Street stage (Dec. 16-30).

'Tis the season, as they say, and the right piece of theater can put you in the mood for merriment.

CONTACT RICK PENDER: rpenders@citybeat.com