

Charismatic quartet provides Christmas cheer

By [Karen Hauge](#) Wed, Dec 07, 2011

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Need a little Christmas? Grab the nearest red-nosed quadruped and fly over to Crown Center for Musical Theater Heritage's "A Spectacular Christmas In Concert" at the Off Center Theatre for a night of enthusiastic and heartwarming holiday cheer.



Sick of *The Nutcracker*? Seen one too many Nativity scenes? Feeling Scroogey from all the animated-and-otherwise renditions of *A Christmas Carol* running rampant through your cable box? Well, never fear, because Musical Theater Heritage is here with something completely different—a night of holiday music, fun, and oodles of Christmas cheer.

The Off Center Theatre was transformed into a winter wonderland, complete with garland, twinkle lights, a huge glittering tree, and enough kitschy Christmas knickknacks to make the space feel like a big, warm family room. Unlike most typical family rooms, however, the scene also came with microphones, a piano, and ten talented musicians to deliver a program of Christmas music to a roomful of guests. Jeremy

Watson took his position behind the piano as he has so many times for MTH productions, and was joined by four of Kansas City's favorite singers: Lauren Braton, Grant Golson, Samantha Barboza, and Richard Gibson. Together (and with help from possibly the most adorable children's mini-chorus in the city) they presented a program in two acts, not only singing our favorite Christmas tunes, but also providing the historical back-story for how these songs came to be part of our holiday vernacular.

The gang explained the influence of Jewish composer Johnny Marks on the Christmas season; he wrote some of the most classic songs, including "Rudolph The Red-Nosed Reindeer," "Holly Jolly Christmas," and many more; They explored the origins of the legend of Rudolph, why Leroy Anderson wrote *Sleigh Ride*, and recited the classic poem "The Night Before Christmas" describing how it launched many Christmas traditions in America. The hosts were engaging and funny. Even the corniest jokes were received with chortles from audience members, young and old.

The musical performances were excellent throughout. With Watson at the piano and the singers representing a tight SATB quartet, each song, from "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" to "Rockin' Around The Christmas Tree" was pulled off with flair. Some of the best (out of the dozens of songs performed) were the jazzy a cappella rendition of "Carol Of The Bells," Watson's crowd-pleasing rendition of Chuck Berry's "Run Rudolph Run," and "Sleigh Ride,"—which was complete with percussion instruments, including the whip crack! The group sounded fabulous, blending perfectly whether singing sweet, tender harmonies, or hamming it up with cowboy hats and Elvis impersonations.

Fourteen-year-old Malena Marcuse nearly stole the show each time she sang, with charisma and beautiful tone that will keep her on stage for many years to come. Brendan Hulla's "Walking in the Air" was captivatingly sweet, and the children's chorus had the audience in stitches with their medley about "gettin' nuttin'" for Christmas, despite the fact that they wanted a hippopotamus, their two front teeth, and/or a hula hoop. But my favorite part of the whole show was the one bit that would not quit—hats off to director Sarah Crawford for the kids' hilarious interjections of "This Is Halloween" from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Individual performances helped provide variety to the program, and highlighted the talents of each singer. Braton's gorgeous, ringing soprano was chillingly lovely in the chant "Hodie" that solemnly opened the second act of the show. Golson's sweet and wistful "I'll Be Home for Christmas" certainly had out-of-towners reaching for their Kleenex, as did Barboza's "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." Gibson's bass-baritone was consistently impressive throughout the evening, and he certainly had the crowd in tears of laughter with his impression of Johnny Cash. It was his "A Place Called Home," however, that enveloped the audience during a segment of the show dedicated to American veterans.



Adults! Kids! Pets! Snowmen! Add this show to your Christmas calendar. It's a truly spectacular evening you won't want to miss, and it's only around until December 18!

REVIEW:

Musical Theater Heritage
A Spectacular Christmas

Runs December 1 through 18, 2011 (Reviewed December 3, 2011)

Off Center Theatre

2450 Grand Blvd., Kansas City, MO

For tickets call 816-842-9999 or visit <http://www.mthkc.com>