

THEATER REVIEW

'A Spectacular Christmas' has many poignant, mesmerizing moments

By ROBERT TRUSSELL
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This year's edition of "A Spectacular Christmas," the annual holiday show staged by Musical Theatre Heritage, is a characteristically quirky affair, well sung by a gifted cast and loaded up with inside jokes and self-referential reflections on the meaning of Christmas.

In one way the show is structured much like the previous editions — in Act 1 the characters decide to put on a show and in Act 2 we see the show they planned.

But there's a big difference this year. Previous versions of the show were basically copping holiday TV specials of a bygone era (albeit with a twist), but this year the piece begins with a valid acknowledgment of some of life's harsher realities, which naturally stand out in sharp relief during the holiday season.



The script, written by George Harter, Musical Theatre Heritage executive director, takes place in the West Bottoms beneath the 12th Street Viaduct, where Mel (Nathan Granner) and Sky King (Harter) have set up a Christmas tree lot but can't attract many customers.

Soon they are joined by Maria (Lauren Braton) and her piano-playing husband Joe (Jeremy Watson). Other oddballs gathering beneath the bridge are Godot (Chad Gerlt), who drifts in and out of the action as a weird personification of the spirit of Christmas; Gaby (Tom Lancaster), who brings with him a jug of homemade Scotch; and Madge (Sarah Kleeman), who waits tables at the Woodswether Cafe. Toward the end of Act 1 there's another arrival, Eve (Malena Marcase), a homeless kid who wants to buy a tree. Although the actors are technically playing fictional characters, Harter's script often indulges in allusions to the performers' real lives.

There's a lot about the first act that doesn't quite work. But it's also undeniably compelling. The idea of misfits, eccentrics and outcasts celebrating Christmas under a bridge is inherently poignant.

Harter knives in plenty of laugh lines and there's a jubilant quality to it all, but there's also a mystical element. At one point Godot shows up with a box of ornaments that seems to contain strange reminders of each characters' past. And while Godot, isn't exactly spectral, he does seem to possess a timeless, all-seeing quality.

The music is a grab bag of traditional carols, secular pop tunes and sacred songs. Some are instantly recognizable and others are relatively obscure. Granner, Braton and Kleeman are exceptional singers. At times they and Lancaster produce extraordinary four-part harmonies.

Act 2 is a straightforward performance in which director and music director Sarah Crawford finds ways to make the old and stale seem fresh again. Marcase is used sparingly but to stunning effect. Act 1 ends with her serene performance of "Night of Silence/Silent Night," but Crawford saves the very best for last. For the last number in Act 2 before the curtain call, Marcase reappears to handle the lead vocals on "We Are Not Alone," a choral piece that is so effective in its simplicity that it holds the viewers' attention like few other songs in the show. It is, in a word, mesmerizing.

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