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Theater review: 'Another Night Before Christmas' at Theatre Too! is a musical needing better craft

11:53 PM CST on Monday, November 30, 2009

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Folks complain that contemporary musicals are all craft, no heart. Sean Grennan and Leah Okimoto write shows with the opposite problem.

Theatre Three scored a hit with Grennan and Okimoto's *A Dog's Life* two seasons ago. Some who succumbed to that musical's sentimental appeal felt almost guilty: The dialogue was often clumsy, the lyrics unworkmanlike.

The same company opened Grennan and Okimoto's *Another Night Before Christmas* in its basement Theatre Too! on Monday. The writing is even shakier this time around, but the production is good enough to afford some pleasure.

Another Night Before Christmas combines motifs from many favorite holiday tales, most notably *A Christmas Carol* and *Miracle on 34th Street*. Karol Elliott (played by Patty Breckenridge) seals herself off from the world on Christmas Eve. She doesn't even pick up the phone when her family calls.

Karol thinks her new alarm system makes her secure, yet she stumbles into her dark living room to find a man who insists he's Santa Claus (R Bruce Elliott). Karol, a social worker, had seen the man on the street earlier, and she believes he's a deluded homeless guy. But he seems perfectly rational, except for his fixation, and he manifests some unusual powers, such as knowing the phone is about to ring and who the caller is.

Under director Terry Dobson, the stars do their best with the material. Breckenridge too frequently has to resort to a broad musical comedy style when the dialogue repeats the same plot points. What a joy it is, though, to hear her sing so much, so well – and without a microphone, at that. Elliott may be the only actor in town who could get this jolly old elf's wit and wisdom across without making us gag or boo. He's got style.

Marisa Diotalevi and Philip Bentham, playing several small roles apiece, don't have enough to do because this is a two-person show. Fortunately, the plot gets more interesting, and the songs more amusing, as the show progresses. The three best numbers all come in the second act, and Breckenridge and Elliott know how to sell them.

PLAN YOUR LIFE Through Dec. 20 at Theatre Three at the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh St. Runs 120 mins. \$25 & \$30. 214-871-3300, www.theatre3dallas.com.

