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Stage

Warm and furry

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DSM's new '101 Dalmatians' musical barks up the wrong tree; 'Another Night Before Christmas' soothes like a cup of cocoa

SHOWTIMES

THE 101 DALMATIANS

MUSICAL, Fair Park Music Hall,

909 First Ave. Through Dec. 20.

\$18-\$71. Ticketmaster.com.

ANOTHER NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS,

Theatre Too, 2900 Routh St. in the Quadrangle.

Through Dec. \$25. 214-871-3300.

Theatre3Dallas.com.



THE LITTER-ATI | See that sad face? You'd be sad too if you were a dog in a dog like '101 Dalmatians.' (Joan Marcus)

Who let these dogs out? No seriously. Because we need to have words.

Actually, the dogs themselves — the notoriously thick-skulled spotted quadrupeds slobbering their way across the Fair Park Music Hall this month — are one of the best things about The 101 Dalmatians Musical. They scamper around, being their playful, mutton-headed selves with snarky little gimmicks: lifting a leg here, pulling a wagon there. Thing is, aside from a shadow version in the opening scene, our fourlegged friends don't make any onstage appearance until the end of Act 1, and they don't really get to shine until the final scene. And there aren't 101 of them.

(Not that we expected there would be.)

Instead, the butt-sniffing duties are undertaken mostly by humans in black-dotted white jogging suits, making them look more like bad laundresses in a Jewish community center in Florida than sweet-faced pups.

Having humans in dog roles also necessitates putting those actors playing actual people on stilts hidden under zoot suit-sized costumes.

You know the halting way the sole stilt-walker perambulates during a parade? Well, imagine a cast of those. And now imagine the choreography for it. Cruella DeVil seems less monstrous if you spend two hours hoping she doesn't fall and break a hip.

As Cruella, Broadway veteran Rachel York, who looks about as big around as a pencil except that she's clod-hopping around under a huge bustle to hide her elevator shoes, has almost as much fun as the dogs, and for the same reason:

There's nothing she won't chew on. York attacks the scenery as if it were slathered in barbecue sauce — cackling, tenting her fingers, flailing her arms like Olive Oyl and flashing her eyes like the Hulk after someone made her angry. Subtlety doesn't figure anywhere in this show, so why not just go to town?

101 Dalmatians is not a product that improves on each subsequent incarnation.

Dodie Smith's 1956 book was Disneyfied by the original 1962 animated film, then went down a peg with the live-action version with Glenn Close and again in its sequel, 102 Dalmatians. So by the time we reach this pre-Broadway tryout tour, we've pretty much exhausted for all time hope at moving up the ladder artistically.

While the themes about human-pet relations and "Fur Is Murder" mentality are nice, family-friendly ideas, this production doesn't supplement them in anyway — and it trots through a dozen forgettable songs getting there. (You know your score is in trouble when the Playbill lists a reprise ... and you don't remember hearing it the first time 20 minutes earlier.)

As an animal lover, this is a show I wanted to walk away warmed, if not wowed, by.

But like your neighbor's yippie Yorkie, it's more annoying than adorable. This dog needs to be put down.

You'll have more cockle-enriching opportunity with Another Night Before Christmas, the second show at Theatre Three in the downstairs space. Like Dalmatians, the script and score lack zing, but along the way it does put you in the holiday spirit.

The title seems in-ap, as it's less a riff on Clement Moore's poem A Visit from St. Nicholas than an updating of Dickens' Christmas Carol by way of Miracle on 34th Street. Karol (Patty Breckenridge) is a cynical social worker who humbugs the holidays with Scroogey vigor.

On Dec. 24, as she heads to bed early, a white-bearded homeless man (Bruce Elliott) — called just “The Guy” in the program — breaks into her apartment. He’s Santa Claus, he claims, though of course Karol doesn’t believe him ... until, of course, Act 2, when the hearth glows and they have a “God bless us, everyone!” moment.

Sean Grennan’s book and lyrics (he also did last year’s problematic *A Dog’s Life* at Theatre Three) toggle between cutesy and labored.

He dashes off a few Neil Simon-esque one-liners (regarding Santa’s hobo-aroma: “You try working behind nine reindeer at high speed — things happen”) before drifting into the downright painful (rhyming “fantasia” with “echinacea” and “jurisdictional” with “fictional” — ugh). An amusing gag — a home security system whose automatic voice keeps getting her name wrong — runs out of gas before the finale.

But Leah Okimoto’s music — sung with beauty and conviction by Breckenridge — elevates the proceedings. “Poles Apart,” which has the meter and sentiment of a country ballad by Emmylou Harris, provides a gorgeously harmonized duet between Karol and her mom (Marisa Diotalevi).

If comic bits like “Kill Der Bingle” fall flat, well, what’s the diff?

Ultimately, it’s as comfortingly sentimental as sipping a cup of cocoa under a flannel blanket.

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Scrooge goes local

One very enjoyable upside to the Dallas Theater Center’s new resident acting company is that, for the first time in memory, the centerpiece role in the signature production will be played by a local actor.

Sean Hennigan steps into the role of Ebenezer for the annual production of *A Christmas Carol* which, for probably the last time, will be performed at the Kalita Humphreys. Back are vets like Chamblee Ferguson, pictured, as Bob Cratchit. But we also get a new *Ghost of Christmas Present*: Natalie King, who follows in the pumps of Liz Mikel and Denise Lee.

**Kalita Humphreys Theater, 3636
Turtle Creek Blvd. Through Dec. 27.
\$15–\$46. 214-880-0202.
DallasTheaterCenter.org.**

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MRS. SCROOGE | A cynic (Patty Breckenridge, seated) gets into the Christmas spirit with the help of Santa (Bruce Elliott, left) and some helpers (Marisa Diotalevi, Philip Bentham) in ‘Another Night Before Christmas.’ (Ken Birdsell)



— A.W.J