



Last Updated: **Nov 30th, 2007 - 18:04:57**

Winkin', blinkin' and nog

By Arnold Wayne Jones - Staff Writer
Nov 29, 2007, 18:03

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Camp, sentimentality and reality mark three Christmastime productions

The holidays mean different things to different people, which may account for why so many theater companies attack the season with distinctive (and not always warm-and-fuzzy) styles. Whatever your attitude, there's something out there for you right now.

"Aladdin"

Theatre Britain's original comedy doesn't have any Christmas content per se, but the traditional English panto is a holiday favorite nonetheless. The story follows the general outline of "Aladdin" — boy finds magic lamp with a genie inside, wishes are granted, etc. — but while it has the trappings of children's theater, there's a campy, ribald heart beating underneath.

Credit actor Mark Shum as the Widow Twankey (there's lots of cross-dressing in these plays) with capturing the naughty spirit of Jackie Mellor's script. The randy matriarch is a staple of the panto, and it's difficult to imagine anyone besting Shum in sheer daring.

Dressed variously like a gingerbread house and a Las Vegas neon sign, Shum is unpredictable, crazy, winkingly flirtatious and downright hysterical.

"I'd love a man who pops out when you need him — now where do I rub?" he chirps with bawdy brio to adult laughter and child bewilderment. "'Is there no justice?" he demands, before adding, "Are there no muffins?" Nonsense, but brilliant nonsense.

Like all pantos, "Aladdin" is flush with anachronistic references and campy touches (the "camel" is two actors



A LITTLE SONG, A LITTLE DANCE, A LITTLE WASSAIL DOWN YOUR PANTS: A disastrous holiday get-together makes for comic delight in Theatre Too's 'Season's Greetings,' one of several Christmas-themed plays that opened this week. (ANDY HANSON)

in a cheesy cow costume with a cushion for a hump), all of which can delight the family or just lovers of pop culture. Almost anyone will love taking this magic carpet ride.

“Season’s Greetings”

Less campy but just as funny is Theatre Too’s production of Alan Ayckbourn’s screwball comedy set over Christmas week.

Ayckbourn’s gimmick is a comedy about the awkward issues that rear up during the holidays — it’s a Christmas show without any children or talk of Bethlehem and Christian peace, just harried married sniping at each other in the confines of the homestead while getting toasted on hot-buttered rum.

It’s set at the home of Neville and Belinda Bunker, and “bunker” is a good word for it: The nine characters are essentially holed up like the Germans in the Ardennes, staking their claims on traditions (the drunk who insists on making a terrible dinner, the creepy milquetoast uncle who stages a dreary puppet show every year) and responsibilities (Neville never helps out and Belinda isn’t shy about reminding him). When a newcomer (David Fluitt) injects sexual energy into the festivities, things begin to unravel with breakneck hilarity.

Director Kerry Cole manages the activities with superb skill, helped along by a right-on Emily Gray as Belinda and solid performances all around. The great living room set in the small downstairs space adds an uneasy intimacy to the proceedings — it’s not difficult to imagine your own family in all these destructive little bits. “Season’s Greetings” steels you for the month ahead.

“A Christmas Carol”

For the third year in a row, the Dallas Theater Center has presented its annual adaptation of the Dickens classic in the Kalita Humphreys Theater, and once again, the narrower focus than the cavernous (and now defunct) Arts District space conveys a sweet, genuinely touching tone. It’s like a Victorian greeting card come to life in soothing earth tones.

Director-choreographer Joel Farrell returns with a cast largely comprised of long-time veterans of the show, but it doesn’t feel over-rehearsed or tired, even with last year’s Scrooge (Robert Langdon Lloyd, who boils with red-faced vinegar) back for seconds. While there are mostly minor variations of this roasting chestnut, the emotional arcs have been revisited — there are new discoveries to be had, even while some of the successes, like Dean Nolen, perfection as a tooth-rattling Marley, are intact.

The familiarity also allows you to appreciate the design more — the authentic, colorful and textured costumes, the fluid movement of the scenery, the seamless transitions.

So what if it beats you over your eggnoggin with its merriment and holiday cheer? (William Junkin, buttercup-cute as Tiny Tim and Scrooge as a boy, easily steals his scenes by just standing there.) If you can’t be forcibly heart-warmed by this “Christmas Carol,” you might as well get used to grumpily saying “bah, humbug” in your old age.

“Aladdin,” Theatre Britain, KD Studio Theatre, 2600 N. Stemmons Freeway, suite 180. Through Dec. 22. \$15. 972-490-4202.

“Season’s Greetings,” Theatre Three, 2800 Routh St. in the Quadrangle. Through Dec. 16. \$20–\$30. 214-871-3300.

“A Christmas Carol,” Dallas Theater Center Kalita Humphreys Theater, 3636 Turtle Creek Blvd. Through Dec. 24. \$16–\$46. 214-522-8499.

This article appeared in the Dallas Voice print edition November 30, 2007