

## “A Christmas Carol Story” is Comfort Food for Holiday Theatergoers

By Fran Syverson



Comfort food...that's what appeals to us this time of year. Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, gravy.....

“Comfort food” may well be what we look for in our play-going, too. The holidays are upon us, red and green bedeck every window, carols ring out in elevators and on street corners...And our days are filled with hustle and bustle...

Then along comes *A Christmas Carol Story*, as predictably as Santa in his sleigh. And we sigh softly and settle into our seats at the Sierra Madre Playhouse. Ahh! “Theatrical comfort food!”

You know the theme. Miserly Scrooge, thanks to visitations by three ghosts—Christmases Past, Present, and Future—finds redemption and changes his tune from “Bah! Humbug!” to “Merry Christmas to All!” And we remember the Cratchits and their timeless crippled Tiny Tim.

Yes, we know how it goes. But each year we find our way to the Sierra Madre Playhouse for our holiday “comfort food,” and to relive the story freshly told and sung.

This season, a grown-up Tiny Tim tells the story. The curtain opens to a scene of colorfully garbed villagers in freeze-frame stances. They magically come to life as Timothy weaves his way among them, merrily greeting each other and singing. Although some of them are peasants, their gloriously colored garments evoke the place and period: London in 1843. Hooded capes, mufflers, caps, and boots say “wintertime” just by being there.



A more stark scene follows shortly. Grumpy Ebenezer Scrooge, huddled over his desk, refuses Bob Cratchit's request for another lump of coal to heat their office. He rebuffs his nephew's invitation to Christmas dinner. And he fires Cratchit, then bah-humbugs his way home from work.

And so begins his adventure. Jacob Marley, Scrooge's long-dead partner, “appears” to Scrooge and warns him to expect some unworldly visitors. In turn each arrives, and each takes Scrooge to scenes from his life. We travel with them and peek in—on schoolboy moments, on the blossoming of first love and its painful breakup...on to the impoverished but loving Cratchit family, to the nephew's Christmas festivities with its charade mocking Uncle Scrooge, to the Fezziwig party with music so rollicking we're tempted to go onstage and dance with them....



And all the while, Scrooge views the scenes from the sidelines. Sometimes he joins in, becoming part of the merriment. Sometimes his face clouds with agony as he sees lost chances slip away forever. Opening night found John Szura in this role, with superb facial expressions and body language portraying Scrooge's emotions. Stuart Galbraith plays Scrooge in some performances. Indeed, many roles are double-cast because of the expanded number of presentations, including some weeknights, during December.

Beautiful traditional holiday songs with excellent soloists, as well as the chorus of children and adults, enhance *A Christmas Carol Story*. Music by duets or ensemble is interspersed occasionally between scenes. This helps lessen the distraction of the dark scene changes that come a bit too frequently and last a bit too long. The Ghost of Christmas Present also brings light during some scene changes with his crown of candles and the mysterious globular light he fondles.

The Playhouse sets, despite the limited space and budgets, never fail to delight, for



there's ingenuity aplenty at work. The set for *A Christmas Carol Story* is no exception, evoking as it does a village street in London. (Credit Don Bergmann and David Calhoun.) Snow lingers on rooftops and lights. Broad, massive doors open when revelers burst onto the scene.

Basically brown, the buildings are a perfect backdrop for the villagers' brilliantly colored clothing. On the small side stage, a fireplace glows in Scrooge's bedroom where he dons his red silk dressing gown and white nightcap.

While this classic Dickens tale is for children of all ages, parents might do well to realize that some moments could be really scary for little tots. Examples are when chain-clanking Marley's ghost appears, or Christmas Present's voice booms loudly.

With the many youngsters involved in this production, we can rest assured of a supply of future thespians. The troupe of actors and musicians are a delight to watch! They are products of the Southern California Lyric Theater where they study under Alison Kalmus, who also directs this holiday production. Because they are students still in school in December, most roles are double-cast to make the schedule less demanding for them. And that also gives more of them a chance to shine in *A Christmas Carol Story*.

To see who's who and who's playing whom, you will need to study the lengthy "cast of characters" in the program when you attend your theatrical "comfort food." *A Christmas Carol Story* is playing weekends and selected weeknights through Tues., Dec. 23. Be sure to call early for reservations, as the Playhouse's holiday offerings usually enjoy sellouts.

The Sierra Madre Playhouse is located at 87 W. Sierra Madre Blvd., Sierra Madre. Free parking is available in city lots. Restaurants on Baldwin Avenue and Sierra Madre Boulevard offer pre-theater dining for every taste.

For show dates, reservations or more information, phone (626) 256-3809, or visit the web site, [www.sierramadreplyhouse.org](http://www.sierramadreplyhouse.org), for information or for online credit card sales. *Photos courtesy of Ward Calaway. Photo 1: Lindsey Mixon and Jordan Byers. Photo 2: Ross Merrick and Tina Fells. Photo 3: Samantha Ozea, Megan Sanborn, Talia Saldana. Photo 4: Stuart Galbraith, Talia Saldana.*