

Valley Actors Star in Final "Christmas Carol"

Written by Written by David M. Brown

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After this—its 18th consecutive season in the Valley—the annual presentation of "A Christmas Carol" by Actors Theatre Company goes silent. So, don't play Ebenezer: Book seats for one of the 15 shows at the Herberger Theater Center in Downtown Phoenix.



Charles Dickens' tale of hope and redemption, first published as a novella in December 1843, runs Dec. 4-24, including Sunday 2 p.m. matinees and a 1 p.m. Christmas Eve performance. When that final curtain falls, Phoenix-based Actors Theatre Company will have performed the seasonal favorite for the 392nd time.

"After 18 years, it's time for Tiny Tim to walk on his own," says Matthew Wiener, producing artistic director at the company for 16 of those. "When we first started producing 'A Christmas Carol' in the Valley, there was very little holiday programming. Over the past 10 years, more and more have popped up, and our attendance has started to decline. It may come back in the future, just not in the next few years."

Adapted by Wiener and Michael Grady, with music and lyrics by Alan Ruch, the show features Californian Kim Bennett, who returns for his 11th season as Scrooge. Valley actors include Tempe's Gene Ganssle, who plays Scrooge's amiable nephew, Fred; Sally Jo Bannow, Phoenix, as the Ghost of Christmas Past; David Barker, Tempe, as the Ghost of Christmas Present; and mother and son, Stephanie Likes and Casey Likes, both from Chandler, who return as Mrs. Cratchit, wife of Scrooge's impoverished clerk, Bob, and their crippled son, Tiny Tim.

The crew for Actors Theatre Company also includes Paul Black (Lighting Design), David Temby (Sound Design), Jeff Thompson (Scenic Design), Manuella Needhammer (Hair and Make-Up Design) and April S. Smith (Stage Manager).

Other cast members are Keilani Akagi, Chandler, who plays Belinda Cratchit; Glendale's Abby Belliston as Mrs. Fezziwig; Natalie Ellis, Scottsdale, the Nurse; Phoenix' Robert Kolby Harper, who portrays Bob Cratchit; Beau Heckman, Scottsdale, the Sailor; Mike Lawler, Phoenix, as Jacob Marley; Tempe's Lillie Richardson as Mrs. Fred; and Ben Tyler, also of Tempe, as Mr. Fezziwig. In addition, David Rodgers of Gilbert is the Miner, Maxx Calile-King, Phoenix, is Young Scrooge, and Alison Malony of Ahwatukee is Martha.

"This show has been significant for many of our audience members who come back year after year," says Wiener, who has directed 30-plus productions for the company, this year celebrating its 25th anniversary. He lives in Phoenix with wife Marion and twin daughters Jordan and Claire. "The audience tells us it helps start the holiday season for them."

He adds: "It's also been significant for all the performers and technicians who have worked on the show for years. For many, it has been a steady gig, with most of the cast returning year after year. Several actors have actually grown up on stage and moved from one role to another."

For 13 years, Ganssle has been playing Fred, who annually invites Scrooge to his home for Christmas and even toasts him at a party while the latter is on his journey with the ghosts. "When he shows up at the end, it's hard for Kim [Bennett] and me to avoid tearing up sometimes," says the New Jersey native, who teaches acting at ASU and Scottsdale Community College. "It never gets boring, and the story and the 'family' of actors I work with make this one of my favorite productions ever."

Likes, Mrs. Cratchit, and her son, Casey, Tiny Tim, have been playing their roles for four years. She is an ELD teacher at Chandler High School, and Casey is in the third grade at Jacobson Elementary. Casey's sister is Claire, 2.

Her first year in Actors Theater Company's "A Christmas Carol" was 1998; she played Scrooge's past girlfriend, Belle, whom he sees again with the Ghost of Christmas Past at the party of Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig.

"I started performing when I was 6 years old," she says, noting that she has performed on Broadway and in the National Tour of "Les Miserables" as Eponine and Cosette, at Walt Disney World/Tokyo Disneyland/Disney Cruise Lines as Ariel, Pocahontas, Jasmine, and others, and at the Fiesta Texas/Opryland USA. In addition to her other roles with the company, she has also performed locally at Phoenix Theatre and Arizona Jewish Theatre Company.

Casey started in the business even earlier in his life, appearing in his first commercial at 3. He has done several commercials, videos and is appearing in two films: 'Dead West,' and 'Everything Must Go,' starring Will Ferrell. He plays Ferrell's character as a child. He also enjoys summer theatre camp every year, mom notes.

"We are so sad that this is the last of a long series," she says. "It has become family tradition to be a part of the show every year — a part of our holiday season. Christmas won't be the same without 'Christmas Carol' — and we will also really miss our 'Christmas Carol' family."

For the last three years, Phoenix native Ben Tyler has been portraying the exemplary Mr. Fezziwig, who apprentices young Scrooge at his warehouse. Tyler also played the Spirit of Christmas Present for Actors Theatre Company 13 years ago.

He also was a child actor: "I talked to my mom into letting me audition for a local kid's TV show, 'Romper Room,' in 1962," he recalls. I was cast and appeared on the show for a week." He graduated from Central High School in 1974 and attended Phoenix College, where he studied theater.

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A Tempe resident for the last 16 years, Tyler was a founding member of the Mill Avenue Theatre there and is today executive director of Centennial Theatre Foundation, an Arizona Legacy Project developing Arizona-themed stage plays.

"It is the longevity of this show that makes it unusual for those of us associated with it," he says, adding that many Arizona actors have performed in Actors Theatre Company's "Christmas Carol" at various times during the last 18 years. "Actors can form families in six weeks of rehearsal and performance, so you can only imagine what can happen in 18 years."

"It's very sad to see this come to a close," says Beau Heckman, who's been acting and singing for 20 years. During his 12 years with "A Christmas Carol," he's played a variety of roles, including a Grave Digger and Charity Gentleman to Topper, a party guest, and, in this production, the Sailor, singing at sea of friends, love and warmer places.

"I have met some of the finest people over the years working on this production and have some wonderful warm memories," he adds. "For now, I'm just focusing on putting the show back up one last time and making it the best of all."

"This is like saying goodbye to a really, really good friend," Tyler says. "A lot of bittersweet moments are awaiting us this year. I'm just glad that we know this is the last year because it gives us all the chance to say goodbye. I'm not sentimental — but next year at this time I'm going to feel like something important is missing."

Notes Ganssle: It's always tough to close a show because of the friendships and memories you make while working. A theater production, it's been said, is like a sand painting," he adds. "We all know it is going to disappear sometime, but it's beautiful while it lasts. And this 'Carol' was a beautiful painting." www.actorstheatrephx.org.