

D *Starkville* DAILY NEWS

SCT serves up a comic winner with the holiday-themed 'Inspecting Carol'

A Review by Edwin Warfield
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A full house drew a dozen aces at Thursday night's opening of Starkville Community Theatre's "Inspecting Carol."

Director Pattye Archer, who doubled as set designer, deftly guided a twelve-person cast through a splendid, uproarious performance of Daniel Sullivan's two-act comedy for a capacity audience at SCT's Playhouse on Main.

During the last twenty minutes, the audience's continuous billows of laughter rocked the downtown theatre. In fact, no SCT performance in recent years has matched this extended response.

Actors' skillful performances, creative direction, and several splendidly-executed special effects make "Inspecting Carol" a show to enjoy and remember. The cast includes four newcomers to SCT's regular season and eight veteran performers. Their work meshed well.

Sullivan's script blends situational, physical, and verbal humor. Its fundamental premise is a double variation on the traveling salesman story.

Here, the Soapbox Playhouse, a regional equity (professional) theatre company, struggles economically because of a dwindling season subscriber base and recent news that National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant support for Soapbox has vanished. A slim hope of NEA funds' restoration depends upon the judgment of an NEA "inspector" soon to arrive for a site visit.

The inspector's visit will coincide with Soapbox's dress rehearsal for its annual holiday production of Dickens's "A Christmas Carol," usually Soapbox's only moneymaker.

In response to a Soapbox ad for auditions, a second visitor, an abysmally untalented 30-year-old itinerant, Wayne Wellacre, stops at Soapbox. Soapbox's founding director Zorah Block-and her "Christmas Carol" actors-mistakenly believe that Wellacre represents NEA, and they immediately cast him in their show and defer to his every whim.

The traveling salesman/visitor-from-outside and mistaken-identity plot ploys have an extended history-from Roman comedy to Shakespeare, and to Starkville. Sullivan adds farcical details and brief under-plots. Archer's attention to detail and imaginative reading of the script took Thursday's SCT production to rarified heights of humor. She was ably assisted by Alison Stamps and Stephen Cunetto.

Exceptional set and costume quality, and exactly-timed, complex production elements of lighting, sound, and special effects reinforce the comic language and situations.

Founding Soapbox members include Bloch (Marianne Ulmer) whose physical and emotional investment in Soapbox will lead her (as she tells Wellacre) to "do anything-give anything-to save it." "Anything," in this case includes attempted seduction. Ulmer, as a frequently-frantic Lithuanian possessed with "a lot of anger," is the center of the action; she brings both commitment and idealism to her role. She keeps the show moving in multiple directions-a centrifugal force.

Founding Soapbox member MJ (Molly Watkins) functions as stage manager and foil to Zorah. Her calm, rational, seasoned, practical awareness of the realities of performance keep Zorah's ditzzy tendencies in check. As Martha Cratchit in the "Carol" play, she add a touch of the playful, whimsical prankster. Two vastly different



roles-nifty performance.

The third dimension of Soapbox's operation, business agent Kelly Emery, necessarily bears tidings of great financial woe and has to contend with the script's least attractive lines. However, MJ Etua's energy, line delivery, and her skepticism about the company, transform an otherwise ho-hum role into a zestfully humorous one. Yes, Molly plays MJ. And MJ plays Kelly.

Among the other characters, Sidney Carlton (Lyle Tate) and Dorothy Tree Hapgood (Madeline Golden) play an aging husband-wife team of founding Soapbox members. Carlton, as Marley's addled ghost in "Carol," struggles with Marley's chains and in the closing dress rehearsal generates rousing rounds of laughter. As Carlton, Tate adds a healthy dollop of engaging fussiness to the "Inspecting" cast and the interior "Carol" cast.

Dorothy doubles as Mrs. Cratchit in the inner play and as the company's voice coach in "Inspecting." Before the initial dress rehearsal, she insists that the "Carol" cast warm up. The ensuing warmup scene highlights Act One; well-written and acted, the scene becomes Golden's "directing" tour de force. The verdict: an excellent comic performance by one of SCT's top veterans.

Two other founding Soapbox members, Phil Hewlitt (Brian Hawkins) and Larry Vauxhall (Jay Cooper), add comic dimensions that differ markedly from each other and from the play's other roles.

Hewlitt, Soapbox's stock character (the classic bumbler) has a serious, unrequited case of real-life hots for Zorah; this affection becomes a secondary plot whose success depends upon Hawkins's naively persistent courtship and Ulmer's equally devoted rejection.

Much visual humor in the "Inspecting" play comes from Hawkins's role as Bob Cratchit in the "Carol" play. Because he has to haul a hefty 12-year-old Tiny Tim -- obviously no longer Tiny -- onto the stage for the "Carol" rehearsal, Bob has sustained a painfully-strained sacroiliac and "traveling sciatica." Hawkins makes his fellows (and audience) feel his lower back pains.

As Scrooge in "Carol," Larry demonstrates a sharply-honed sense of comic timing. Larry's misplaced confidence in his skill as a writer leads him to revise the "Carol" script to caress his own credo that only good actors can write good plays.

His revisions combine a misfired cynical perception of the Cratchit family and a half-baked political correctness. Larry doesn't comprehend this absurd contradiction. Cooper's versatility, bald dome, and easy, mannered feel for the stage call attention to his standout job.

In an SCT debut as the Ghost of Christmas-

Present in "Carol," Walter (Vincent Smith) has several of the funniest takes in the show. As Walter in the "Inspecting" segment, he represents Soapbox's effort -- at NEA insistence -- to increase cultural diversity. SCT audiences should look forward to return engagements from him. Notice Smith's Ghost costumes, which contribute materially to the play's visual humor.

Another SCT newcomer, Ura Seymer plays Wayne, the amateur actor searching for a job to fulfill his "bliss." Mistaken for the NEA inspector, he obtains several roles in "Carol," while bollixing up a bit of the "Inspecting" plot.

Seymer's Tiny Tim stretches, quite literally, the outer edges of the venerable character. Count Seymer as another talented newcomer.

Ty Phillips, as Bart Francis, plays the company handyman in "Inspector" and Peter Cratchit in "Carol." He and Chad Allgood (as child actor in "Inspecting" and a temporary Tiny Tim in "Carol") perform competently and comfortably in their roles.

Then arrives the real NEA bureaucrat, Betty Andrews, bearing briefcase and south Hoboken accent. Carole Ramsey -- in another SCT debut -- convinces cast and audience alike that she is the real thing. Note her bureaucratic uniform and her costume in her transformation as Queen Elizabeth.

The Queen Elizabeth scene, though brief, brings "Inspecting Carol" to its astonishing conclusion.

The twenty-minute final dress rehearsal for "A Christmas Carol" requires two alternating pinpoint spotlights on the "Carol" audience and constant adjustments in broad lighting of the "Carol" stage.

Because lighting shifts in place and intensity, Andrew Watkins in the light booth and Mike Goettig in the sound booth are the busiest people in downtown Starkville for this twenty minutes.

Complicating this scene, too, are the foul-ups with the "Carol" rehearsal and the straight scene of director and bureaucrat separately observing the dramatic devastation of the rehearsal. Much of the rehearsal scene's effectiveness depends upon several spectacular surprises. Here Riley Moore's work in creating and constructing the unseen, but crucial, mechanics of the set enabled the surprises to work so well.

Thursday evening's audience was amazed, and as the script says, "they gasp at it. They do . . . Every time." You will, too.

Costumes-well-made, varied, and colorful-are like the fairy-tale porridge-just right. Medals of honor to Derek Aarons, Jody Denny, Faye Fulgham, Cindy Ruff, Ann Stamps, and Joan Wilson. Costumes came off, or on, without a glitch.