



REVIEW: A TUNA CHRISTMAS AT SPOTLIGHTERS THEATRE

REVIEWS: NOVEMBER 23, 2015
by AMANDA N. GUNTHER

Well yeehaw, y'all! It's a rootin' tootin' Christmas time down in ol' Tuna, Texas, yes it is, why yes it is! And for a limited holiday engagement you too can visit with Aunt Pearl, Didi and RR, Vera Carp, and all the rest of those zany southern characters from the lone star state at The Audrey Herman Spotlighters Theatre as they take up residence to celebrate the festive season through December 20th. Directed by Fuzz Roark, this raucous backwoods Christmas comedy is a splendid alternative to the dozens of productions of Christmas Carol happening this time of year. With grenade-and-shell Christmas trees, the Christmas Phantom, and a good two dozen whacky characters portrayed by just four actors, there's holiday fun for everyone.



Glen Charlow (left) as Dixie DeBerry and Jim Hart (right) as Aunt Pearl Burras in A Tuna Christmas at Spotlighters Theatre
Spotlighters Theatre/Chris Aldridge, CMAldridgePhotography



Adam Abruzzo as Didi Snavelly in A Tuna Christmas at Spotlighters Theatre
Spotlighters Theatre/Chris Aldridge, CMAldridgePhotography

Texas pride is in full blaze all across the intimate space of Spotlighters' stage with Resident Scenic Designer Alan Zemla at the reigns. Red white and blue striped poles with stars and bright echoes of Texan local flavor can be found throughout the scenic decorations, just look around. Zemla, working with Director and Costume Designer Fuzz Roark, even crafts a sci-fi space-door for a particularly hilarious scene featuring RR—keep an eye out for those aliens! Zemla has peppered the set with nostalgic references of Tuna, Texas see if you can count them all before the show is over.

Roark, who steps up to the plate as the show's Costume Designer, really grounds the show in garish Texan charm from Stetsons and cowboy boots to frilly holiday-appropriate cowboy shirts complete with festive embroidery. In a show where the main difference between one character and another being

played by the same actor is the outfit, Roark succeeds in making each of the characters distinct in his garment outline. Personalities resonate strongly in the wardrobe department, particularly when it comes to the camo couture seen on Didi and the posh pink threads saved for the classy Vera Carp.

Getting right down to the meat and potatoes of the production, the pacing is just off. Not as a whole, or even in readily identifiable quantities, qualities, or locations, but there are moments in odd places where pauses occur that shouldn't and where line exchanges fall short of their high-energy benchmark. The pacing problem aside, the humor is ripe for enjoyment and the show as a whole provides a healthy dose of Christmas comedic fluff to keep the audience in good spirits throughout the performance. Roark, who do to spacing constraints, utilizes four performers instead of the traditional two, makes good use of the role divisions, playing to his actors' strengths with each character assignment.

Four gentlemen take on some two dozen roles, several of which are wildly amusing females, and they work exceptionally well together on stage, creating moments of adorable hilarity that tickles the funny bone in a fashion most pleasing for this festive season. Adam Abruzzo, Glen Charlow, Jim Hart, and Matt Wetzel comprise the ensemble of the production and the quartet does a fine job of landing the little comic nuances that make the show so entertaining.

Jim Hart takes on a plethora of characters from the flamboyant and sassy Joe Bob Lipsey to the very simplistic Thurston Wheelis and several others in-between. It's Hart's portrayal as both Bertha Bumiller and Aunt Pearl Burras that showcase his seasoned acting chops. Adjusting his phys-



Jim Hart (left) as Bertha Bumiller and Glen Charlow (right) as Arles Struvie in A Tuna Christmas at Spotlighters Theatre
Spotlighters Theatre/Chris Aldridge, CMAldridgePhotography

ical stance and gait to that of a Texas woman and elderly Texas woman respectively, Hart delivers these two characters with a great deal of amusing intrigue. His high-strung approach to Bertha, particularly when it comes to dealing with her miscreant children and decorating the house for the holidays, is thoroughly enjoyable, almost as much as his tender-hearted approach to playing Pearl. Finding a slightly different feminine Texan sound for each woman further delineates the difference in these two main character tracts.



Glen Charlow as R.R. Snavely in *A Tuna Christmas* at Spotlighters Theatre
Spotlighters Theatre/Chris Aldridge,
CMAldridgePhotography

Glen Charlow might have the most character assignments in the entire production but he really finds the comic niche of each of them, whether it's the momentary flash of Garland Poteet— the giggling gas-bag who literally has a walk-through cameo appearance— or the grumpy Sheriff Givens, who appears only once but Charlow's brusque nature in delivering that appearance sets the tone for his character every time he's mentioned thereafter. Charlow tackles the blissfully simplistic role of RR Snavely with physical panache, giving him the jitters, the twitters, and the spins, especially when it comes to being shouted down by his controlling wife, Didi. But it's Charlow's portrayal of Arles Struvie, yes it is, yes it is, that really tugs at the holiday heartstrings. His patter-exchange with Hart's Thurston Wheelis during the radio segments is perfectly executed and his quirky charms when it comes to interacting with Hart's Bertha is too precious for words.

Vying for the title of comic queen or comic king, Adam Abruzzo and Matt Wetzel take on the high-intensity comic characters in their portrayals of Inita Goodwin and Helen Bedd working the counter down at the Tasty Kreme. With hysterical melodramatic heightened theatrics when it comes to these two lousy ladies, Abruzzo and Wetzel are spinning circles around each other with who can run away with the comedy of the scene faster. Their sassy and snappy attitudes as these two saucy waitresses is just too much for words.



Matt Wetzel (left) as Helen Bedd and Adam Abruzzo (right) as Inita Goodwin in *A Tuna Christmas* at Spotlighters Theatre
Spotlighters Theatre/Chris Aldridge,
CMAldridgePhotography



Adam Abruzzo as Didi Snavely in *A Tuna Christmas* at Spotlighters Theatre
Spotlighters Theatre/Chris Aldridge,
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Abruzzo's main character work falls into the hellacious form of Didi Snavely, a characterization of every ass-backwards stereotype in Texas when it comes to women and ammunition. Growling, grouching, and grumping through the Christmas season, Abruzzo unearths the raw humors of Didi not only in her speech patterns but in her little gestures. Puffing on an invisible cigarette and disrupting her off-key Christmas carols, Abruzzo— like the rest of the ensemble— makes excellent use of his pantomime, furthering his character development by treating it like an extension of Didi, particularly when it comes to her blown-out verbal rage storms complete with arm tantrums.

Wetzel spins himself silly between the obnoxious Charlene Bumiller, the offbeat Petey Fisk, and the diva-queen Vera Carp. It's hard to say which of his three females are the best as each possesses a uniquely hysterical quality all its own, though as Charlene his fits of temper are wildly amusing. Wetzel's portrayal of Vera is an uproarious account of southern charm losing its cool, going from calm voices to spastic outbursts in the blink of an eye. There's even a

quiet moment of reflection occurring in Wetzel's delivery of Petey Fisk late in the woods beneath the Christmas star, which showcases his dynamic ability as a performer. Truly a comic riot, Wetzel takes the show by the horns and wrangles his characters into hilarious submission.



Matt Wetzel as Vera Carp in *A Tuna Christmas* at Spotlighters Theatre
Spotlighters Theatre/Chris Aldridge, CMAldridge-
Photography

So scoot your boots on down to Spotlighters Theatre this holiday season and enjoy a good old fashioned Christmas, Texas style. You're guaranteed to have a good time because everyone loves to laugh at the holidays.

Running Time: Approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes with one intermission

A Tuna Christmas plays through December 20, 2015 at The Audrey Herman Spotlighters Theatre— 817 St. Paul Street in the historic Mount Vernon neighborhood of Baltimore City in Maryland. For tickets call the box office at (410) 752-1225 or purchase them online.