

Skaters help tell 'The Christmas Angel' story

"Mannheim Steamroller Holiday Ice Show - 'The Christmas Angel' 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 19, Joe Louis Arena, 600 Civic Center Dr., Detroit. Tickets (\$50 Gold Circle seats, \$35 and \$25), available at Joe Louis Arena, and Fox Theatre box offices, and all Ticketmaster locations, call (248) 645-6666, or on-line at www.ticketmaster.com. For information, call (313) 983-6606.

By KEELY WYGNON
STAFF WRITER
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With little ones at home, Christmas is a special time for Chip Davis, creator of Mannheim Steamroller.

"I've gotten really involved with Christmas," said Davis in a telephone interview from San Diego. "It wasn't intentional, it just happened. I've got a 7-year-old daughter, a 2-year-old son, and a new release, a girl, due in January. It's becoming increasingly more evident to me that there's a need to create quality time for families."

A 1969 graduate of the University of Michigan, Davis still has ties to the school, and lots of great memories. He recently wrote a piece to dedicate the new bell tower on campus. "It was the foundation of everything I've done," he said about the time he spent at U-M. "It was not an easy school, it was a lot of work. Go Blue!"



Holiday show: Colorful costumes, sets and skaters are part of Mannheim Steamroller's holiday ice show, "The Christmas Angel."

Davis was born into a family of musicians and began his training on piano at age 4. He graduated from U-M as a classically trained bassoonist and played percussion in the school's marching band.

Trivia buffs will know him for his 1975 hit song, "Convoy." In 1976 he was named Country Music Writer of the Year. Since then he's been busy exploring new ways of expressing himself musically, and developed a style he calls "18th Century classical rock." He called his band Mannheim Steamroller, the name of an 18th century musical technique now known as the crescendo.

His first Christmas album "Mannheim Steamroller Christmas" in 1984 sold more than 6 million copies. Other Christmas albums followed including "A Fresh Air Christmas," and "Christmas in the Air."

"The Christmas Angel," his newest project, gives families three options. They can buy the CD and read the story of "The Christmas Angel," while listening to the music, watch the special that will air Saturday, Dec. 19, on NBC, or see the show at Joe Louis Arena on the same day.

This year he's introducing "The Christmas Angel," a holiday tale brought to life by a cast of 15 Olympic and World Champion skaters that includes Dorothy Hamill, Janet Sabatovich, and Tonia Kwitkowski.

"We have a society of kids killing kids," said Davis. "The underpinnings are a lack of a family. The entertainment we see is so violent - monkey see, monkey do, led on a mission to create family entertainment."

He chose Christmas because it's a time when people are more open. "It's an emotional time for family and friends to be together," he explained.

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"I'm trying to focus on creating quality entertainment for family and friends," he said. "I create musical backdrops for life."

The production will be narrated via video display by Olivia Newton-John and Davis, and feature colorful costumes and sets, and a musical background of updated Christmas classics such as a rocking "Carol of the Bells," "Greensleeves," and "Good King Wenceslaus."

Davis said he decided that in addition to narration and music, skaters could best tell the story of "The Christmas Angel," because they can glide, jump and do lots of things.

Many skaters, he learned, have already skated to his music, and knew it well. Davis wanted to keep things simple, and let the music and action tell the story.

He met Dorothy Hamill and Olivia Newton John through mutual friends. "We're all older parents who have done the career part and are having kids," said Davis who is 51. "When you have your career under your belt it creates a different aspect of sensitivity."

"The Christmas Angel" takes place in the little village of Hamlet on the night before Christmas Eve. When they place the angel, the very last ornament, on the tree, the toys are allowed to play before they become Christmas presents. "Gargon steals the angel off the Christmas tree and takes her to the Netherland. The toys are stuck in life and can't become presents again. It makes them cry," explained Davis.

Dorothy Hamill, who portrays the mom, goes to the Netherland to hunt down the evil Gargon and rescue the angel. "The energy of good overcomes bad," said Davis. "Gargon isn't a bad guy, he just got off track, but that doesn't mean he can't get back on."

Music helps set the tone for the story. "Greensleeves is so emotional," said Davis. "The angel is lost and alone and has no idea how she'll get back."

Skating fans will enjoy the show, but it's not intended to be a skating extravaganza. "It's a story driven," said Davis. "It's a movie on ice."

As we talked, Davis was busy getting ready for the tour. "They're loading it on the truck," he said. Davis will be on the road with the Mannheim Steamroller Christmas Show, which is also touring select U.S. cities, but he'll be home for Christmas.

"I haven't had a normal Christmas since 1984," he said. "I love to cook. We'll have Waco, I've got the original 11-5 recipe, ham or turkey. I'll spend the day fiddling around in the kitchen. I might make a pie."

Hilberry offers stirring 'Tale of 2 Cities'

The Hilberry, WSU's graduate theatre company, presents the Midwest premiere of the Charles Dickens classic, "A Tale of Two Cities." The show will run in rotating repertory through March 4. Tickets can be purchased by calling the theatre box office at (313) 577-2972 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. weekdays.

By SUE SUCHYTA
SPECIAL WRITER

The entire Hilberry company has come together to present the Midwest premiere of Dickens classic "A Tale of Two Cities." Adapted for the stage by Nagle Jackson, the play was previously performed in San Francisco and Princeton.

From the classic opening line, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," players know they are in for a literary treat, with a stirring, passionate script and a fascinating historical backdrop. Set against the

French Revolution, "A Tale of Two Cities" is a story of political intrigue and romance.

Lucie Manette, a young lady of French birth living with a guardian in England, discovers that her father, long thought dead, has been liberated from the notorious Bastille, where he was wrongly imprisoned for many years. As she returns to England to nurse her father, she meets a young French noble, who, disillusioned by his uncle's abuse of power and people, has renounced his title and expatriated himself to England. When the British accuse the noble of being a spy, Lucie is called upon to testify. The outcome seems bleak until his lawyer's crafty assistant, Sydney Carton, who bears an uncanny resemblance to the nobleman (now known as Charles Darnay), comes to Charles' aid. Sydney and Charles both fall in love with Lucie. It is

Charles, however, who courts and weds her. Years later, Charles and Lucie's bliss is threatened when he risks his life to return to France to discharge a debt of honor. Caught up in the bloody turmoil of the French Revolution, Charles finds his life in danger once again, and his only hope is in the hands of his look-alike rival Sydney Carton.

Dickens' characters are full of passion and honor. There are those who are good, those who are evil and those whose years of indifference are redeemed by acts of passion or courage. Among the good are Darnay, the renounced noble, portrayed by Matt Troyer with an earnest dignity, conveying warmth and optimism despite the reserve demanded by Darnay's noble title. Emily Miller's portrayal of the loving and uncomplicated Lucie Manette is warm and effervescent. She wears her emotions on her sleeve.

Hilberry veteran David Engelman, having appeared earlier in the season as Trotter in "Mousetrap" and the prince in "Hamlet," seems intent on setting a Hilberry season record for playing the most, conservative troubled souls. He is, nonetheless, stirring and convincing as Dr. Manette, the victim of many years of abuse in the Bastille.

Erik Gratton's role as Sydney Carton is also complex. Carton, the barrister's assistant, is indifferent yet candid; abrasive and uncaring yet ultimately honorable. Gratton is able to keep the audience wondering whether his motives are self-serving or pure. His scene with Sara Wolf, a woman awaiting the guillotine, is poignant.

The costumes, from the rags of La Carmagnole to the riches of the nobility, set the historical tone of the play.

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