

THEATER

Meadow Brook conjures spirit of Dickens' timeless tale

"A Christmas Carol" at Meadow Brook Theatre, Oakland University, Rochester Hills. Performances: Dec. 14-28; 8 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 2 p.m. Wednesday; 8 p.m. Friday; 2 p.m. & 6 p.m. Saturday; 2 p.m. & 6:30 p.m. Sunday. Tickets: \$23-\$33.50; (248) 377-3300.

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

In the current context of rampant consumerism and unbridled capitalistic zeal, "A Christmas Carol" is arguably the most recited secular parable of the Christmas season.

Proving that it, too, has been moved by the benevolent spirit, Meadow Brook Theatre has provided an inspiring modern-day chapel for Charles Dickens' sermon about sin and salvation.

From the opening walk of 19th century carolers down the aisles onto an intricately imaginative set, Meadow Brook's "A Christmas Carol" displays high theatricality without slipping into drippy sentimentalism.

Turning, two-level sets unfold into London streets. Bob Cratchit's humble home and a timeless dreamscape as Ebenezer Scrooge stumbles through Christmases past, present and to come.

While "A Christmas Carol" remains one of the western world's most well-known stories,

Meadow Brook has managed to throw in enough surprises to keep audiences searching the stage for the next dazzling pyrotechnic display, crawling mist or hydraulic-driven appearance of specters and tombstones.

The collaboration of Peter Hicks' scenery, Barbara Jenks' costumes and Reid Johnson's lighting remind us of the promise of theatre to conjure a magical world in the here and now.

To their credit, Meadow Brook doesn't confuse special effects with a special performance. Ultimately, nothing does - nor should - get in the way of Dickens' timeless plea for decency and fellowship.

Much of the credit should go to Charles Nolte's adaptation, which preserves the framework of the story while adding a 1990s sensibility. Nolte, who also directs the play, adapted the story especially for Meadow Brook.

The current production, including set, script and staging, ran at Meadow Brook from 1982-1994 before returning this year to the Oakland University stage.

In particular, Nolte has wrought a tapestry of humor and pathos from Dickens' taut tale.

Giggle along with Paul Hooper's daffily Fazzling, the Beetle Juice-like anvilting merchants (John Biedenbach, Chuck O'Con-

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nor, Richard Schrot), and a Christmas Present (Debra Lynne Wicks) who's filled with equal parts of a boisterous fairy god-mother and the outrageous RuPaul.

Shed a tear for the burdened but dignified Bob Cratchit (also played by Hooper), and other Londoners too destitute to qualify for credit, but none too short on holiday cheer.

And cast a prayer upon hearing the Cratchits sing "Silent Night" as a dirge to the goddess world where money and power rules, and justice is a penniless pauper.

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Ironically, Dickens wrote the story in 1848 because he, too, needed money. Like no other story he composed, Dickens was said to have laughed and cried

while writing the classic. Obviously, the "spirit" has moved through others.

Scrooge isn't merely a compelling character, but a conduit for the good vs. evil struggle in each of us in the days where supply and demand determine the rules of survival.

So, of course, what would be a tale about the spiritual awakening of one of literature's crankiest misers without a flesh-and-blood replica.

With deftness and subtlety, Booth Colman is not only the paragon Scrooge, but he should be examined to find if an actual transformation has taken place.

As Colman holds the rudder, Scrooge is steered away from his initial observation that "The only thing more ridiculous than Christmas is love."

The patience for Scrooge's narrowness is a festive dose of holiday carols, a swig of eggnog and a gathering around the hearth.

Meadow Brook's "A Christmas Carol" accomplishes more than being an entertaining theatrical presentation. The production, along with Scrooge's epiphany, proves that love is not only for all ages, but timeless.

And that's a timely reminder amid the crazy rush to "get ahead" and the current spending spree once known as the Christmas season.



MEADOW BROOK THEATRE

Holiday tale: Debra Lynne Wicks (center) performs with Hannah Locker and Jeffrey Hyke in Meadow Brook Theatre's 16th annual production of "A Christmas Carol."

ART BEAT

Send items for consideration in Art Beat to Frank Provenzano, arts reporter, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc. 805 E. Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009, or fax (248) 654-1314.

THE BEAUX ARTS TRIO
Recognized for more than 40 years as setting the standard for performance of piano trio literature, The Beaux Arts Trio brings its igniting energy to Orchestra Hall this Wednesday.

The concert is produced by the Chamber Music Society of Detroit. The legendary ensemble has played a major role in the programs of important cultural and educational centers through-

out North America. They perform in the annual concert series at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Celebrity Series of Boston, and the Library of Congress, where the trio is in residence. The trio participated in the "December Evenings" festival in Moscow at the invitation of renown maestro Sviatoslav Richter, and performed at the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul. Their long list of recording awards include the Gramophone and Stereo Review's award of the year.

OAKLAND SINGERS
The Oakland Singers will join the Detroit Concert Choir and other local musical groups in an appearance on Channel 7's holiday special presentation Saturday, Dec. 20.

The choir will sing during breaks in the "White Christmas," schedule to air from 12:30-3:30 p.m. They will also appear during newscasts throughout the day, and during BeBe Winans' Christmas special, 7-8 p.m.

MEADOW BROOK NAMES PLAYWRIGHT-IN-RESIDENCE
Karin Alrawi has won named Meadow Brook Theatre's first playwright-in-residence and literary manager. He will oversee the theatre's development of new works, and assist in outreach

programs to local schools. Born and raised in Alexandria, Egypt, Alrawi has had his plays produced in his homeland, England, Canada and the US. His best-known plays include "Migrations," "Fire in the Lake," "Child in the Heart" and "Patagonia." Alrawi has won the Whiting Award, Edinburgh Fringe First Award and Canada's Jesse Richardson Award. He has also written several feature length films and television documentaries that have aired on the BBC. He comes to Meadow Brook after serving as artistic director of the New Play Centre in Vancouver, Canada.

WEDNESDAY DINNER SPECIALS

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- Item D Hunter residential-size signs (opening bid price is \$40: 18 available)
- Item E Tree sign (three signs on sign-post top) showing Ring Rd/E. Brown/S. Woodward, opening bid is \$60; only one available
- Item F Large median signs: miscellaneous N. Woodward, S. Woodward and Hunter (opening bid is \$60; total 11 available)

Note: Signs are actual street signs and are weathered.

How to Bid:

- Telephone bids accepted beginning Thursday, December 4, 1997. Auction closes at 5 p.m. Monday, December 15.
- Auction by voice mail: Call the Woodward Avenue Action Association at (248) 399-3933. You may call 24 hours a day until 5 p.m. December 15, 1997.
- Leave your name, day time telephone, type of sign desired and bid amount.
- Top bidders in each category will be contacted to arrange for pick up in Birmingham. All calls will be logged by date and order received. In the event of a tie, earlier call wins. Sign payments are tax deductible with proceeds going toward beautification efforts on Woodward in south Oakland County. All winning bidders will be published in the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers January 8, 1998.

Members of the Woodward Avenue Action Association Board of Directors and association employees are excluded from participation.

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