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Butte host to premiere of new melodrama

By Suzanne Core, Staff Writer 12/06/2007

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This year's holiday melodrama at the Butte Opera House in Cripple Creek is a new offering from two of the principals of the Thin Air Theatre Company, writer Chris Sorensen and director Chris Armbrister.



Courtesy photo/City of Cripple Creek

"Angel of the Christmas Mine" is a brand new script written by Chris Sorensen for the Butte Theater stage. It premiered at "locals night" Nov. 23, the day after Thanksgiving to the usual packed audience of locals and, this year, their Thanksgiving holiday guests. The appreciative audience gave the cast a standing ovation.

As is traditional with classic melodrama at the Butte, Angel of the Christmas Mine is set in Cripple Creek and embraces familiar themes, local history, song and dance, heroes and villains. Less familiar is Chris Sorensen's complex scripting, which adds dimension to plot and characters. For instance, in Angel of the Christmas Mine, the classic hero is a bit flawed, sometimes making poor choices, even if for good reasons, and the villain can show his humanity and his greed.

Classic melodrama has been produced in Cripple Creek since Wayne and Dorothy Mackin introduced it at the Imperial Hotel in 1946. Sorensen takes it to another level. Sorensen also wrote Dr. Jekyll's Medicine Show, produced for Halloween, and earlier this year he adapted and directed the Butte's summer melodrama, The Colorado Colleen.

Both earlier shows, like this one, featured multidimensional heroes and villains, no doubt unique to the genre of classic Victorian melodrama, which itself is far more complex than the stock characters of the more stereotypical "damsel in distress" story.

Mickey Burdick and Mel Moser also return to the Butte stage for this Christmas production. Each has a long history with Cripple Creek melodrama and existing roles as principals with the Thin Air Theatre Company. Each brings talent, timing and heart to the production. Burdick stars as hard-luck miner John Bell, who can't afford Christmas for his young family. Taking a shift in an unstable mine, he is trapped there on Christmas Eve. Moser is also trapped. Only a miracle can save them - a Christmas miracle.

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BUSINESS

It also has been a tradition to blend professional and community actors in the holiday melodrama. Staying on from the summer's professional troupe, in addition to Burdick, Moser and Maga are Morgan Gengo and Ashley Chasteen. Gengo portrays Gloria, the omnipresent if not quite ethereal Angel of the Christmas Mine, while Chasteen ably portrays Bell's loving wife.

The remaining cast members are community members, most of whom have worked backstage on other Butte productions. Each of them gave competent performances, blending well with the professional actors.

Outstanding among them is Dylan McClintock, who plays Bo Meadows, a young man with a simple heart and even simpler mind, who is easily led into danger and is trapped with the others in the mine.

McClintock's dramatic ability shines as he makes his simpleton character both believable and sympathetic. Roy Rains, Jr., also gives a notable performance, as the villain mine owner.

The play is enhanced by the musical expertise of piano man and musical director David Maga.

The play is followed by the traditional Olio, created by Maga and Burdick, featuring Christmas songs and the choreography of Cresson dance instructor Stacy Smith.

The melodrama plays through Dec. 31, with shows at 7 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays and 1 p.m. matinees Saturdays and Sundays.

For reservations, call 877-689-6402 or 719-235-8944, or go to www.butteoperahouse.com.

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