

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# Minimalism undermines the heart of SC Shakespeare's 'A Christmas Carol'



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**Quick Take**

Santa Cruz Shakespeare's holiday "A Christmas Carol" arrives with a talented cast and good intentions, but its minimalist staging and narration-heavy adaptation never find the emotional spark that makes Scrooge's journey so enduring, leaving this production feeling surprisingly hollow.

There's a reason we return to "A Christmas Carol" year after year, in every form it's ever taken – from lavish stage productions to black-and-white films to animated retellings on TV. Charles Dickens gave us one of literature's most satisfying emotional journeys: the redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge, a man hardened by loss and loneliness who is cracked open by memory, compassion and ghostly intervention. No matter how many versions we see, that arc – from miserliness to mercy – tugs at something deep within us. It's the promise that people can change, that empathy can be rekindled, and that even the coldest heart can find its way back to warmth.

Santa Cruz Shakespeare set an impressively high bar this past summer – rich performances, imaginative storytelling and staging that felt both inspired and artistically courageous. With that, I anticipated a thoughtful, well-crafted take on this classic holiday tale, adapted and directed by Charles Pasternak and co-directed by Alicia Gibson. But despite those high expectations, what was delivered was a minimalist and emotionally thin "Christmas Carol."

**If you go**

**Who:** Santa Cruz Shakespeare  
**What:** Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol"  
**When:** Through Dec. 24  
**Where:** Veterans Memorial Building, 846 Front St., Santa Cruz  
**Tickets:** [santacruzshakespeare.org](http://santacruzshakespeare.org) or 831-460-6399

Overall, the actors are talented, a few costumes are genuinely lovely, and it snows on stage. So what, exactly, left this production feeling so empty? The production's struggles are threefold: actors in multiple roles; the stark, almost barren design; and the adaptation itself.

The cast is stocked with strong Equity actors who should have carried this production with ease. Mike Ryan is always a standout in whatever role he takes on, and his Ebenezer Scrooge had flashes of cruelty, humor, and even a few delightful fourth-wall breaks that momentarily sparked the room. I found myself wanting more Mike Ryan – not less. Although Scrooge is present throughout the show, the adaptation gives him surprisingly limited emotional space outside the opening scenes and the final transformation. It felt as though one of the company's strongest assets had been underused.

The remaining six-member ensemble – Eddie Lopez, Andrea Sweeney Blanco and Charlotte Boyce Munson among them – delivers solid performances across multiple roles. Julie James takes on seven different characters, including two of the four ghosts who visit Ebenezer on his long night of reckoning. It's an enormous workload, and James must have been exhausted changing costumes 10 or more times – the sheer volume of roles she had to handle worked against her. Instead of feeling dazzled by range, I grew weary of seeing the same energy reappear again and again.

And nowhere is this inconsistency more evident than in the ghost sequences, which should anchor the emotional and supernatural spine of the story but never quite land. James' Marley lacked the weight and terror of a tormented spirit – the chains never clanked and the moment never chilled. Soon after, seeing her again as the Ghost of Christmas Present offered no jubilant revelry or larger-than-life warmth. At the points in the story when the emotional temperature should spike, everything instead felt oddly muted.

More broadly, with so much narration and singing unrelated to the plot, the emotional throughline felt hollow. The Cratchit family, for instance, didn't read as poor or struggling, and I never felt the tenderness or urgency that typically makes their scenes so moving. Tiny Tim's storyline, which typically tugs at the heartstrings with ease, landed with a dull thud – the emotional impact simply wasn't there because the script and staging never created a world rich enough for us to care about the characters as we should. The tenderness, the fragility, the stakes – all missing. And because those emotional beats never landed, Scrooge's final transformation had nothing to push against.



Left to right: Charlotte Munson, Julie James, Joseph Pratt Lukefahr, Mike Ryan, Andrea Sweeney Blanco, Sigrid Breidenthal and Eddie Lopez in Santa Cruz Shakespeare's ongoing production of "A Christmas Carol." Credit: Kevin Lohman

Design-wise, the challenges deepen. Santa Cruz Shakespeare has long embraced minimalism, trusting its actors to carry the emotional load while the physical world remains spare. It's a model that works beautifully in the Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park, where the forest adds texture and magic. But here at the Veterans Memorial Building, that philosophy collapses. These actors cannot carry the story to the emotional depths it demands without a world around them – they need a set; they need props; they need something tangible to bring Christmas to life.

The bare two-story rotating spiral staircase – a familiar structure from the summer shows – sits onstage without a single decorative touch. No warmth, no festivity, no holiday glow. Several monologues were delivered in front of a plain red curtain. The Cratchits didn't even have a table for their Christmas dinner; they sat on the floor as if staging a picnic. Add unimaginative lighting, and the entire aesthetic drifted toward bargain-basement production values.

What makes this more frustrating is how easily some moments could have been improved. There is no reason this production couldn't have been enlivened with simple decorations – a wreath, a garland, a lantern, something to mark Christmas morning when Scrooge awakens reborn. Instead, his epiphany is met with visual emptiness. A bit of sparkle or warmth would have gone a long way.

Ultimately, however, the problem lies in the adaptation itself. Pasternak's script relies heavily on narration and the singing of traditional carols, often interrupting the action rather than enriching it. A couple of carols might have been charming; instead, the frequent singing stretched the 90 minutes into something that felt much longer. The reliance on exposition over dialogue grew tedious. Rather than being shown the magic, we were told about it.

Everyone knows the arc of "A Christmas Carol" – it's woven into our cultural DNA. The emotional payoff comes from walking Scrooge's journey with him – feeling the sting of his past, the ache of his present, and the dread of what's to come. But here, that journey was never built; there was no sense of being pulled into Scrooge's inner world. Without that connection, Scrooge's redemption simply doesn't land, and the conclusion has no emotional reward.

Overall, this minimalist "A Christmas Carol" is a lost opportunity.

All of this makes the experience surprising, because Santa Cruz Shakespeare has proved time and again that it can deliver theater of extraordinary craft and imagination, which is why this "Christmas Carol" feels like such an unexpected misstep.

Here's a message from the Ghost of Christmas Future – or perhaps the Ghost of Theatre Yet to Come: The heart of Dickens' story is timeless, but it needs atmosphere, depth and a sense of wonder to truly resonate. Holiday theater thrives on delight and visual charm. If this show is to become a holiday tradition, I look forward to seeing it evolve into something as imaginative and emotionally resonant as the company's summer work. Theater, after all, is about transformation – and perhaps that journey is still ahead. As it stands, this version may leave audiences wishing for more Christmas magic than it offers.

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