

# A Dickens of “A Christmas Carol”

**IT'S BECOMING ROUTINE** for Ventura's Rubicon Theatre to present extraordinary, vividly creative artistic wonders and this Holiday season is, happily, no exception.

Learning from the past, from Charles Dickens' classic, iconic novel *A Christmas Carol* (Dec. 1843), to various stage and screen adaptations, the Rubicon's Producing Artistic Director, Karyl Lynn Burns has crafted a rich, loving, tender, artful vision of that time, long ago, in England, when life was simpler than it is today – and as intricate and human.

## ALEX HENTELOFF THEATRE REVIEW

The same care and attention to detail was followed through with variations of sensitivity and bold and brash behavior and humor by Director Brian McDonald. The staging is clean, clear, and wondrously inventive; the characters were infused within the simple, yet stunning multilevel set of roughhewn lumber (Designed by Thomas S. Giamario), highlighted by lighting (Jeremy Pivnick) that sensually propelled the story forward.

The entire company of 24 appears onstage at the outset, an impressive visual feat, and “Jacob Marley” (Joe Spano, another sterling performance) begins his role as both character and narrator.

First the stage is cleared with a beautiful singing prologue by young Elijah Graham, then on to the shop, where we meet “Ebenezer Scrooge” (Peter Van Norden, a virtuoso performance).



Photo by Lew Abramson

It is the morning of Christmas Eve and he is grumpy and bad-tempered (with a most pliable face) and his poor, shivering employee, “Bob Cratchit” (Gary Clemmer, sweet, gentle) endures his miserable, penny-pinching behavior.

Marley, the ghost of Scrooge's departed partner, moves the tale swiftly along setting the scene, introducing characters, stopping to pet a dog (charming and funny); later telling the unwilling actor that he's now a suckling pig! (These are among many charming inclusions Burns has added, along with several carols sung at important moments to warm the heart.)

Railing at Cratchit that having Christmas Day off is picking the pocket of his employer, the poor dear soul agrees to come in early on Christmas day and they depart. (The joys and love in the Cratchit family is balanced against the dreary, miserly life of Scrooge.)

Arriving at home, Scrooge is met by Marley who says three ‘spirits’ will come to him this night, take heed.

First, the “Ghost of Christmas Past” (Sophie Massey, innocent and pure) takes Scrooge to scenes of his childhood to learn he had been a vulnerable and lonely child; then we meet his first boss, “Mr. Fesswig” (Dan Call, raucous, fun). It was a joyful time; then his true love leaves him explaining he will always choose money over all else. He returns to bed with these painful memories.

The “Ghost of Christmas Present” enters. He's a giant, Bacchus-like spirit, showing holiday joy everywhere: in the marketplace, at Scrooge's nephew Fred's home, and at the Cratchit's where ill and crippled young Tiny Tim lives. Kindness and love are everywhere, but Scrooge, after seeing two emaciated children named ‘hunger’ and ‘want’, must move on.

Finally the “Ghost of Christmas Future”, a tall shrouded figure on stilts, with bones sticking out for hands, arrives. It's a year later and the Ghost shows scenes of the death of a man who had no friends. Wanting to see some tenderness regarding death, he is shown the Cratchit family mourning the death of Tiny Tim. Heartbroken, Scrooge is shown his tombstone. He begs for a chance to change, to honor Christmas with all his heart!

Christmas morning, his wish is granted. He's a new man, cheerful, helpful, sharing life's bounty, and becoming a ‘mensch’ for the rest of his life!

This *Carol* had no wrong notes. Besides the already mentioned company members, Costumes by Abra Flores, Wigs by Danielle Irene White, Sound Design by Cricket S. Myers, and the Dialect Coaching by Tuffet Schmelzle added to an extreme success!

*Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol* is playing at the Rubicon Theatre in Ventura through Dec. 24th.

Tickets (\$30/\$64) are available online [www.rubicontheatre.org](http://www.rubicontheatre.org)

## Santa Barbara Choral Society

### Home for the Holidays

**A PIN DROP MIGHT BE HEARD** when the audience at the Lobero Theatre leans forward in anticipation during the Santa Barbara Choral Society's *Hallelujah! Project 3* celebrity reading of Clement Moore's iconic poem, “*Twas the Night Before Christmas*,” by Alison Sweeney.

“I don't remember a time I didn't know that poem [“*Twas the Night Before Christmas*],” related Sweeney, who is an accomplished actor, author, director, producer, and TV host.

One of the oldest community choirs in the nation, the Santa Barbara Choral Society, who will host the reading during their performance, has been presenting major works for chorus, soloists, and orchestra since 1948. *Hallelujah! Project 3*, will take place Saturday,

December 12th at 8pm and Sunday, December 13th at 3pm. The

**DANIEL KEPL MUSIC INTERVIEW** holiday-themed program by the 80 voices of the Choral Society, with full orchestra conducted by JoAnne Wasserman will include a special appearance by the Goleta Valley Junior High Show Choir, performances of Daniel Pinkham's *Christmas Cantata*, Randol Bass' *Symphony of Carols*, seasonal favorites by John Williams, John Rutter, Mack Wilberg, and Choral Society resident composer Stephen Dombek. The ubiquitous *Hallelujah Chorus* from Handel's *Messiah* will also be on the musical menu.

Moore's beloved poem, written in the early nineteenth century (1823), is brimming with vivid word imagery that captures the imagination still, nearly 200 years later. “It's so visual,” Sweeney remarked. “You think about how many things are relevant to the time. If you read something from the 80's you'd really hear the 80's in it. In some ways that could be true of this story, it's very period, and yet it manages to capture the imagination of everyone, young and old, no matter what time period you're in.”

Los Angeles born and raised, Sweeney has been a professional actress since the age of four.

“We read a lot together when I was growing up. I'm certain my mother read it to me when I was



Photo by Robert Trachtenberg

Alison Sweeney

young,” she related. “It's the first thing I thought about when I had my own kids. I wanted them to have that experience. It's the first Christmas story I read to them when they were babies, the first thing I thought about when getting ready for Christmas. It's always been so timeless and perfect.”

For over 20 years Sweeney played the character Sami Brady on *Days of Our Lives* and for nine years hosted the reality show, *The Biggest Loser*. These days she's active in making romcom (romantic comedy) movies for television, including starring and executive producing the *Murder She Baked* movie franchise for Hallmark Movies & Mysteries. She also directs (*General Hospital*) and is an author. Her third novel, *Opportunity Knocks*, will be published in April. “I was brought up with really active and outgoing parents. My dad is in finance, he is now an entrepreneur who is out there living his dream. My mother is a concert violinist and very involved with music. In fact, that is how I met my husband. His father and my mother worked together for 30 years making amazing soundtracks for feature films. Seeing both of my parents go out there and pursue their passions, pursue their dreams, and make them a career, has always inspired me,” she explained of her own career success and motivation.

Sweeney feels comfortable in her role reading, “*Twas the Night Before Christmas*.” “I'm a storyteller,” Sweeney explained. “I love getting an audience invested in what that story is, what that dream is, and how it is affecting them. However I can make that happen, is such a miracle for me. I love every bit of it.”

For Tickets (\$26.50-\$46.50/\$5 for kids 7-17) visit the Lobero Theatre box office, at [www.lobero.com](http://www.lobero.com), or call 963-0761.

**Daniel Kepl** has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews for Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.

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