Cabirro Stage’s ‘Scrooge’ brings spookiness to classic Christmas tale

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Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol” takes place in another world in another time—Victorian-era England, to be exact. But for contemporary audiences, the story of the longest night in the life of Ebenezer Scrooge is as familiar and beloved as just about any story dreamed up on this side of the Atlantic.

How has Scrooge’s tale become so deeply ingrained in the American psyche? First off, many if not most of the Christmas traditions we celebrate today are rooted in Victorian England (figgy pudding, anyone?). More importantly, no writer has apparently been able to capture the redemptive power of the holiday season more vividly than Dickens.

This is why Cabirro Stage is bringing back “Scrooge”—the staged musical version of “A Christmas Carol”—for a second straight year. Audiences are not tired of hearing the story. Still, last year’s production was essentially a new animal, an introduction to the gorgeous new Crocker Theater on the Cabirro College campus and Cabirro Stage’s high-profile foray into the holiday season.

This year, that newness isn’t an issue.

“It was made clear to me that this would be a remount of last year’s production,” said returning director Andrew Ceglio. “But my hands were not tied creatively. So we are doing some different things.”

Ceglio said that this year he wants to up the spooky factor by focusing on the famous trio of ghosts who visit mean old Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Eve by building suspense and creating foreshadowing. He’ll also be showcasing a new Scrooge. Equity actor Tony Panighetti, an longtime Bay Area theater professional, will be last outing with Cabirro Stage was featured roles in some Like It Hot (2001) and Annie Get Your Gun (2005).

There are only six cast members returning from last year’s show. “It’s almost a completely different production,” Ceglio said.

As director, Ceglio wants to underscore the story’s redemptive arc, and push the audience to meditate on the moral dimensions of the play. Does Scrooge transform from a heartless, miserly old tightwad into a joyful soul because he wants to be good, or merely because he wants to escape the punishment of hell?

“It’s tough to convey,” said Ceglio.

“Scrooge gets lots of close calls and he gets to see all the horrible things that the future can hold if he doesn’t change. Does he turn around only because he doesn’t want to burn for eternity?”

Panighetti takes on a role that has become a kind of soup-to-nuts showcase of the actor’s craft. Scrooge is called upon to be mean, cruel, nasally, joyful, just about every emotion in the spectrum.

“There’s nothing he doesn’t go through.”

Ceglio said that one of his production’s major innovations is the casting of women in all three “spirit” roles. The Spirit of Christmas Past is often cast as female, but rarely is Christmas Present, an often burly male inspired by the Victorian image of Father Christmas. Ceglio said that he was inspired to cast a woman in the role due to Dickens’ own background and his strong dependence on women in his life.

The scariest creature in “Scrooge” is, and always has been, the Spirit of Christmas Yet To Come, often a silent cloaked figure who stands quietly by and lets Scrooge get carried away with his fears. Even that role in this production is identically female.

“She is really creepy,” said Ceglio.

JANA MARCUS/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO
Tony Panighetti stars as the iconic protagonist in “Scrooge,” Cabirro Stage’s newest production.