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Holiday shows offer a mix of naughty and nice

LINDSAY CHRISTIANS | The Capital Times | lchristians@madison.com Dec 2, 2010



Promotional Photo

"The Santaland Diaries" presented by the Bricks Theatre will be showing at the Barrymore Theatre.

For the performing arts, the holidays are a time to return to the classics. Ballet companies can make enough money presenting "The Nutcracker" to support more daring work, and "A Christmas Carol" draws record crowds to the Capitol Theater every December.

But this year, local theater and dance companies are creating new traditions. Children's Theater of Madison is exchanging "Carol" for "A Wonderful Life," a musical version of the classic Frank Capra movie. Li Chiao-Ping Dance presents an eclectic new show called "The Knotcracker" with original music and choreography, and Madison Ballet's "Nutcracker" has its biggest cast ever.

While not an exhaustive list, here are a multitude of ways to celebrate the holidays and support local arts, with one entertaining evening after another.

Madison Symphony Orchestra Christmas Spectacular

Soprano Angela Brown will join the Madison Symphony Orchestra for the annual Christmas Spectacular, when maestro John DeMain crowds the stage with three choirs: the Madison Symphony Chorus, Madison Youth Choirs and the Mt. Zion Gospel Choir.

Brown debuted as "Aida" at the Metropolitan Opera in 2004 and now brings an educational program, "Opera from a Sistah's Point of View," to schools around the country. She'll give that performance at Wright Middle School on Thursday, Dec. 2.

The Spectacular program includes John Rutter's "Star Carol," "Ave Maria," Richard Hynson's "Upon this Night" and popular holiday fare, like "Deck the Halls," "Silver Bells" and "The Christmas Song."

Madison Symphony Orchestra Christmas Spectacular

Where: Overture Hall, Overture Center, 201 State St.

When: Friday, Dec. 3, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, Dec. 4, 8 p.m.; Sunday, Dec. 5, 2:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$15.50-\$75.50

Info: <http://madisonsymphony.org>; 258-4141

"The Knotcracker"

Don't expect any sugarplums or Russian music at this newest entry in holiday dance. "The Knotcracker" is the story of Little Miss Steps, a young girl "trying to solve a puzzle without falling to pieces."

The new 90-minute work features an original score by music director Matan Rubinstein and the Weather Duo (Patrick Reinholtz on cello and Ben Willis on bass). Members of Li Chiao-Ping's class for older adults at the Madison Senior Center will participate, as will members of the Zhong Yi Kung Fu Association.

Li said she wanted to create something as an alternative to "The Nutcracker," which she defined as emerging from a Christian tradition. She said she's "interested in illuminating the power and value of the individual within the community."

And that includes some fun costumes.

"We've got swim flippers," said Kelly Rupp, Li's assistant. "It's going to be crazy."

"The Knotcracker" presented by Li Chiao-Ping Dance

Where: Promenade Hall, Overture Hall, 201 State St.

When: Friday, Dec. 3, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, Dec. 4, 2 and 7:30 p.m.; Sunday, Dec. 5, 2 p.m.

Tickets: \$17 for adults, \$12 for students and seniors

Info:

<http://overturecenter.com/production/knotcracker>

"Nutcracker Fantasy"

Sascha Radetsky and Stella Abrera return this year for Dance Wisconsin's annual "Nutcracker Fantasy," a twist on the classic ballet that includes a trip through a toy shop and a journey to the Land of Poinsettias.

Characters include a Jack in the Box, soldiers, ballerina dolls, a teddy bear and of course, a Nutcracker who transforms into a dashing cavalier. In 2009, reviewer Karyn Saemann called the "Fantasy" an "intensely hometown show that warms the heart and ushers in the holiday spirit."

"Nutcracker Fantasy" presented by Dance Wisconsin

Where: Wisconsin Union Theater, 800 Langdon St.

When: Saturday, Dec. 4, 2 and 7:30 p.m., Sunday, Dec. 5, 2 p.m.

Tickets: \$10-\$32, discounts for students, seniors and children

Info: <http://dancewisconsin.com>, 262-2201

"A Christmas Carol"

Madison Theatre Guild has taken Dickens' venerable holiday ghost story and remade it as a radio play, presented on three consecutive Saturdays in December.

Norman Gilliland, host of "Old Time Radio Drama" on Wisconsin Public Radio (970 AM or 90.9 FM), will give a pre-show talk about the history of radio theater before some of the performances. The play will be staged as though broadcast for the radio, though it will not be.

"It's still a theatrical script," said director Catie O'Donnell. "It's going to translate and make an interesting piece of theater for people to watch."

"A Christmas Carol" presented by Madison Theatre Guild

Where: The Bartell Theatre, 113 E. Mifflin St.

When: Saturdays, Dec. 4-18, 3 p.m.

Tickets: \$15, \$10 for students under 18

Info: <http://madisontheatreguild.org/a-christmas-carol>

"The Santaland Diaries"

The Bricks Theatre reprises its 2009 Brink Lounge run of the comedy "The Santaland Diaries" with four shows at the Barrymore Theatre.

Joe Mantello adapted David Sedaris' stories about his adventures as an elf at Macy's SantaLand into a one-man play in 1996. R. Peter Hunt, a well-known Madison actor, stars as Crumpet, who gradually morphs into Blisters as rude customers, idiotic co-workers and the demeaning nature of his job grind him down.

Bricks Theatre is sponsored by Yahara Bay Distillers, so come early for a holiday cocktail in the lobby. Blisters would approve.

"The Santaland Diaries"

Where: Barrymore Theatre, 2090 Atwood Ave.

When: Thursday, Dec. 9, 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday, Dec. 10-11, 8 p.m.; Sunday, Dec. 12, 5 p.m.

Tickets: \$15 in advance, \$20 at the door

Info: <http://barrymorelive.com>">barrymorelive.com,
<http://thebrickstheatre.com>">thebrickstheatre.com, 241-8633

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"A Wonderful Life"

The nostalgia-driven story of George Bailey, a frustrated young man who needs an angel to show him that his life has value, has made Frank Capra's 1946 film "It's A Wonderful Life" a holiday classic.

This season, Children's Theater of Madison presents a musical version of the story created by Sheldon Harnick, the lyricist behind "Fiddler on the Roof," and Joe Raposo, famous for his work with the Sesame Street Muppets.

"We know it's a risk, but it's worth it," CTM artistic director Roseann Sheridan said in May when the company announced the decision to drop its usual holiday offering. "'Christmas Carol' has its own following. We'd like to bring together audiences that come every year ... as well as those who might be interested in a musical and something new."

"A Wonderful Life" presented by Children's Theater of Madison

Where: Capitol Theater, Overture Center, 201 State St.

When: Dec. 10-23 (see website for exact dates and times)

Tickets: \$12-\$35

Info: <http://ctmtheater.org/plays/a-wonderful-life>">ctmtheater.org/plays/a-wonderful-life

"The Nutcracker"

One of Madison's most lavish productions, with lush storybook sets, Tchaikovsky's lively score, and a professional corps of dancers, Madison Ballet's "The Nutcracker" is a long-standing holiday tradition.

W. Earle Smith, Madison Ballet artistic director, created the choreography and recently tweaked the story so that Clara "grows up" after the Nutcracker transforms into a prince. This year's production has the largest cast ever at Overture Center.

"The dance community is getting larger," Smith wrote in an e-mail. "More students are enrolled in dance classes around Dane County. I feel the number of students has increased due to 'So You Think You Can Dance' and 'Dancing with the Stars.'"

The ballet will have its popular Christmas Eve matinee performance this year, with five performances total.

"The Nutcracker" presented by Madison Ballet

Where: Overture Hall, Overture Center, 201 State St.

When: Dec. 18-26 (see website for exact dates and times)

Tickets: \$9-\$59

Info: <http://overturecenter.com/production/the-nutcracker> > overturecenter.com/production/the-nutcracker, madisonballet.org, 258-4141

And there's more: the Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra performs "The Messiah" on Friday, Dec. 10, at Blackhawk Church in Middleton; Overture will host a holiday-themed show from the comedy troupe Second City on Saturday, Dec. 11, and the new Middleton Community Orchestra gives a holiday performance on Wednesday, Dec. 22.

See this week's Around the Bubbler on page 4 and check out <http://calendar.madison.com/77> > calendar.madison.com/77 for a full listing of holiday events.

[Editor's note: An earlier version of this story neglected to list Matan Rubinstein as music director of "The Knotcracker." He will also provide some of the original music for the show.]



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