

~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

THT weaves historical perspective into Christmas musical celebration in 'A Civil War Christmas'

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Tom Reilly and Terrance Smith Photo Stu Selland

Town Hall Theatre ends 2017 with an American musical celebration – an ambitious and vast epic story set on Christmas Eve in 1864, on a very cold Civil War night. During that one night, a nation divided as never before is portrayed through the lives of historical figures and simple Americans, struggling with the difficult times and transcended by the miracle of Christmas, whether they believe or not. Through songs and narratives, the 50 characters played by 14 actors in “A Civil War Christmas” take the spectators on a journey of human struggle and hope.

The audience is taken back to 1864, in Washington D.C., in the White House with President Lincoln and his wife preparing for Christmas despite the burden of responsibilities, in the cold street of the capital city where a black woman who escaped slavery desperately searches for her daughter, with Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant hunkered down with their exhausted troops, on the banks of the Potomac River where a man seeks vengeance and a kid wants to become a man and a hero.

Fifty different characters paint the picture of that harsh night in the middle of war. The 14 actors comprising the cast constantly change costume, shift from supplying contextual commentaries, to embodying one of the many unique characters whose stories the audience follows. Costumes here are key: a top hat turns a commoner into Lincoln, a wide dress and a shawl transform a simple woman into the First Lady. The Christmas songs, the period hymns and marches

crimp each scene. The actors act, dance, some play a musical instrument, and they sing. There are some very solid and beautiful voices in the show; Alicia von Kugelgen sings with the purity of an opera singer.

Susan Evans, THT artistic director, asked Dawn Monique Williams to direct the play. She had never seen the play by Pulitzer Prize winner Paula Vogel before, but knew of it and was very interested in creating entertainment that would also provide food for thought. She says that this is a Christmas play, but not full of fluff, and that even if there is laughter there is also gravity. She liked that the play mixes real historical figures with fictional characters that are the conflation of several ordinary people of the time. Williams, who also was a singer, loved the musical aspect of the play, the variety and beauty of the songs.

The director says that it is particularly relevant to create this play at a time when the country is so polarized. The night this reporter went to the theater to see a final rehearsal, filmmaker Eric Metzger had come to film THT’s adventure. He is working on a documentary about 2017 in America, a year that he sees as a moment in history when this country has been more divided than ever. He sees this play as representative of our times of separation, but with the possibility of still reaching out to each other.

Williams says that she believes in Sankofa, a Ghanaian word meaning “go back and get it.” She says that as we move forward in time, we carry our cultural memory, and

that the lessons of our past that we transport into the future can bring hope. The play shows us that in a moment of time we can be united.

The play is a family show that will entertain all ages. The Civil War is studied in the fourth grade, so children 9 years old and older will understand most out of the show.

“A Civil War Christmas” will play at Town Hall Theatre from Nov. 30 to Dec. 16. For details and tickets, visit www.townhalltheatre.com.

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XOXO, Annie

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