

Vpstart Crow flies away from its holiday standard
By:Valerie Walker
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The discount Halloween candy still lingers on the shelves of the local Safeway, and dreams of holiday turkey are only beginning to stir in our minds, but the holiday show has already taken the stage at the Cramer Center in Manassas.

After an eight-year tradition of staging "A Christmas Carol," director Christine D. Lange chose this year to part with the past.

This year's selection, "An O. Henry Christmas," weaves elements of the life of O. Henry, a well-known American author, with his most famous short stories.

Of her selection, Lange wrote in the program, "I was impressed with how closely [author] Howard Burman kept to the original stories using much of O. Henry's description and dialogue, even staying true to O. Henry's signature twist at the end of the story."

Sitting in the audience, waiting for the play to begin, however, we were struck by the un-Christmas-like character of the stage.

The scene is set in a rail yard on the outskirts of New York City. It's Christmas Eve in 1893. The set, suggesting the dirt and grime of the Big Apple at the height of the Industrial Age, is blackish and gloomy and as the cast takes the stage, they fit right in with the gloom.

What else would you expect? This is a group of hobos huddling against the cold and sipping broth for a holiday dinner. Still, it would have been nice if the cast might have done a collective shot of Red Bull before taking the stage. Their lack of energy in the first half hour, coupled with the warmth of the theater and the dim light on the stage made it a battle to remain focused on the story line, which goes like this:

Four of the hobos who normally live in the rail yard are tending to Marguerite (Kathryn Kelly), a young girl who has lost her will to live. Another member of the band, Grover (Ted Ballard), is a former doctor who diagnoses Marguerite's affliction.

Agnes (Carolyn Cameron) devotes herself to patting Marguerite's head while Hal (Mike King) portrays alcoholism by trying not to stagger off the stage. Dinty (Jonathan Marget) is the old curmudgeon - whose volume and intonation bear an unfortunate resemblance to Austin Powers emerging from the deep-freeze (think, "I'm having trouble controlling THE VOLUME OF MY VOICE!").

Into this mix of souls wanders O.P. (Joseph Thornhill), the man who represents author O. Henry. O.P. strikes a deal with the hobos: a bowl of broth in exchange for an evening of cheerful Christmas stories.

As the story unfolds, we realize that O.P. is running from the law, much as O. Henry himself once fled around the Americas to escape embezzlement charges. The author eventually served his time, and over the course of his life, he published a total of 300 stories, including "The Last Leaf" and "The Gift of the Magi," two of the stories woven into this play.

The best features about this play are that it is short at only 90 minutes and that it is not far away. The greatest frustration is that, buried somewhere deep within this show, there is a script that Howard Burman took the time to write and that under that script are some classic American short stories.

It is possible that it all could have been very heartwarming and Christmas-spirit-like but all that love was lost under stumbled lines, low energy, and insufficient lighting.

There is still time for this production to energize itself before the end of the run, but in the meantime, visit the snack bar to stock up on caffeinated beverages.

An O. Henry Christmas runs through Nov. 18 at the Cramer Center, 9008 Center St. in Manassas. Show times are Friday and Saturday nights at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$20 for adults and \$15 for students and seniors. For more information, visit www.vpstartcrow.com.