

REVIEW: "An O' Henry Christmas"

By MARY JORDAN

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Discarded citizens from disparate backgrounds gather at an abandoned railway spur on a cold night in 1893.

This doesn't sound like it will make for a heartwarming evening of entertainment, however, Vpstart Crow's "An O' Henry Christmas" manages to be just that.

The story centers on six regulars who have congregated for warmth, the meager broth they've scraped together and some companionship on Christmas Eve.

Enter the mysterious stranger, who offers a trade: a story or two for dinner. It's obvious that he's hiding something, and each appearance of the local policeman sends him running until the coast is clear

The play is based on the life and stories of William Sydney Porter, better known as O' Henry, and uses a few of his best short works to good effect.

The set is simple but evocative, making marvelous visual use of an abandoned railroad car and a brick wall separating our seven subjects from the larger city beyond.

The actors generally hold their own with the script, although there are a few missteps. Particularly good are Ted Ballard's Grover, with his understated and natural delivery, and Janet Devine Smith, whose high-pitched voice is a perfect complement to the street-smart, tough Fran. Joseph Thornhill as O.P. does a fine job of maintaining a soft southern accent throughout, and seems comfortable in the role of leading the evening's amusement.

Carolyn Cameron's accent is explained early in the show, and she pulls off the innocence of coming from a farm while trying to be a catalyst to the others to help Kathryn Kelly's Marguerite overcome her desperate malaise.

The other three actors' accents were jarring, given that the play is set in New York, and all three characters appear to hail from the city. Greg Crowe's Guido has not hint of a New York or Italian accent. However, Crowe has a few nice moments that seem to enlarge a rather small part.

Mike King's Hal also has a southern-tinged accent (the sole exception being his mention of having attended "Havahd"), but he has a nice rapport with the other characters.

Jonathan Marget's Dinty barks everything in a rather staccato monotone. This delivery works once or twice to play up some of the more humorous moments of the show, but was mainly frustrating.

It is important that Dinty be cynical and tough, but this could have been achieved in other ways. There is one small scene with Marguerite that hints at some softness in Dinty, but it never actually manifests on stage.

The more technical elements of the show are handled nicely, with the lighting changing evenly from evening to early morning. There are slight costuming issues, although the clothes are period appropriate and tattered.

This is a story about street people, but none of their clothes are dirty and some even show the marks of having been folded recently.

The actors maintain a nice sense of cold throughout the show, especially when dealing with dishware and their fire barrel. Because the show runs only 90 minutes, there is no intermission, but concessions are allowed in the theater for this production.

This is not a show for small children; there is no profanity or violence, but the dialogue can be tricky, and the pace is too slow to keep little ones entertained. However, the script is well written and offers humor, poignancy and a touch of mystery.

Director Christine D. Lange has staged a touching story and keeps the audience interested and invested in the characters. All in all, I would highly recommend this as a solid pre-holiday night out.

"An O'Henry Christmas" runs Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 and 7:30 p.m. this weekend at Cramer Center, 9009 Center St. in Manassas. Tickets cost \$20, \$15 for students and seniors, military and county employees. For more information go to www.vpstartcrow.com.

Mary Jordan has been active in local theatre since 1992.