

'An O. Henry Christmas'

Vpstart Crow kicks off holiday season with uplifting story

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For a break from Scrooge this year, try O. Henry.

"An O. Henry Christmas," the latest from Vpstart Crow Productions, opens Friday at the Cramer Center. (There's also a pay-what-you-can preview tonight, at 8 p.m.)

The play, by Howard Burman, is based on classic O. Henry stories, including "The Gift of the Magi." O. Henry was the pen name of William Sidney Porter, who was known for his turn-of-the-century short stories. "An O. Henry Christmas" takes place in the late 19th century.

There are eight cast members and the play is an hour and a half long, without an intermission.

The story is about a homeless man, O.P. (O. Henry), looking for food on Christmas Eve. He finds a group of homeless people huddled together and swaps them stories for food.

"He gets them to reenact the stories," said Melissa Jo York-Tilley, 33, of Herndon, the production manager and costume designer.

Joseph Thornhill, 26, of Falls Church, plays O.P.

"He's sort of homeless for his own reasons," said Thornhill, an administrative assistant. "He's trying to find a sense of peace on Christmas Eve when he's really far away from those he loves... It's an interesting twist on street theater. We reenact the stories as I narrate them."

Thornhill won't go too deep into it, but he's had homeless friends, which he said helped him prepare for the role.

"I've learned where this puts people mentally," said Thornhill, who has been acting professionally for two years.

He participated in last year's local 48 Hour Film Project. The resulting short film, "Imaginary Joe," is on youtube.com. Thornhill will also appear as an extra in "National Treasure: Book of Secrets," out later this year.

"So was every actor in the Washington area," said Thornhill, adding that he appears in a scene on a bike behind Nicholas Cage and Harvey Keitel.

"An O. Henry Christmas" marks Thornhill's debut with Vpstart Crow.

"During Christmas a lot of theaters will do 'A Christmas Carol'," said Thornhill. "This is kind of a different thing."

He added that unlike the redemptive moral of Charles Dickens' classic, "An O. Henry Christmas" is more about the meaning of community and friendship.

"It's an equally important message," said Thornhill.

York-Tilley said the play takes place in an alley behind a train station in New York.

"They're all bums on the streets of New York," said

York-Tilley. "It's just people trying to keep warm on the streets of New York City on Christmas Eve."

Except for one police officer character, everyone is layered and bundled in ratted jackets. The set is a box car and wall of a cityscape. The actors are centered around an oil drum, sitting on crates.

"It's a basic set, but it looks really good," said York-Tilley. "It's a very powerful, uplifting story."

She added that Vpstart moved its Christmas production earlier in the year because the Cramer Center will produce "A Christmas Carol" closer to the December holiday.

Carolyn Cameron of Gainesville plays Agnes, a high-spirited, optimistic homeless woman.

"Agnes is playing nurse to an ailing prostitute, Marguerite," said Cameron. "[Marguerite] has a fever. It doesn't really say what's wrong with her... Agnes has made it her mission to see that Marguerite is not going to die."

Cameron added that the play alludes to a "quack doctor" who, it can be inferred, botched an abortion. But one of the other homeless characters, Grover, is a doctor who lost his license. Grover tells the other characters that it's up to Marguerite to decide if she has the will to live.

"It's not about luck or possessions or things you have," said Cameron. "Happiness is a choice."

Cameron previously appeared with Vpstart Crow Productions as the fiancée in "The Ghost Sonata," earlier this year.

"This is a really good cast," said Cameron. "I just think that whoever comes to see the show, they'll be impressed."

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