

The 99-Seat Beat: A twist on Dickens, a 'Latina Christmas Special' and more

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By Philip Brandes



This week in L.A.'s small-theater scene, we have a twist on a holiday classic, some real-life portraits shown onstage and more. Here's why we're keen on the Independent Shakespeare Company's "A Christmas Carol With Charles Dickens," 24th Street Theatre's "Pang!," the Latino Theatre Company's "The Latina Christmas Special" and Fountain Theatre's "A Piece of My Mind."

1. ISC's 'Christmas Carol With Dickens'

The essentials: In a refreshing departure from traditional adaptations of a classic, Independent Shakespeare Company's "A Christmas Carol With Charles Dickens" inventively shifts the focus to its author, whose secondary career as an actor included popular solo performances of his yuletide novella. Drawing on the script Dickens originally adapted for this purpose, ISC co-founder David Melville re-creates one of those performances, wittily engaging the audience as Dickens even as he conjures up the beloved story.

Why this? Though best known for his colorful performances in Griffith Park Free Shakespeare Festival productions, Melville has honed the character of Dickens over more than a decade. (Local audiences may recall his Dickens hilariously debating other luminary scribes from the afterlife in the 2014 world premiere of Scott Carter's "The Gospel According to Thomas Jefferson, Charles Dickens and Count Leo Tolstoy: Discord.")

Details: An Independent Shakespeare Company production at Independent Studio, Atwater Crossing Arts and Innovation Complex, 3191 Casitas Ave., Atwater Village. Begins Thursday, ends Dec. 23. Performances 7:30 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, plus 2 p.m. Dec. 23; dark Dec. 16. \$25-\$35. (818) 710-6306, www.iscla.org



David Melville in Independent Shakespeare Company's "A Christmas Carol With Charles Dickens" Mike Ditz

2. 'Pang!' at 24th Street Theatre

The essentials: Hunger for food, shelter and understanding links three portraits of life below the poverty line, drawn from interviews and collaborations with American families selected from South L.A., Miami and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. In the format of an old-time radio broadcast performed before a live studio audience, creator Dan Froot and his ensemble have adapted these stories using narrative voices, music and sound effects infused with authentic oral history (think "War of the Worlds" meets "Nickel and Dimed").

Why this? As in past co-productions with 24th Street Theatre, Froot's efforts to raise awareness, decrease stigma and promote cross-class dialogue are an ideal fit for the company's community outreach mission. The L.A. sequence, in which a struggling family falls victim to an unscrupulous mortgage loan adjuster, has particular resonance.

Details: 24th Street Theatre, 1117 W. 24th St., Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday. \$24. (213) 745-6516, www.24thstreet.org.



At the microphones, from left: Donna Simone Johnson, Christopher Rivas and Natalie Camunas. In back: Dan Froot, left, and Robert Een. Will O'Loughlin

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3. 'Latina Christmas' at LATC

The essentials: What began as autobiographical monologues by comedians Diana Yanez, Maria Russell and Sandra Valls have been shaped by director Geoffrey Rivas into “The Latina Christmas Special,” a full-fledged theatrical celebration of Christmas and cultural diversity. The performers recount and vividly enact episodes — funny, sad and heartwarming — drawn from their family bonds, squabbles and scandals.

Why this? A Times Critic’s Choice in 2015, the show mines the performers’ very different backgrounds to dispel stereotypes of monolithic Latin culture. Yanez (Margaret Cho’s “The Sensuous Woman”) is a Miami-born Cuban American; Valls (Showtime’s “The Latin Divas of Comedy”) is a native Texas Mexican American; and Russell (“Teen Wolf,” “Lights Out”) is the daughter of “an over-dedicated Mexican mother and compliant Lithuanian father.”

Details: A Latino Theater Company production at Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 S. Spring St., Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays, through Jan. 7. Also 8 p.m. Dec. 18, Dec. 21 and Jan. 4; dark Dec. 25 and Jan. 1. \$32-\$37. (866) 811-4111, www.thelatc.org

4. 'A Piece of My Mind' at the Fountain



Eric Barr in "A Piece of My Mind" Peter Phun

The essentials: Acting and directing teacher Eric Barr reprises his inspirational solo performance chronicling the challenges he faced after a series of strokes left him unable to speak or use his left side. Now a professor emeritus of theater at UC Riverside, Barr presents his story as “a journey from near-death to recovery and reinvention, a celebration of life and the human spirit.”

Why this? This one-night performance is presented by the Fountain Theatre as a benefit for veteran L.A. theater director Dan Bonnell, who faces a difficult rehabilitation of his own after a brain aneurysm. Bonnell has helmed productions at many of L.A.'s best 99-seat theater companies and enjoys respect and affection throughout the theater community. Barr's show is a fitting vessel of hope and generosity.

Details: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., L.A. 8 p.m. Dec. 16. \$50. (323) 663-1525, www.FountainTheatre.com

[For the record, Dec. 1: A previous version of this post said that "Pang!" at 24th Street Theatre in L.A. would run 8 p.m. Friday and end Saturday; it runs 8 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 2, and 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 3.]

The 99-Seat Beat appears every Friday. Our team of reviewers — people with more than 75 years of combined experience tracking local theater — shortlist current offerings at 99-seat theaters and other smaller venues. Some (but not all) recommendations are shows we've seen; others have caught our attention because of the track record of the company, playwright, director or cast. You can find more comprehensive theater listings posted every Sunday at latimes.com/arts.