

Theatre-Go-Round celebrates the holidays in song and dance

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With lingering summer-like temperatures, it's hard to believe that the calendar year is ending and we are in the midst of a gala holiday season. But there is no better way to get into the true spirit of Christmas and New Year's Eve than by enjoying two Theatre-Go-Round Dinner Theatre holiday productions.

And the audience certainly did enjoy the opening night performance of "Holly Leaves & Christmas Trees," which recently began its run that will last through Dec. 27. This is a show with more brilliant facets than a well-cut diamond.

There is all the nostalgia of memorable Christmases past as well as heretofore unknown songs, which linger with a warm afterglow. And there is also Christmas with "attitude" and finger-snapping edginess as long-favored holiday tunes like "Deck the Halls" are given entirely new tempos and arrangements, set to some snappy choreography. And while the warmth of the presentation was off the charts, the true gift of this holiday show is the way it reminds us of all that is still good and right in the world. Santa himself could not have brought a better present.

That holiday spirit continues right up to the end of 2015 with a special New Year's Eve show "Turn the Beat Around," which showcases the top hits of the 1970s. It is named in honor of the song made famous by Vero Beach hotelier Gloria Estefan, a recent recipient, with her husband Emilio, of the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Can't miss

If there is one thing that Theatre-Go-Round's artistic director and founder Jon Putzke has learned in a four-decade career in theater, it's that he dare not omit a holiday show for local audiences.

Several seasons ago - assuming that people were just too busy this time of year to attend a show - Putzke dropped the Christmas production from the TGR repertoire. Bad mistake. He heard quite emphatically from disappointed patrons that they wanted and looked forward to ringing in the holiday season with one of his special musical revues. Due to patron demand, this year's Christmas offering has added Friday performances, with dinner served at 6:30 p.m. and the show at 8 p.m.

Considered one of TGR's mainstay productions, this year's show has a New York-centered theme and features the talents of Christmas "angels" Eleanor Dixon, Beth McKenzie-Shestak, Shamara Turner and Caitlin Harris, as well as musical direction by Gregory Harris, sound by John Sutherland and choreography by McKenzie-Shestak. The four-part harmonies as well as solo numbers are nothing less than heavenly.

The production conjures up images of New York City's Rockefeller Center and its renowned tree lighting ceremonies. Also sprinkled like snowflakes and glittery tinsel throughout the show are some interesting facts and trivia about those Christmas tree festivities, which got a modest start in 1931, when workers building Rockefeller Center bought a balsam fir tree and decorated it. The rest, as they say, is history. This year's tree stands 78-feet high, weighs 10 tons and will, after the holidays, be milled into wooden boards to build homes by Habitat for Humanity.

New favorites

The show includes holiday standards such as "Sleigh Ride" and "Do You Hear What I Hear." But in typical Putzke/TGR style, there are also intriguing, lesser-known tunes including "Christmas in Dixie" and "Heirlooms," not to mention the show's title piece "Holly Leaves & Christmas Trees." But do keep a hanky handy, because songs including "'Til the Season Comes 'Round Again" will tug strongly at your heartstrings and perhaps serve as a reminder to cherish each holiday get-together with loved ones.

During final rehearsals for the show, Putzke took a much-needed break to share some thoughts about his cast and show. "These ladies are running wild with it. This show has such a good feeling about it and the songs are done with fresh and new arrangements yet have all the flavors of a traditional Christmas show," Putzke said.