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How the Grinch Stole Christmas

Children's Theatre Company

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How the Grinch Stole Christmas is back, filling Children's Theatre Company's annual slot with abundant warmth, good will and humor. Dr. Seuss' classic tale of misanthropy and redemption is simple enough for very young children to understand, yet with truth and wisdom enough to provide uplift to the most holiday-adverse adults.

This is the musical's eighth mounting at Children's Theatre since it premiered in 1994, its adaption authorized by the estate of Dr. Seuss, aka Theodor S. Geisel (it also appeared on Broadway in 2006 and in 2007). The mean, green Grinch, his eager-to-please dog Max, and the joyful community of Whoville were last seen here in 2014, and in three years, thousands of newly minted young children are ready for their first exposure to this marvelous holiday entertainment. For those (like myself) who have had the pleasure of past viewings, a booster dose of Seuss' imagination and good will can do nothing but improve one's spirits.

**Reed Sigmund and Mabel Weismann***Photo by Kaitlin Randolph*

In the unlikely event you hadn't heard, the Grinch is a monstrous grouch who is fed up with the happy voices of Christmas singing rising up to his lair on a mountain top and the visions of holiday happiness they carry. He plots to steal Christmas, lock, stock and barrel, from the Whos, the kind and affectionate inhabitants of Whoville. Dressed as Santa, with his beleaguered dog Max sporting a reindeer antler, the Grinch creeps into the Whos' homes on

Christmas Eve, stealing everything that makes their holiday merry—trees and tinsel, food for their feast, presents, the log from their fire. The one thing though, he is unable to steal is the inner joy and beauty of Christmas and within each Who's heart. Christmas comes to Whoville after all, and the Grinch is transformed by the true meaning of the holiday.

The illustrated children's book is quite complete. However, the stage musical is able to embellish the story, giving personality to several Whos (only one, Cindy-Lou, who encounters the Grinch in his guise as Santa, is named in the book), as well as offering insights into the Grinch's hatred of all things noel. This includes a poignant expansion of the Grinch's scene with Cindy-Lou Who, who is greatly distressed to learn that "Santa" always spends Christmas alone. The entire story is framed as the reminiscence of Max, now and old dog, returned to visit the Grinch cave and the streets of Whoville one last time.

There is a reason the estate of Dr. Seuss entrusted this work to Children's Theater Company. Their exquisite care and inventiveness transform every bit of whimsy and joy off the pages of the book and onto the stage, in costumes (David Kay Mickelsen), sets (Tom Butsch), and lighting (Nancy Schertler), the entire production brightly honed under Peter C. Brosius' direction. Timothy Mason's score provides tuneful enough songs that embellish the story's cheer and color. Standouts include the Whos' ode to the holiday, "Who Likes Christmas?" and the Grinch's big, splashy number, "One of a Kind," in which he revels in his uniquely nefarious nature. There is also a frenzied number that shows Christmas shopping as a kind of addiction, which, though clever, actually kind of supports the Grinch's point of view. Cindy-Lou is given a lovely solo, in which she plants seeds of doubt within Grinch about his professed preference for solitude.

As always, Children's Theatre Company has cast their show with wonderfully game, talented performers. Company member Reed Sigmund is back as a loveably horrible Grinch, a part that he owns for as long as he wants it. His broad-stroked, hammy nastiness, along with his limber movements all over the stage and through the audience, are a treasure. Last time around, young Natalie Tran played Cindy-Lou Who, and at the time I advised audiences to keep an eye on her. She has been busy since then, at Children's Theatre as well as a host of other local stages, including the Guthrie, the Ordway, Artistry and Theatre Latté Da. She is growing up and now appears as Young Max, totally persuasive in conveying the pooch's unbridled optimism and playfulness.

Taking Tran's former spot as Cindy-Lou Who is Mabel Weismann, herself already a veteran with appearances at CTC, the Guthrie, the Ordway and Stages Theatre Company. Her acting and singing are first rate, performed with confidence and conviction. Dean Holt, another long-time CTC company member, plays Old Max, opening the show with the warmth and wisdom of his years, a grandparent's presence to ease any young theatergoer's worries about facing the actual Grinch. The rest of the cast are all having a great time, which they project on to their audience, with Sara Ochs in particular making the most of her turn as Grandma Who.

The musical is divided into two 45-minute acts, bright, funny and important enough to the youngest theatergoers to hold their interest for that length of time. Of course, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is known to many by the 1966 animated cartoon featuring the indelible voice of Boris Karloff, and that is a terrific rendition in its own right. CTC's original production borrows just one song from that version, the iconic "You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch," and maintains its droll sensibility.

Linda Talcott Lee's choreography provides joyful dancing, of the kind that brings to mind community holiday celebration, and music director Victor Zupanc, a fixture at CTC, ably leads the nine-member orchestra, heavy on woodwinds and without any brass, contributing to the tone of warmth and whimsy that pervades the show.

For those who believe nothing is better than live performance, and who enjoy robust, full-fleshed entertainment, CTC's *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* is must-see holiday fare—at least once, but just as Christmas is meant to be repeated each year, stories like the Grinch bear repeating, if only to remind us not to forget that Christmas is more than what we buy from a store.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas, through January 7, 2018, at the Children's Theatre Company, 2400 Third Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN. Tickets are \$15.00 - \$85.00. Ten percent discount for purchase of six or more tickets. For tickets call 612-874-0400 or go to childrenstheatre.org. Best enjoyed by all ages.

Book and Lyrics: Timothy Mason, based on the book *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss; Music: Mel
Lin; Additional Music and Lyrics: Albert Hague and Theodor S. Geisel; Director: Peter C. Brosius;
Choreography: Linda Talcott Lee; Music Director and Sound Design: Victor Zupanc; Scenic Design: Tom Butsch;
Costume Design: David Kay Mickelsen; Lighting Design: Nancy Schertler; Associate Sound Designer: Sean
Healey; Projections Design: Craig Gottschalk; Stage Manager: Nate Stranger; Assistant Director: Madison Mellon;
Assistant Stage Manager: Todd Kalina; Assistant Choreographer: Tony Vierling; Assistant Lighting Designer: Alex
Clark.

Cast: Dean Holt (Old Max), Rajané Katurah (Betty-Lou Who), Dwight Leslie (JP Who), Stella Ruth Murphy (Annie
Who), Autumn Ness (Mama Who), Sarah Ochs (Grandma Who), Reed Sigmund (Grinch), Jay Soulen (Danny
Who), Will Spangrud (Mini Grinch), Natalie Tran (Young Max), Sidney Whiteside (Tiny Who/Mini Max), Mabel
Weismann (Cindy-Lou Who), Max Wojtanowicz (Grandpa Who). Who Ensemble: Gerald Drake, Mario Esteb,
Austen Fisher, Greta Nackerud, Maddie Neal, Cameron Schmalz, Payton Seacrist, Christian Tesch, Symphonie
Whitted, Neah Williams and Calvin Zimmerman.



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