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If you live in JC, especially the downtown area, it’s likely that you’ve noticed posters adorning telephone poles promoting something called “A Tuna Christmas.” To be honest, I checked out what the poster had to say when I first saw it but from there didn’t really give it a second thought. That changed a few days ago when Clay Cockrell, one of the driving forces of the [J City Theater](#), hit me up to spread the word.

We get emails like this every now and again and this one really stood out. I really appreciate what the guys are trying to do and how they’re going about it. They love theater and want to see more of it here in JC so they’ve spent the past few years trying to make that happen. They refer to their style as “theater in the raw” and it’s hard to argue with the tag line when you look at how they’re going about “A Tuna Christmas.”

Instead of me simply pasting some info in here (although, there is some of that at the end...), I thought it would be cool to get a bit more insight. I asked Clay to answer a few questions and he was cool enough to take the time and provide some genuinely insightful answers. Continue reading after the following show details and enjoy.

“A Tuna Christmas” is playing thru Dec. 20 on Thurs, Fri and Sat at 8pm. Tickets will set you back a very reasonable \$15 and [can be purchased here](#). The production is presented at the Church of St. Michael’s Parish of Resurrection at 252 9th St (Hamilton Park.)

**D&Q:** *This is the second run of “A Tuna Christmas” with the first performed in 2006. Why the year off?*

**CC:** Well, we originally started our theater company at Grace Church Van Vorst. We had a very successful run of A Tuna Christmas there – and decided to make it a Jersey City tradition...we would produce it every year. However, due to cost and scheduling problems, we weren’t able to continue to produce at Grace Church. (They are very busy, and it’s difficult to just turn your church over to another group.) So we began to look for other spaces to produce. Of course, Jersey City being what it is – performances spaces are few and far between. We almost had a few places lined up for last Christmas’ production, but they all fell through at the last minute. We have been lucky enough to be invited to produce at the Brennan Court House last fall (As Bees In Honey Drown) and this past summer we were able to produce Moon Over Buffalo at Frank Sinatra Park in Hoboken.

But then we met Father Vic, who said he had a great space at St. Michaels. We saw the space, put together a proposal – and we were off and running again. He is an incredibly generous man and we hope to build a long term relationship with him and Resurrection Parrish.

**D&Q:** *Two actors will be playing all 22 characters in the performance. Who are these actors and how did the process of selecting them for such challenging roles work?*

**CC:** Kellis Carroll plays one half of the duo. He was in the original production and is a founding member of our company. He’s an incredibly talented actor who easily transforms from hen-pecked husband to an oversexed waitress in 4 inch heels – in about 30 seconds. So he was a natural choice to return to the role.

I’m the second part of the duo. When I saw how much wild fun they had during the original production, I swore that I would one day do one of the roles. Since the previous actor was not available this year – I get to fill in. It’s been quite a challenge to produce the show and be in it – but I’m very pleased with the result.

***D&Q:** How much preparation and rehearsal did the two actors go through to be ready? Can you provide any interesting details or anecdotes?*

**CC:** We’ve rehearsed for the past 6 weeks, every night and on weekends. You could say that we have lived these roles non stop. And it’s been a crazy ride. Interesting stories? Sure! We use grapefruits for boobs (we play several women in the show) – and the changes backstage happen very quickly...so there are times that we have rushed on stage as a man...with boobs because we forgot to take out the grapefruits!

***D&Q:** Are these actors the same that performed in the 2006 production? If so, have they adjusted their performances in any way since then?*

**CC:** I talked with Kellis about this – since he is the one who is returning. And he is playing the same ‘set’ of characters. He said that he really wanted to approach the roles in a fresh way – and try not to re-do what he did in 2006. I think he has really done that. His characters are really well formed and he has sharpened the humor and humanity of all of them. We’ve found that even though these people are wild and bigger than life – they are not caricatures. They are very real – and that’s ‘the funny’.

***D&Q:** In general, how does this production compare to that of 2006? Were any lessons learned from the first go-round and how did you adjust the performance based on those lessons?*

**CC:** This show is a crash course in comedy. We learned so much in 2006, mainly about the nature of comedy. Simple things – like any physical movement after a laugh line, kills the laugh. Laugh lines have to have a certain pace...a build. If the pace is off – the funny dies. If the actor laughs with the joke – it kills the laugh. Comedy is serious – if it’s not life and death to the character – it’s not funny to audience. You can never work for the funny – an audience can sense when you are trying too hard and ‘working for the laugh’. One can only live the character’s experience truly and the audience will get it.

And of course – we’ve learned not to let the backstage chaos infect the onstage life. We have 2 dressers backstage and it gets very crazy as we change from one full costume to another. But once that change has happened – the actor can’t walk back on stage looking like they just went through a tornado – you have to be calm.

***D&Q:** Tell us a bit about how having a permanent space at St. Michael’s is going to help in developing and presenting further performances?*

**CC:** It’s been very difficult to build a following with our audience – because we were never able to have a scheduled season – and no one ever knew where we were going to be. Moving around has really limited our growth. All our lighting and sound equipment has been in storage. It’s been great to pull everything out of storage and create this very unique theater at St. Michaels. If we are able to continue there, and it looks like this is a strong possibility – I think that we are really going to be able to grow quickly. We can now focus on what we want to do – vs. where we are going to do it.

***D&Q:** Are there any plans in place for your next production?*

**CC:** We have a few shows that we want to do next. One thing that we would like to do is return our “Jersey Shorts” series. This is an evening of short story readings that is based on National Public Radio’s “Selected Shorts at Symphony Space”. We have local people read short stories and intersperse the readings with local musical performances. It’s a great evening of music and story – and I’m hoping to do this for Valentines Day. But nothing has

been decided. We’ve been really focused on Tuna – and once this is finished we want to sit down with Father Vic and go over some of our ideas.

**D&Q:** *Is it possible for anyone interested to get involved in what you’re doing? If so, how?*

**CC:** You bet! We are a theater of volunteers and are always looking for people to help and participate. Anybody interested can go to our website [www.jcity.org](http://www.jcity.org) and email us their information. We will put you to work! There is always something to do.

::::::FULL PRESS RELEASE::::::

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J CITY Theater presents

A Tuna Christmas

December 4 through December 20

Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays at 8:00 pm

Tix: \$15

Tickets can be purchased through [www.brownpapertickets.com](http://www.brownpapertickets.com) or calling 800-838-3006

At

The Underground Theater at The Church of St. Michael’s – Hamilton Park

252 Ninth Street, Jersey City, NJ 07303

On December 4th, 2008 J CITY Theater will open “A Tuna Christmas” by Jaston Williams, Joe Sears, and Ed Howard at The Underground Theater at the Church of St. Michael’s Church on Hamilton Park in downtown Jersey City. Performances run Thursday thru Saturday at 8pm. Audiences are encouraged to reserve tickets due to limited seating and a limited run. The show is scheduled to close on December 20th.

“A Tuna Christmas” is a marathon Christmas comedy of southern madness. The Christmas yard display contest is heating up in the small town of Tuna, Texas as neighbor fights neighbor for the most outrageous display of lights, Santa, Baby Jesus and Rudolph. This year, however, there is a Christmas Phantom on the loose, spreading vandalism and havoc. With quick-change zaniness and quicksilver one-liners, two incredibly talented actors introduce us to 22 of the wildest citizens in Tuna.

J CITY Theater first produced A Tuna Christmas in 2006 and is bringing it back this year for an encore run. “We hope to make ‘Tuna’ a Jersey City holiday tradition”, says Clay Cockrell, Executive Producer.

“We had such a great time with it in 2006 and the audiences just loved it. Many people told us they were disappointed that we didn’t do it last year. We are always trying to listen to our audiences – so here we go again!”

“‘Tuna’ is one of the greatest shows for an audience,” explains Kellis Carroll, one half of the acting duo in A Tuna Christmas. “No one expects to see so many characters show up on stage. The bonus for an actor is being able to charge–full throttle–into so many personalities and have them live for a while.”

Sandy Cockrell, Artistic Director, said that this Christmas show is a wonderful celebration for the company. “We pride ourselves on our motto: theater in the raw. As a production team our focus has always been on the actor and the purity of each particular story with minimal sets and costumes. However, with Tuna Christmas we really have to pull out all the technical stops. The comedy is found in the quick changes and the bizarre costumes and wigs...the fact that two actors are portraying 22 characters. This show is a wild and breathless ride.”

J CITY Theater has a history of magically transforming unusual spaces into dynamic theatrical venues.

“Performance spaces are few and far between in Downtown Jersey City”, says Mr. Cockrell. “But thanks to Father Vic Kennedy and the Church of St. Michael’s, we have found an absolutely perfect location for this show. We are very grateful for the wonderful support of everyone at St. Michael’s. They have opened

up their beautiful home and made us feel welcome. We look forward to continuing our relationship as we begin to explore our upcoming season.”

J CITY Theater ([www.jcity.org](http://www.jcity.org)) is a not-for-profit professional theater company based in Jersey City, New Jersey. It is a founding company of the Hudson County Theatre Alliance ([www.hudsonall.org](http://www.hudsonall.org)) and has been producing locally since 2006. Recent productions include Archibald MacLeish’s J.B., Douglas Carter Bean’s As Bees In Honey Drown, and this summer’s smash hit: Moon Over Buffalo. They are also known for the politically relevant one acts, Compression of a Casualty and The Spot, during HCTA’s annual One Act Festival. J CITY Theater’s mission is to create quality, high-energy theater that is told with sophisticated simplicity.

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# An interview with Clay Cockrell of “A Tuna Christmas”

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