



Holiday hilarity in Jersey City

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By Peter Filichia/For The Star-Ledger



Sandy Cockrell

Clay Cockrell and Kellis Carroll as two of their 22 characters in "A Tuna Christmas" now playing at J CITY Theater.

The sign above the set is supposed to spell out "Happy Holidays" in lights — but more than half the bulbs have burned out.

No problem. The bright performances that Kellis Carroll and Clay Cockrell are giving in "A Tuna Christmas" light up the J City Theater stage with their own high wattage.

"A Tuna Christmas" is the delightful holiday edition of "Greater Tuna," the 1982 surprise off-Broadway hit. Once again authors Jaston Williams, Joe Sears and Ed Howard joined forces to take a look at a lonely Lone Star State rural town. Tuna, Texas, is a dot on the map where everybody knows everybody else's business — for what else does anyone have to do with his time? That means that

if you had an incontinence problem as a child, don't expect anyone to forget it — even when you're old enough to be the town sheriff.

To replicate Tuna's population of 568 would be too immense for even the richest Broadway budget. So Carroll and Cockrell simply play many of its prominent residents: young and old, male and female.

Although both are successful throughout, Cockrell seems to have the most fun in portraying Didi Snavelly, the shop owner who purveys "weapons for the home, the car and the workplace." Or does he prefer Vera Carp, the woman who's convinced that she's the big fish in Tuna?

Carroll enjoys his stint as Bertha Bumiller, the head of the local censorship bureau that isn't sure it'll approve every word of the upcoming community theater production of "A Christmas Carol."

The actors frequently rush off-stage to change costumes — and they get laughs each time they return, acknowledging not just their speed, but their outrageous new outfits.

When Cockrell must play a woman, he automatically becomes what is euphemistically known as a "big girl." One of

the great mysteries of the season must be how women's clothes could be found to fit him. While we're at it: Where did those poinsettia-appliquéd high heel shoes come from?

And what about those wigs, which are — to borrow a lyric from a musical that celebrates a nearby state — as high as an elephant's eye?

The two-hour show is briskly done thanks to director Sandy Cockrell, Clay's wife, who knows how to get all the juice from the comedy. She gets laughs from the tiniest details: When her two actors play older women, they don't just plop into chairs when they sit down — given their age and aches, it's a slow-motion adventure.

And yet, one of the most fascinating aspects of "A Tuna Christmas" is that the authors don't spend all their time mocking the town or its inhabitants. They have a good deal of sympathy for the poor souls who can't extricate themselves from this cultural wasteland, and for those who won't be having a Merry Christmas.

Better still, the playwrights take care to show that there are solid brains in these people's heads, and that many are capable of speaking in a most poetic way. In fact, Tuna could easily be described as "Simile City," given how often its inhabitants make comparisons. "He's as useless as ice-trays in hell" is quickly followed by "She screamed like white trash at a tent meeting." And who could forget, "She looked like death chewing on a cracker"?

Well, the word "simile" does contain the word "smile." And smile is what theatergoers will do at "A Tuna Christmas" — that is, when they're not roaring at Cockrell, Carroll and their outsize creations.

A Tuna Christmas

Where: J City Theater, 252 Ninth St. at Hamilton Park, Jersey City

When: Tonight through Saturday at 8 p.m.

How much: \$20. Call (800) 838-3006 or visit jcity.org.

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