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The Charitable Sisterhood Christmas Spectacular

By

BO WILSON

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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BO WILSON

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(THE CHARITABLE SISTERHOOD CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR)

ISBN: 978-1-61959-151-6

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“*The Charitable Sisterhood Christmas Spectacular* was originally produced by
Virginia Repertory Theatre, Richmond, Va.”

The Charitable Sisterhood Christmas Spectacular was originally produced by Virginia Repertory Theatre at Hanover Tavern on Dec. 2, 2016.

Cast:

Lorraine Jensen Debra Wagoner
Tina Yates Jan Guarino
Bea Littleton Catherine Shaffner
Janet Murchison Donna Marie Miller
Lucille Orton Jody Smith Strickler

Production Team:

Director Joe Pabst
Set Design Terrie Powers
Costumes Marcia Hailey Clark
Sound Derek Dumais
Lights B.J. Wilkinson
Musical Arrangements Jason Marks
Stage Manager Corrie Yarbrough

The Charitable Sisterhood Christmas Spectacular

CHARACTERS

TINA YATES: 40s. Originally from Walbrook, just outside Baltimore. A successful nurse because she's warm, practical and cares about people, but doesn't tend to pause and consider whether she ought to be less frank; a blurter. Enjoys her role as the local Yankee.

LORRAINE JENSEN: 40s. Lived here all her life. Has nine children, at last count. Gently sarcastic and always good humored.

BEA LITTLETON: Late 40s to early 50s. The wife of Pastor Hiram Littleton and happy to let you know it. He might be the pastor, but it's her church.

JANET MURCHISON: 30s. A New Jersey native who recently opened her own private investigation agency. Quick with a wisecrack and even quicker with ideas. Bea trusts her even though she dislikes doing so.

LUCILLE ORTON: 50s. The widow of the late Reverend Joseph Orton of First Salvation Church. Bea's blood rival. In appearance, puritanical and scary. In tone, sweetly menacing. Carrie Nation by way of Sue Ann Nivens.

Voice of **RADIO ANNOUNCER.**

SETTING

The basement of the Second Trinity Victory Church, just outside Pennington Gap, Virginia. The weeks leading up to Christmas, 1977.

MUSIC NOTE: Throughout the piece, the radio announcer introduces various songs that fade out as the scene continues. Producers may substitute other pre-1977 Christmas songs of their choosing and adjust the announcer's text accordingly.

Additional notes on the music, effects and staging of the Spectacular can be found at the back of the playbook.

APPENDIX

THE BACKSTAGE/ONSTAGE EFFECT

There are, of course, myriad ways to achieve this transformation. A producer might want to employ a turntable or even a double-turntable, and, of course, that's fine for those who have turntables. But there are other, less complicated ways to execute the same transformation—probably as many as there are clever designers in the world (and in my experience, they outnumber clever playwrights.)

One can simply draw one of two curtains across the stage, each of which is meant to represent one or the other face of the church's curtain or backdrop—pretty on one side, tattered and scribbled upon and patched on the other. When we're watching the Spectacular, we make sure to display the one that is meant to represent the pretty, public side of things, and when we're backstage, we show the one representing the other side.

There's also the option used for the original production—the use of rotating panels or flats on each side of the stage. One face of each rotating unit is what we'd see from the Second Trinity audience seating. The other face tells us we're backstage, with different surfacing, “quiet backstage” signs, and so on.

Be clever, have fun, and remember that the audience will happily buy in as long as the intention is simple and clear.

THE MUSIC

An accompaniment CD and vocal arrangement for the medley of Christmas songs are available for license from Dramatic Publishing. Of course, these are optional, and many producers will have access to musicians and/or sound designers whose

work they like, and they will wish to create their own medley for their production. A live piano for the second act—the oft-mentioned “Junie Ferguson”—could be a great deal of fun.

The same holds true for the slide show of tacky holiday sweaters and accompanying music—producers can craft their own, or if they have the ability to project a video file, the license for music will also include the slideshow.

ABOUT THE STYLE OF THE SPECTACULAR

As we know, plays-within-plays are always fun but they can be a little tricky. The hope for the Spectacular is for two very different layers of competence. We’d like to be able to move between onstage and backstage smoothly and with skill. In other words, the “real” transitions should be artfully managed whatever the stage device employed. However, the transitions in the Spectacular—the placement of scenery, the getting into position by actors, etc.—can be utterly lacking in any of the sleight-of-hand and smoothness of craft on which most theatres pride themselves.

Characters can walk out in full view and be seen to then crouch behind a bit of scenery, ready for their entrance. The stagehands are not a racecar pit crew—they are simply trying to put things where they go, and this might occasionally mean holding something in place—a bit of curtain or a wall. The Spectacular takes fullest advantage of its community’s good will, and no one involved in it has any ambitions of a career in showbiz.

Many readers will have enjoyed the Christopher Guest film *Waiting for Guffman*; its show-within-a-show, “Red, White and Blaine,” is in the right zip code as a reference for acting styles and skill levels.

The ladies of the Charitable Sisterhood are busily preparing to mount Second Trinity Church's Christmas show, but something's afoot-- it seems that a rival church has stolen the figure of the Christ child from their nativity scene! While Sisterhood members probe the theft, the show must go on, and the resulting pageant is a comedic Christmas gift!

In this first taste, Sisterhood members Tina Yates and Lorraine Jensen are discussing the many tasks that must be done to get the Spectacular ready:

TINA (*looking at the clipboard*). Is this date right? The show is in two weeks? And there's all this to do? (*Reading from the list.*) "The Second Trinity Victory Church Christmas Spectacular," that title is wayyyyyy too long. "Presented by the Charitable Sisterhood of the" blah blah blah, etcetera, my gosh, look at all these acts ...

LORRAINE. A lot of that stuff is gonna get cut.

TINA. When you say "a lot" ... ?

LORRAINE. All of it, pretty much. That list you're holding? It's all *other* people's ideas for the show. And Bea listens, and she says, "What a *wonderful* idea, *thank* you!" and then she types it all up and posts it on the big bulletin board upstairs, and everyone's happy. But look at the top of the page there and tell me what it says.

TINA. "List of episodes under consideration." Ohhhh ...

LORRAINE. Ya see? All she has to do is consider, bless her hard little heart. Every year, exactly one of those suggestions actually makes the cut. That way, they can't complain. Well. They could ...

TINA (*simultaneous*). But not a good ... right.

LORRAINE (*simultaneous*). Kinda like suicide, right.

Betty Lee Dobbs has been pushing the same idea for at least ten years.

TINA. What's her idea?

LORRAINE. A slideshow of Christmas sweaters that she's knitted for all her relations. Anyway, Bea will come in here and say, "Ladies, here's what we need to do, we need to get things into show shape." And suddenly, she'll have reasons why this act doesn't belong, or that one wouldn't be quite right, or, "Don't you think that one's a little long, I do," till there's only one left and then she puts in all her own ideas, many of which seem to have something to do with who makes the biggest donations to the church.

TINA. But don't people get mad?

LORRAINE. Oh, believe me, ever since Friday, nobody is madder than Bea.

TINA. What happened Friday?

LORRAINE. Oh my gosh, that's right, you don't know! OK. You were here last Christmas?

TINA. That was our first, yes.

LORRAINE. OK, well you remember all the contests, right? Best nativity scene, best tree, best carolers, they proly had one for best eggnog.

TINA (*dryly*). Yeah, everybody celebrated very competitively.

LORRAINE. Well it wasn't supposed to be like that, see, the original idea was that all these contests would lead to everyone visiting everyone else's church and there would be understanding and fellowship and good will toward men, but all it inspired was the will to win, particularly in Bea, and especially particularly when it comes to beating Lucille Orton.

TINA. Do I know her?

LORRAINE. Tall? Kinda terrifying?

(TINA shrugs. She doesn't know her.)

LORRAINE *(cont'd)*. She's over at First Salvation? But she and Bea have been rivals since they were in school, they're like ... ooo! They're like that cobra and that ricky ticky tatty thing!

TINA. They fight a lot?

LORRAINE. No, heavens, they'd never come right out with any kind of public hostility. You've heard of killing with kindness? They *murder* each other with kindness. They beat each other to *death* with kindness. It's a terrible thing to watch ...

TINA. First Salvation, their beliefs are very ... um, strict. Right?

LORRAINE. Put it this way: There's what they believe, or there's going to hell.

TINA. Wow.

LORRAINE. You know why they don't make love standing up? 'Cause it might lead to dancing.

TINA. Ahhhh! *(Makes a rim-shot sound.)*

LORRAINE. They believe that fun is for sinners. But they're never mean about it, see? It's that kindness thing again. If you disagree with them, they're just very, very, very sorry for you.

TINA *(simultaneous)*. Because you're going ...

LORRAINE *(simultaneous)*. Gonna burn in hell, right.

Lucille's husband, Joseph, he was their preacher, he passed away earlier this year? But it doesn't seem like it slowed her down any.

TINA. And something happened with her and Bea while I was away?

LORRAINE. Oh! Right, yes! With the contest, the nativity scene, it certainly *appears* that someone has stolen our baby Jesus right outta the manger.

TINA. “Appears”?

LORRAINE. I didn’t want to rule out miracles.

TINA. But, hang on, I thought with a nativity scene you weren’t supposed to put the baby Jesus into the manger until Christmas Eve, so that it could be the miracle of Christmas and so on?

LORRAINE. Bea has her own ideas about that. Bea says—and I have to admit that there’s a certain logic here—“For the love of Pete, NONE OF THEM were there until Christmas Eve, so why should we have any of them out there staring into some empty pile of straw??”

TINA. That is a fair point.

LORRAINE (*moving closer and keeping her voice very low*). And so now, someone has stolen our baby Jesus and Bea is on the warpath, and I mean *furious*,

And this excerpt from the Spectacular features the ladies' very special version of a time-honored classic, introduced by Bea, who acts as the emcee for the evening:

BEA. Oh, wasn't that just amazing-zing-zing, Arlene and Raylene Dunbar, The Zither Sisters! You know, I always wondered what the difference was between a zither and an autoharp? And Raylene told me, "Any idiot can play an autoharp," and I told her, "I'm not just *any* idiot!" These are the jokes, folks. Actually, these aren't really the jokes. The jokes are coming in our next act, I'm sure you're familiar with that poem "The Night Before Christmas"? Well, sit back and enjoy "Broke Into Our Trailer."

(LORRAINE and LUCILLE walk onstage carrying aluminum folding lawn chairs—the super cheap kind. They are wearing housecoats and their hair is in rollers or covered with a scarf. Both carry Slurpee cups or coffee mugs. Their delivery begins just short of deadpan—straight out, with no comment on the particulars of their story—but as things proceed, their re-enactment becomes more energetic.)

LORRAINE. 'Twas the night before Christmas, and the trailer park waited.

LUCILLE. For the blizzard to stop, 'cause the snow we all hated. We had hung out the laundry, but of course, it all froze.

LORRAINE. All our socks were all stiff from the tops to the toes.

LUCILLE. So those stockings we hung, by the hot water heater.

LORRAINE. Then we emptied the ashtrays, to keep the place neater.

LUCILLE. It's near Christmas, I said—Show respect for the day!

LORRAINE. I just wanted my bath, Calgon, take me away.

Then up on our roof, something rattled the tin.

LUCILLE. It could have been raccoons, tryin' to break in.

LORRAINE. They'd done it before, and they made such a mess!

LUCILLE. It's no use asking questions ...

LORRAINE. Raccoons never confess.

LUCILLE. But this sounded different—a heavier sound.

LORRAINE. I got Daddy's shotgun, and chambered a round.

LUCILLE. And then came more noises, like dozens of paws.

LORRAINE. I said to Lucille, "That ain't Santa Claus."

LUCILLE. "But who else could it be?" I said with alarm.

LORRAINE. "Could be Elton Cole's beagles, escaped from his farm!"

LUCILLE. We opened the window, to see what was what.

LORRAINE. And then in came a fat man, and he led with his butt.

LUCILLE. He wheezed and he puffed as he backed his way in.

LORRAINE. He fell on the congoleum, and gave us a grin.

LUCILLE. "Merry Christmas," he said, "My name is Saint Nick!"

LORRAINE (*miming looking down the shotgun barrel*). "You'd best say what you're up to, and say it right quick."

LUCILLE. Then he spun us a tale of holiday cheer ...

LORRAINE. But his breath smelled just like his third pitcher of beer.

LUCILLE. His whiskers were white, and he was wearing red ...

LORRAINE. And he told us the noise on the roof was his sled.

LUCILLE. So I asked, "Where's the reindeer?" He said, "They're up there too."

LORRAINE. "But you gals have no chimney! What's a fat man to do?"

LUCILLE. Now we had both seen some strange things in our lives.

LORRAINE. Like that two-headed goat, or the man with twelve wives.

LUCILLE. This was last year's revival, in the Miracle Tent.

LORRAINE. I got terrible sunburn, I was sorry I went. Anyway, there I stood, with my gun pointed true.

LUCILLE. And we said.

LUCILLE & LORRAINE. "What on earth do you think we should do?"

LORRAINE. "I would hate to do violence on Christmas Eve night!"

LUCILLE. And he gave us a look with a face filled with fright.

LORRAINE. He said, "Please let me live, I've got toys to deliver!"

LUCILLE. While I closed up the window, we were starting to shiver!

LORRAINE. "So what did you plan to give us, Mister Fats?"

LUCILLE. And he handed us both these new STP hats.

(They put on baseball caps bearing the STP logo.)

LORRAINE. Then he said, "Wait, there's more!"

LUCILLE. Like they do on TV!

LORRAINE. A Loretta Lynn eight-track!

LUCILLE. June Carter for me!

LORRAINE. By this time of course, we had stopped being mad.

LUCILLE. He might not have been Santa, but he wasn't half bad.

LORRAINE. We offered him eggnog as he lurched to his feet.

LUCILLE. He said, "No thank you, ladies, I've got sunrise to beat." Then he moved to the window—we knew what was in store.

LORRAINE. So we turned him aside and said.

LORRAINE & LUCILLE. “Please use the door.”

LORRAINE. And he said, as he staggered right out of our sight.

LORRAINE & LUCILLE. “Merry Christmas to y’all! And to y’all a good night!”

(They rise, doff their caps, bow and hug. BEA comes out to center as LUCILLE and LORRAINE pick up their chairs and take them offstage. Meanwhile, the stagehands are setting up a simple drum kit.)