

Stage Left Players' 'Jingle My Bell' will make you laugh until you cry

By CHARLES CALABRESE

The Stage Left Players' original musical revue, "Jingle My Bell," is the perfect remedy for pre-Christmas stress for the whole family. You'll laugh so hard that your eyes will water, and the likeable characters will remind you that you can find the true spirit of Christmas in the goodness of the people around you.

The original script by SLP artistic director Kandace Cleland, with arrangements of familiar Christmas songs and musical direction by Jodine Pilmer, is set in December of 1952 at Dave and Dee Dee's Diner in Lisbon, Ohio.

The business is on the verge of closing after the unfortunate, accidental death of a customer. But a winter storm forces a busload of people (the audience) to spend the night and buy some food. Everything seems to be going well until a mean-spirited health inspector makes a surprise visit.

Vince Ward and Kari Lankford are endearing as Dave and Dee Dee, the long-married owners of the diner who are still very much in love with each other. The actors' playful portrayal of mature love is both realistic and subtle, and embodied by Dave's solo on "You're the Cream in My Coffee," and Dee Dee's reactions to his heartfelt declaration.

Cleland herself is excellent as Southern transplant waitress Mona, a sassy, independent woman who finds herself being pursued by amorous bus driver Bob, portrayed hilariously by Dave Bedell. Their duet on "Baby, It's Cold Outside" is a masterful combination of verbal and physical comedy that is both funny and charming.

Jacob Ward is a delight as Dave and Dee Dee's nebbishy son, Corky, and is perfectly matched with Allison Dolphin as teen waitress Patty, the object of his suppressed 1950's affections.

It is great fun to watch them awaken each other's interests, with Corky slowly — really slowly — realizing that he'd rather have a girlfriend than a puppy for Christmas, and Patty helping him figure it out.

While Ward has had a number of major roles in his young life, this is the first show I've seen in which Dolphin has been given an opportunity at a big part that is also a showcase for her glorious singing voice in a number of Andrews Sisters ensemble numbers with the other women in the cast.

But Dolphin's best musical moment takes

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place during a nicely executed duet of "Button Up Your Overcoat" with Lankford, in which mother and girlfriend compete to protect Corky from the elements, almost suffocating him with winter outerwear before they completely cover Ward's appropriately funny facial expressions.

Nathan Kuhns is quite funny as Phil, the painfully shy bread delivery man with a secret crush on the sweet and geeky waitress Agnes, played by the adorable Ali Cleland, only to see her pursued by health inspector Floyd Knickerbocker, portrayed with sneering gusto by Reed Worth.

Phil takes Agnes on a romantic "Sleigh Ride," while Floyd tries to impress her with a "Blue Christmas" and a well-executed dance-duel with Agnes.

But it is Ali Cleland who steals the show with a side-splittingly funny attempt to distract Floyd from his health inspection duties with her rendition of "Santa Baby," in which she channels Lucille Ball rather than Eartha Kitt. In one of the show's few serious moments, she makes the audience want to give her a big hug as she longs for "Someone To Watch Over Me."

The production is filled with snappy dialogue, flawless physical comedy and memorable renditions of classic American popular music, all wrapped up in the big red bow of a talented ensemble cast, backed beautifully by musical director Pilmer on keyboard and Dave Drevna on drums. It is a tribute to cast and directors that this thoroughly professional program was ready for an audience after only two weeks of rehearsal.

Don't suffer through another poorly written, sappy, sentimental, dumbed down excuse for a Christmas play, movie or television show this year. Have your faith restored in first-rate writing, acting, singing and dancing.

I urge you to pay a visit to Dave and Dee Dee's Diner (the Trinity Playhouse in Lisbon) this Friday at 8:00 p.m. and Saturday at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. to see a performance of the Stage Left Players' "Jingle My Bell." Call ahead for reservations at 330-831-7249. I give this show my highest recommendation for the whole family.

(Guest reviewer Charles Calabrese, a resident of Wintersville, has been writing performing arts reviews for print and broadcast for more than 30 years.)