A Christmas Carol

Jack Studio Theatre

In a festive outing, this gem of English literature is set in the framework of an entertainment for the wounded in the First World War.

Tice Oakfield in his one-man show presents the misanthropic Ebenezer Scrooge who rejects the spirit of Christmas as ‘humbug’ and is haunted by the ghost of his late business partner. That night he is visited by three spirits: of past, present and future Christmases, giving him the choice to change his life. This adaptation by Ross McGregor does good service by remaining faithful to the Charles Dickens story while allowing it to be a real dramatic production and not simply a telling of the tale.

In a performance of remarkable virtuosity, Oakfield plays all the parts: Scrooge himself, Scrooge’s downtrodden clerk Bob Cratchit, joyful nephew Frederick, the Charitable Gentleman seeking alms for the poor and the joyous host Mr Fezziwig. In the Cratchit home he plays Bob, Mrs Cratchit and Tiny Tim.

Oakfield dances, jumps, sings and does magic tricks. A virtuoso performance of ‘A Partridge in a Pear Tree’ gets a round of applause and when you think there are no more surprises he can pull out, he emerges on stilts in a huge green coat dressed with fur as the Ghost of Christmas Present. His excellent performance shows him to be a talent to watch for.

He is helped by a clever adaptable set design by Karl Swinyard made largely of doors through which Oakfield passes into different worlds and times. Marley’s ghost is a fearful projection; voices off give us Scrooge’s beloved dead sister and the woman he should have married but didn’t, because matrimony would gave got in the way of a life of making profit.

If there is a reservation, it is over the ability of the boundlessly energetic Tice Oakfield to play an old curmudgeon as well as he can the younger ones. He is just too nice. It is also questionable how dramatically useful the framing device of the troop show is, with Oakfield breaking the fourth wall to talk to and throw sweets at the audience. Overall, however, Oakfield channels Dick Van Dyke and Hugh Laurie, making the very difficult task of a one-man show playing so many characters look easy in this 75 minutes of non-stop entertainment.

It is a good choice not only for its seasonality but because the cold and poverty of Victorian England and the cruel approach to it from the likes of Scrooge find unhappy resonance in today’s Britain.