

Frosty The Snow Manilow

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The Troubies' formula has rarely worked better than it does in *Frosty The Snow Manilow*, their 2009 holiday offering and one of their best shows ever.

You probably know the recipe by now. Take a well-known play, movie, or TV show, add to it a bunch of hit songs by a famous recording artist or group, spice it up with puns galore and sight-and-sound gags aplenty, and ad-lib (or appear to be doing so) till the cows come home. This winning formula has scored The Troubadour Theater Company 12 Ovation Award nominations for the 2008-9 season, second only to Center Theatre Group and the Geffen. 2009-10 looks to be every bit as hit-filled, the recent *Oedipus The King*, *Mama* and the now-running *Frosty The Snow Manilow* getting the current theater year off to a bang-up start.

Unlike plot-dense past shows such as *As U2 Like It* and *OthE.L.O.*, *Frosty The Snow Manilow* starts out with a wisp of a storyline from the 25-minute long 1969 TV special. This allows the Troubies even more time than usual to just be themselves—acting, dancing, improvising, and singing Barry Manilow classics like no other theater troupe you've ever seen.

Every Christmas tale needs a narrator, and *Frosty The Snow Manilow* is no exception. Not every Christmas tale gets its narrator from the audience, though—however since this is a Troubies show, it turns out to be another instance of leg-pulling. The gruff theater patron whom Troubies head honcho (and *Frosty The Snow Manilow* director) Matt Walker has pulled from his seat is none other than Jack McGee (Chief Riley on TV's *Rescue Me*), soon seated in an appropriately Archie Bunker-esque armchair and ready to regale us with this holiday "true story."

If you've seen *Frosty The Snowman* (the TV special) you already know that its leading lady is a young girl named Karen (understudy Molly Alvarez doing terrific work). *Frosty The Snow Manilow* starts off in Karen's classroom on the day before holiday break, her class getting lectured on what will happen to their bodies if they should happen to fall into a black hole. (It's not a pretty picture.) Upon being dismissed by their ukulele-playing schoolmarm (Leah Sprecher), the children come upon an inept magician called Professor Hinkle (Walker). Unable to pull a rabbit out of his hat, the nutty Professor does the next best thing. He pulls his horny pet rabbit Hocus (Lorin Shapiro) out of a trashcan.

Meanwhile, Karen and her buddies (looking cute indeed in their prosthetic nose extensions) have been hard at work building a snowman. When they place Professor Hinkle's discarded top hat on its head, lo-and-behold, it comes to life as Frosty (Paul C. Vogt), greeting his newfound friends with a cheerful "Happy Birthday" every time the hat is put back on his head. Naturally, Frosty's arrival in the kids' lives must be celebrated with a production number (courtesy of choreographers Nadine Ellis and Ameenah Kaplan) and before you know it, Frosty is exclaiming "All that singing and dancing and I'm starting to melt." Naturally, the kids and Hocus head for the train station, destination The North Pole.

Along the way, who should pop up but "guest star Winter Warlock" (from the 1970 TV special *Santa Claus Is Coming To Town*) brought to 10-foot-tall life by the ever amazing Beth Kennedy (on concealed stilts and with fingers each a foot or more in length). Accompanied by her forest friends (a parrot, a penguin, a walrus, a "bipolar" bear, and the red-nosed reindeer himself), Winter Warlock goes into some wacky standup schtick peppered with ad-libs. For the romantically inclined, there's also Frosty's real-life twin Peter Allen Vogt as Crystal The Snowwoman (Snowgirl?).



There's hardly a Barry Manilow hit that the Troubies haven't found a way to insert into the story, often with revised lyrics and titles. "Daybreak" becomes "Play Break," as children and assorted townfolk celebrate the season by skating, sledding, shopping, and snowballing. Professor Hinkle's "Could It Be Magic" now asks the question "Could this be the magic ... hat?" Frosty changes "It's A Miracle" to "I'm A Miracle—that's me!" "New York City Rhythm" becomes "Winter Warlock Fire" and "Mandy" gets retitled "Frosty." Other Manilow favorites, some of which actually get sung with their lyrics virtually intact, include "I Write The Songs," "Can't Smile Without You," "Ready To Take A Chance Again," "Looks Like We Made It," "Weekend In New England," "This One's For You," and "Even Now."

Also making their appearance are the jingles Manilow wrote early in his career—the Band Aid song ("I am stuck on Band-Aid, and a Band-Aid's stuck on me"), the State Farm song ("Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there"), and of course, "You deserve a break today at McDonalds," a musical interlude which prompts Frosty to wonder out loud, "What the hell was that?"

Keep your eyes peeled for sight gags like Walker singing the bridge from "I Write The Songs" atop a *bridge* and Frosty exiting the stage and instantly re-entering from the opposite side. (Three guesses as to how.) Also, be forewarned: If you happen to be seated in the front row, expect the unexpected, and if your cell phone should by carelessness go off, be prepared to have Walker answer it for you and go on from there.

As always, Troubie performances are in a class by themselves. As adept as these actors are at being seemingly out of control (if not quite out of their minds), they are bona fide triple-threats who know exactly what they are doing, from Walker's sly performance as Hinkle to Rick Batalla's Vegas-ready Station Master to Shapiro's adorable miming rabbit. McGee spoofs his gruff TV image as the narrator and as the whitest black Santa ever (or the blackest white Santa ever). Kennedy's Winter Warlock is yet another feather in this uniquely talented actress's multi-feathered hat.

The Vogt twins are a hoot as Frosty and Crystal, twice as funny and twice as ad-libby as when there is only one on stage. Alvarez shines in her double duty as perky Karen and (when needed) in her usual song-and-dance role as one of the Popsicles. Troubie regulars Jill Morrison, Sprecher, and Lisa Valenzuela complete the girl group quartet, and they are as entertaining and talented as ever. Dance captain Joseph Keane, Jimmy Lambert, and Andy Lopez are their gifted male counterparts. I particularly loved Keane's cute-as-can-be parrot, and future leading man Lambert gets his own show-stopping center-stage solo 11th hour number *and* the funniest (scripted) line in the show (possibly the first time I've heard the word "festes" in a theater). Completing the cast in typically first-rate Troubies fashion is Mike Sulprizio as the traffic cop who hollers "Stop!"

Choreography is, as always, a Troubies show highlight, and Frosty The Snow Manilow's is especially inventive and athletic, particularly the somersault-packed finale. Music Director Eric Healy leads the terrific onstage band, with nifty vocal direction by Rachael Lawrence. Sharon McGunigle's costumes get A for originality and imagination. Christian Epp's flashy light design, Robert Arturo Ramirez's tiptop sound design, and Sherry Santillano's storybook set complete the design package.

Frosty The Snow Manilow doesn't need this or any other review to have sold-out houses, but as the current Ovation Award nominations prove, Troubies shows delight not only their multitude of fans but also voters (and reviewers like yours truly). Frosty The Snow Manilow continues the holiday tradition of JACKson Frost and It's A Stevie Wonderful Life. There's not a better way to rid yourself of December stress than by paying a visit to the Falcon. Like Frosty, you're sure to leave the theater a "jolly happy soul" and ready to face your next round of Christmas shopping with a smile.

Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank. Through January 17. Wednesdays through Saturdays at 8:00, Saturdays and Sundays at 4:00, Sundays at 7:00. No performances December 24, 25 & 31, & January 1. Reservations: 818 955-8101 www.falcontheatre.com

--Steven Stanley
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Photos: Chelsea Sutton