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New Cratchit plays catch-up in 'Carol'

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WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



Chevalier

When Denise Chevalier first saw "A Christmas Carol" at the Omaha Community Playhouse, she was a high school sophomore from Central City, Neb.

"It was the biggest theater and the best show I'd ever seen in my whole life," said Chevalier, now 29.

That explains why, as the playhouse opens the popular classic Friday for its 34th annual run, Chevalier feels a certain pressure as one of its newest cast members. She's playing Mrs. Bob Cratchit.

"Nobody's putting pressure on me but me," Chevalier said. "But you don't want to taint what other people have accomplished in the role."

Still, Chevalier said, she leapt at the opportunity when the role came open. It's her first part at the playhouse.

"I've always wanted to be in this show," she said. "It's such a great tradition, what the playhouse does with it."

Active in the metro area's community theaters since moving here in 2003, Chevalier said she knew many "Christmas Carol" cast members only from seeing them onstage.

"It's really fun to get to know them and perform with them," she said. "Everybody's been so nice, very welcoming, and you don't feel like an outsider. But they know the show already." And wanting to be where they are spurs her to learn the songs and lines faster, she said.

Steve Krambeck, who plays Bob Cratchit, said he knows just what she means. He had never seen the show when he joined the cast four years ago.

"I remember being at that point," Krambeck said. "Everyone around you has been doing it so long, and they know what's going on, and you're playing catch-up. And you worry: Am I up to par? Am I doing all right? But Denise has jumped in with both feet. She'll be a wonderful Mrs. Cratchit."

Krambeck said he's always grateful, returning to the familiar "Christmas Carol" fraternity.

"You devote so much time to this, and your whole Christmas season is spent with these people," he said. "You're happy to see them, because we had such a great time last year."

Still, he said, he has to discipline himself at rehearsals. At that first run-through, as he's remembering the steps, Chevalier is learning them for the first time.

"By the second run-through, I might have it down. But the new people don't. Denise and I have so much fun, cracking jokes, but I have to focus."

Krambeck is one of 15 "Christmas Carol" veterans among the 23 adults in the cast, though two veterans are in new roles this year. Among the 16 children, four have been in the show before.

Chevalier said working with people such as Krambeck and directors Carl Beck and Susan Baer Collins is an adventure she's enjoying.

"Carl and Susie know the play so well, and they know where they want you to go with the character," she said.

Early on, Chevalier said, she took Mrs. Cratchit in a sassy direction when speaking about mean old Scrooge. Collins gently steered her toward a little less edge.

"She said Charles Jones (who originated the show at the playhouse) always wanted to make sure you saw Mrs. Cratchit's warmth, her kindness and generosity, even when she's upset."

Though the two-month schedule of rehearsals and performances during holiday season is taxing, Chevalier said, she's already thinking about doing it again next year.

"I haven't found a down side to being in this show, honestly," she said. "Just the pressure I put on myself to do really well. The daunting part is the tradition."

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