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The night before X'mas



COLOURS OF CELEBRATION: Mellow Circle's *Stay By My Side* Photo: M. Vedhan

Mellow Circle's annual Christmas production was up there with the mistletoe

A dysfunctional family and the spirit of Christmas sit snugly beside each other, like patches on a warm quilt, in *Stay By My Side*, a well-mounted production for charity at the Museum Theatre.

The play, warm and moist like rich plum cake was scripted by Rajiv Rajendra and directed by N.S. Yamuna with music by Augustine Paul. With a tapestry of plotlines it had two acts — the first set in the home of the Philips, a modern family which communicates largely through technology and the second in the Glendale Haven for The Elderly with several composite characters waiting to love and be loved.

It's the night before Christmas and the self-obsessed head of the family, John Philip (Yohan Chacko playing to the heartland) has his work cut out for him. He is in charge of decorating the tree in the middle of juggling shares and can't seem to elicit any help from wife Leena (Sharanya Nair) who is more intent on sending out Christmas greetings through email. The youngest Michelle (a sprightly Kiara Chittaranjan) tries her hand at baking but her Christmas tree cookies "are in the oven having a forest fire". The older Maria (Anju Mathew) is about to step out for a party but John suggests that she lend a hand with the tree instead. Michael, the son (Ashish Abraham), is content listening to the stereo, watching television and talking on the phone in his room simultaneously. After an angry exchange of words when no one wants to decorate the tree or eat the burnt cookies Leena ushers in an uneasy calm by suggesting they watch the Christmas carols special on TV. The sets opened up and a 50-strong choir stepped out on stage to render old favourites 'Joy to the World' and the outstanding 'His Name is Jesus' with a solo by Megha

Jacob. While Pastor George (Francis Lazarus) spins out the message of peace, John gets nostalgic, trying to find the true spirit of the season. Following a showdown between father and son, Leena reveals to Michael that John's unhappiness comes from his mother Mama Betsy living in a home for the elderly.

Michael decides to bring home his new-found grandmother. At the home Betsy (played by a gifted Sapna Sera Abraham) with her acerbic contempt and a voice that brooks no disagreement is at war with the patient Rose (Mini George), the senile Lily (Liesel Alexander), the no-nonsense Henry (Thomas Philip) and the hard-of-hearing David (Arul Durairaj). She refuses to greet her grandson and believes that he is after her money like his father was. Nurse Cecilia (Kripa Varughese) and Jeremy (Andrew Abraham) meanwhile script out their own quaint love story. They all decide to bake a cake and discover to their delight that Betsy was a master baker in her prime. Her memory kindled, she remembers herself as a sweet child (played by Antara Chacko) and also a young John (Kuruvilla Jacob).

How Michael manages to bring his family to visit Betsy, the reconciliation between mother and son and the promise of Christmas ended the play on a note that was happy without being saccharine.

The crystalline songs, including 'When you Believe', were perfect and integrated into the fabric of the show. The sets were warm and toasty keeping out a rainy miserable Christmas Eve.

The actors humanised their characters with alacrity even when the narrative took a while to gain momentum in the second act.

The costumes were sober and the bright hues were cast by the gleaming red, green and gold of the decorations. The humour and the dialogues were on cue.

If you were looking for seasonal cheer there was plenty of it — the tinkly tree ornaments, the colourful carollers, and a festival that is a catalyst for familial reconciliation. You'd had to be a Grinch not to like this play.