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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Theater

# Where's the 'Christmas Carol' for Hanukkah? This theater has an answer.

"A Hanukkah Carol, or Gelt Trip! The Musical" joins a small repertoire of stage shows themed for the Jewish holiday.

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From left, Samantha Sayah, Nicole Halmos, Bekah Zornosa and Katrina Michaels in rehearsal for "A Hanukkah Carol, or Gelt Trip! The Musical." (Kent Kondo)

By Rebecca Ritzel

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*CORRECTION*
*A previous version of this article incorrectly referred to the cat in "A Hanukkah Carol" as Tiny Tim. Its name is Kitty Tim. It also included a quote that implied director Marlo Hunter went to Yale; she went to Princeton. The article has been corrected.*

The cast of "A Hanukkah Carol" came back from a rehearsal break and found their normally decisive director, Marlo Hunter, staring at two small menorahs. "We are trying to figure out how to light this thing," Hunter said. Her hands were on her hips, and the sleeves of her flannel shirt were rolled up like she meant serious business.

At issue was not how to strike a match, but how to block two pairs of performers, one upstage and one down, as they sing a plaintive ballad and simultaneously light the menorahs. Hunter cued the keyboards. “We will always remember,” the cast sang. “We will always believe.” “Grab a match!” Hunter shouted over the piano, like a ballet master hollering out counts, and, a few lines later, “Light the shamash!” referencing the central candle used to light others on the menorah.

Unfortunately, a few matches were duds, and a soprano dissolved into giggles. Hunter applauded anyway. There were still two weeks before performances would begin, and there was time, she said, “to work on our candleography.”

Hunter coined the term on the spot. Like everything else involved with bringing this Jewish-focused adaptation of Charles Dickens’s classic to the stage the studio energy felt both deeply familiar and like a whole new winter wonderland. Nearly every actor and creative team member involved in the world-premiere musical at Round House Theatre in Bethesda, Maryland, is Jewish, but none had ever done a holiday show that centers people of their faith.



As actor Aviva Pressman acknowledged at the cathartic first rehearsal, “This is the first time I’ve done a Jewish play that wasn’t about the Holocaust.”

Adaptations of “A Christmas Carol” have long been regional theater holiday staples, with 38 professional productions expected to land on U.S. stages this December, according to American Theatre magazine. But there’s no equivalent juggernaut about Hanukkah. Minnesota’s History Theatre often performs “A Servants’ Christmas,” a musical about a Jewish maid who hides her faith in turn-of-the-century St. Paul. The drag quartet Kinsey Sicks is taking a year off from touring “Oy Vey in a Manger,” a mock-Christmas cabaret that has enjoyed solid runs at Washington’s Theatre J. Beyond those curiosities, the catalogue of options is slimmer than a shamash — something that “A Hanukkah Carol,” now running through Dec. 29, aims to change.

Lyricist Rob Berliner — and Harrison Bryan, who co-wrote the book with Berliner — have replaced Ebenezer Scrooge with Chava Kanipshin (Samantha Sayah), a “misanthropic millennial influencer” more interested in new ring lights than lighting the menorah with her parents. It’s up to the ghosts of Hanukkahs past, present and yet to come to convince Chava she should stop and spin the dreidel. Running holiday gags include Yiddish puns, giant hamantaschen cookies and a hairball-hacking cat named Kitty Tim. The score runs the gamut, and composer Aaron Kenny gave the numbers clever tempo markings like “equestrian klezmer.”

“The audience is being educated on the Hanukkah story in as entertaining a way possible,” Hunter says.

“A Hanukkah Carol, or Gelt Trip! The Musical” began life as a “comedic kosher riff” for a 24-hour holiday play festival. “It was entirely a joke,” says Bryan, but their family of Brooklynite Hanukkah enthusiasts thought it was the best thing they’d ever written. A year later, Bryan met Kenny at a New York puppetry event. Kenny and Berliner, his frequent writing partner, were intrigued by the idea of a Jewish-themed “Christmas Carol.” The trio got to work and, in

December 2022, held a buzzy workshop and concert staging in New York.

Round House artistic director Ryan Rilette heard about it and called Bryan, who had starred in the theater's 2019 production of "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time," to see whether they'd consider bringing the show to his venue.

"I'd never felt more supported onstage," Bryan says of their experience at the Bethesda theater. "It also helps that the D.C. area has a pretty solid Jewish community."



Although getting back to New York eventually is the goal — Broadway producers Daryl Roth and Jim Kierstead are supporting the Round House production — innovation can happen wherever there are committed Jewish theater makers.

"We need to start from the ground up," says Scott Zenreich, a Seattle-based performer and playwright also working to expand the alternative-to-Christmas canon.

Zenreich's musical "Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins," based on the Caldecott-honored children's book by Eric Kimmel, premiered in 2015 in Fort Worth. Next month, it opens at Actors Theatre of Louisville, its biggest stage yet. After clearing some production rights issues — Kimmel's book got optioned for an as-yet-unproduced movie — Zenreich is hoping his musical about a little boy battling goblins who blow out a synagogue's menorah ends up at more theaters next year. "Coming out of the pandemic, there's a little bit of analysis of what we did before, and whether or not that's what we still need to be doing," Zenreich says. That includes addressing religious diversity. He was inspired to write his own Hanukkah-themed show after being cast as blanket clutcher Linus in "A Charlie Brown Christmas," in which he awkwardly recited New Testament scriptures onstage.

"I had to do some deep work to get into the role," Zenreich says. "It really made me feel like a faker."

Berliner admits to embracing holiday opportunities in a way that's "a little unhinged," especially for a Jewish performer. He earned his Actor's Equity card performing in "A Christmas Carol," worked as an elf at both Bloomingdale's and Macy's, and spent three years singing in Walt Disney World's Candlelight Processional.

"I have all these Christmas credentials because that was the closest thing I could get to doing something for Hanukkah," Berliner says. "If Walt Disney World had a Hanukkah parade, I would have been first in line, but there wasn't."

Bryan puts it this way: "One of the reasons we were drawn to this project — as a musical with mainstream capabilities — is that we wished something existed like this when we were kids."

The closest thing they had, Bryan says, was "A Rugrats Chanukah." Taking a nod from that seminal Nickelodeon cartoon, "Hanukkah Carol" also recounts the 2nd-century story of the Maccabees fighting off Syrian rivals through a play-within-a-show, serving as an explainer for audience members without menorahs at home.

“We aspire for the show to be authentically Jewish, but not exclusively,” Berliner says.

“It’s a holiday show,” Hunter insists. “This show is magical. It is a polished production, but there’s scrappiness to it, a spunkiness. There is so much Jewish assimilation, but what this show is saying is, ‘We’re still here.’ We need to make space in a canon that is so overpopulated with ‘Christmas Carols’ and ‘Elf: The Musical’ and a couple of other mainstays. We want to be on equal footing.”

**If you go**
**A Hanukkah Carol, or Gelt Trip! The Musical**
Round House Theatre, 4545 East-West Hwy., Bethesda. 240-644-1100. *roundhousetheatre.org*.
**Dates:** Through Dec. 29.
**Prices:** Starting from $50.

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## *A Hanukkah Carol* Carves a Place Among a Crush of Dickens Adaptations

*How the new musical, premiering at Round House Theatre, puts a contemporary Jewish spin on a Christmas giant (without losing the Dickensian Orphan).*

