



## J CITY Brings the 'Tuna' to Christmas Once Again

By **Jonathan Fitzgerald** • Dec 9th, 2009 • Category: **Arts, Featured**



This holiday season you'll have plenty of opportunities to revisit the classics, whether for you that means *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, or, as it is in my family, the musical version of *A Christmas Carol* starring Albert Finney and simply titled *Scrooge*. And when there are days where the temperature reaches into the mid-60s in early December, these old standbys are often the most tangible manifestation of the season.

Here in Jersey City a new, if not somewhat unlikely, story is quickly climbing to "classic" status: today marks the opening night of local "theater in the raw" group J CITY's third-annual performance of "A Tuna Christmas." This play, with its funny name and Texas setting has proven to be the perfect addition to the holiday season, like the amusing Southern cousin you only get to see around Christmastime.

The plot centers around an annual yard decorating contest in the little town of Tuna, Texas. It would seem that the contest is the victim of a saboteur, referred to by the locals as the "Christmas Phantom." The town's people of Tuna are represented by 22 unique and hilarious characters, played entirely by the two male cast members, Kellis Carroll and Clay Cockrell. As I sat and watched the play during dress rehearsals this week, I met a couple of little people, two very well-endowed women and their love interests, a couple of old ladies and, of course, the town's passionate — and high maintenance — theater director.

Our town's theater director is J CITY's Sandy Cockrell who, with her husband Clay, and Kellis, are the three founding members of J CITY, which officially launched in 2006. Sandy and Clay moved to the area thirteen years ago and began performing and producing plays in New York City. It wasn't until about four years ago, however, that they made the decision to make their theater company's home here in Jersey City. Homeless for several years, the theater company staged plays wherever there was space.

"We were doing shows when a space opened up," Clay says. "They invited us to the courthouse, in the rotunda. When a space opened up, that's when we would get to do a play."

They also performed at Grace Church Van Vorst before landing in their new home at St. Michael's Church in Hamilton Park. Meeting the pastor of St. Michael's, Father Vic as he's commonly called, was a "miracle," Sandy says.

"[During] Cinco de Mayo at The Merchant, we met Father Vic," she continues. "He's been so generous in saying, 'Come down, and when you got on your feet a little bit you can donate to the church, what you can.'" For "A Tuna Christmas," J CITY transformed the church basement into a stage onto which the actors and audience cast their imagination and, in short time, are able to see whatever the scene calls for, be it the inside of a small restaurant or the living room of a house.

This will be the third year that J CITY has performed "A Tuna Christmas" and the third time Sandy has directed and Kellis Carroll has acted in the production. Clay explains that when they first produced the show, J CITY had just started up and his responsibilities as executive producer took precedence. But when the other actor moved away, he took over and, as Carroll notes: "He fit all the costumes!"

When this trio chooses the plays they will perform in any given year, Carroll explains, they select scripts that contain a universal truth. "Everyone can know there is a truth being told," he says. "We tell a story simply, but in a sophisticated way."

Clay adds that when Sandy reads through scripts, she picks those that she not only wants to do, but ones "she has to do." He points to the group's last production, a jarring piece about marital infidelity entitled "Passion," as an example.

"This is too hard," he says he cautioned Sandy. "It's a really scary script that's so raw." But, he says, each time she responded: "We have to do this."

"A Tuna Christmas," on the other hand, is more lighthearted and fun, more suited to the holidays.

"It's a total comedy, almost to the point of farce." Carroll, who is originally from Texas, explains. "[But] there are also these small poignant moments that come out of nowhere and grab you."

*"A Tuna Christmas" opens tonight at 8 pm at The Underground Theater at St. Michael's Church (252 9th St.). The show runs Wed.-Sat. until Dec. 19. Tickets are \$20 and **can be purchased online**.*

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