



HOLIDAY OVERDOSE, PUT TO A VOTE: "TOO MUCH CHRISTMAS"

STUFFED STOCKING

BY JAY WEITZ

If you think the real George W. Bush has some idiotic ideas, just wait until you hear what his fictional counterpart comes up with, courtesy of the folks at MadLab. Seeing the boost that Christmas gives to the economy each year, MadLab's W. figures that having the holiday *every* month would be just what the business doctors ordered, the "Christmas Comes and Cures Poverty Act."

To those of us for whom even a single Christmas amounts to a painful overdose, making it monthly is a 12-fold nightmare of perpetual sentimentality and brain-numbing music. This being the United States of America, at least for the time being, MadLab puts the proposal up for a vote in *Too Much Christmas*.

Two opposing teams of five actors each present alternating skits randomly chosen by the audience on any of 25 themes either in support of the idea (Green Team: Vicki Andronis, Jenn Feather, Ric Shoemaker, Cynthia Sopata, Stephen Woosley) or opposed to it (Red Team: Vanessa Forster, Peter Graybeal, Nikki Johnson, Lorinda Ostapuck, Rob Stretch). At the end of an hour's worth of theatrical persuasion, the audience votes by putting a candy cane of the corresponding color into a hat.

As with other MadLab efforts along similar lines (the many editions of *Theatre Rowlette*, 2003's *Too Much Theatre*), the result is a mixed Santa's bag of clever gifts and lumps of coal. Given that there are 50 possible playlets to be performed, that the audience chooses the order of performance, and that it's impossible to get through even half of them in the course of an hour, one could go to multiple performances and never see the same combination.

What you *will* see are obvious sight gags, pointed diatribes, politically incorrect jokes and enough irreverent mentions of Christmas to give even Bill O'Reilly second thoughts.

Katie Palcsak serves as the indefatigable mistress of ceremonies, deciphering which number the audience has chosen, remembering the corresponding titles and introducing each one.

Some of the skits play with the iconic films, songs and stories of the season. *It's a Wonderful Life* transforms into a teary parody of a credit card commercial. *Miracle on 34th Street* degenerates into a legal battle over the use of theater performance-enhancing drugs. "A Christmas Story" takes a shot at the manipulation of statistics for political ends. *The Nutcracker* becomes an occasion for obvious lowbrow humor. The Green Team sets *A Christmas Carol* on its ghostly head by making it a defense of greed. "How the Grinch Stole X-mas" critiques the redistribution of wealth as social policy.

Other skits approach the seasonal topic more obliquely. "Santa's Reaction" takes a dig at Columbus' Commit to Be Fit campaign. "Rudolph's Friends" depicts the rebellion of other holidays against the multiplication of Christmas. "Heaven's Reaction" turns almost existential regarding the silence of God and the teachings of Christ.

"Alternative Holidays" starts out mistakenly identifying Ramadan, Islam's month of fasting, with Christmas, then attributes the error to faulty research on the Red Team's part.

What saves even the lamest of the scripts is an overriding sense of good-humored silliness, an unpredictable freshness in treating overly familiar stories and an underlying respect for the intelligence of the audience.

MadLab's *Too Much Christmas* won't please those who think there's some sort of "war on Christmas." But it may appeal to those looking for a seasonal counterpoint to the clichéd, the commercial and the crass. **E**

"TOO MUCH CHRISTMAS" CONTINUES Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays through December 23 at MadLab. Call 470-2333 or click to madlab.net for info.