

‘TIS THE (THEATER) SEASON | VENTURA COUNTY OFFERS A CORNUCOPIA OF HOLIDAY-THEMED ENTERTAINMENT

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Peter Van Norden (far right) stars as Ebenezer Scrooge in Rubicon’s critically acclaimed musical production of *A Christmas Carol*. Photo by Jeanne Tanner

The holidays are here in full force. Panic might kick in at any minute — but it doesn’t have to. Take a deep breath. Put aside the shopping bags, craft scissors or whatever impossible holiday goals you’ve set for yourself. Give yourself over to the joy of the season.

Take time out for at least one of the many holiday-themed productions and performances soon to light up Ventura County. Theater productions, chorale performances and other special events are guaranteed to put a smile on your face, a chill in your attitude (the happy, relaxed kind) and a warm glow in even the most stressed-out spirit.

The holidays wouldn't be complete without a performance of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. So make it a good one. The Rubicon Theatre Company brings back its critically acclaimed production. Philip Brandes of the L.A. Times wrote that Paul Van Norden and Joe Spano gave "virtuoso performances" as Ebenezer Scrooge and Jacob Marley, and both stars reprise their roles this year. Holding fast to the Dickens story, the festive production features music and weaves together narration of the original text with dialogue, breathing new energy into the beloved old classic. (**Rubicon Theatre, Dec. 7-24; www.rubicontheatre.org**)

The **Thousand Oaks Repertory** presents its own wonderful production of *A Christmas Carol* (**Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, Scherr Forum Theatre, Dec. 8-11; www.civicartsplaza.com/shows**). This is a more traditional version, brimming with ghostly visits, music and humor.

The Nutcracker, which is more like a rite of passage than merely a tradition, takes the stage at several venues across Ventura County this season. (Do little ballet dancers a favor and book tickets early.) The **Ventura County Ballet** and the **Ventura College Symphony Orchestra** will be performing at the **Ventura College Performing Arts Center (Dec. 9-11; www.venturacountyballet.com)**.

Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza (www.civicartsplaza.com/shows) will host a few different productions: The **Conejo Civic Ballet (Fred Kavli Theatre, Dec. 11)**; the **Pacific Festival Ballet Company (Fred Kavli Theatre, Dec. 17-18)** and the **Moorpark Civic Ballet and Dance Theatre (Janet and Ray Scherr Theater, Dec. 17)**.

Beloved holiday favorites from TV and film come to life onstage, too. *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer: The Musical*, based on the Rankin/Bass TV classic, features Rudolph and all his friends. The cast dresses in costumes that are uncannily like the TV characters. The show itself is a fun lesson that "What makes you different is what makes you special." (**Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza, Fred Kavli Theatre, Dec. 21; www.civicartsplaza.com/shows**.) *Elf Jr.: The Musical* (**Ojai ACT, Dec. 2-18; www.ojaiartcenter.org**) is based on the hit movie and features a young, exuberant cast. Arrive half an hour early and enjoy cookies and caroling in the Ojai

ACT Gallery before the performance. Director Gai Jones says, “The story reminds us all of what the holiday season is about: connecting with family and our childhood wonderment.”

A few blocks away from Ojai ACT is ***Grand Hotel: The Musical***, presented by **Ojai Performing Arts Theater (Matilija Auditorium, Nov. 25-27, and Dec. 2-4; <http://ojaitheater.org>)**. Strictly speaking, *Grand Hotel* isn't holiday fare, but the sheer glamour of it all — the music, personalities, gorgeous sets and costumes — warrants its mention here. After all, what are the holidays without some high drama and glitter? Need more sparkle with your show tunes? Head to **Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza for Broadway Christmas Wonderland (Fred Kavli Theatre, Dec. 1-4; www.civicartsplaza.com/shows)**.

With “high-kicking chorus girls and 1,000 glittering costumes,” the show includes favorites like “White Christmas,” “Winter Wonderland” and more. Also at Thousand Oaks Civic Arts Plaza is **'Tis the Season** presented by the **Village Voices Chorale (Scherr Forum Theatre, Dec. 2-3)**. The 70-voice chorale sings classic songs like “Silent Night” and “The First Noel/Pachelbel’s Canon” and the audience can get into the spirit with a singalong. Fans of the PBS favorite ***An Irish Christmas* (Scherr Forum Theatre, Dec. 14)** can see the very best in Irish song and dance performed by world champions Scott Doherty and Tyler Schwartz. **A Joyful Noise**, presented by **Los Robles Master Chorale (Scherr Forum Theatre, Dec. 18)**, is set to bring down the house with a 105-voice chorale accompanied by a brass and percussion group. It will perform holiday standards like Rutter’s *Gloria*, as well as a new piece written by composer-in-residence Jasper Randall.

The music keeps going at the **High Street Arts Center in Moorpark**, with its production of **Christmas Magic (Dec. 2-11; www.highstreetartscenter.com)**. In this warm, jubilant performance of Christmas stories and music, cast members from the past season of High Street’s shows are joined by the Walnut Canyon Elementary and Chaparral Middle School choirs. (A portion of the show’s proceeds will benefit the school choirs.)

California Lutheran University (www.callutheran.edu/about/arts.html) presents several free events that are open to the public. The **Christmas Festival Concert (Samuelson Chapel, Dec. 2-4)**, CLU's longest-running annual event, features a performance of "Veni Emmanuel" as well as other classics performed by university choral ensembles and the **University String Symphony. Las Posadas (Dec. 4)**, a traditional Mexican Christmas procession, winds through campus and ends with music, activities and refreshments. A celebration of **Hanukkah (Student Union, Dec. 7)** centers around the lighting of a menorah and is accompanied by food, songs and games. A **Kwanzaa celebration (Student Union, Dec. 8)** features gospel music, dance performances and presentations by the NAACP Saturday School Students.

Give yourself a gift this season. Start a new tradition or enliven an old one by taking in some great live entertainment. It's sure to spark some holiday cheer. All you have to do is sit back and enjoy.

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