“Scrooge” gets double the Ritchie, double the talent

by Blake Mathews

For senior Alex Ritchie, the Homecoming musical has become something of a full time job. The hours are demanding, the work always follows him home and his big performance review is scheduled for this weekend. Also, in Alex’s case, every day is “Bring Your Dad to Work Day.”

The Benson stage will feature two generations of the theatrical Ritchie family when “Scrooge” premieres this Homecoming weekend, with Alex playing the title character and his father Bob Ritchie supporting him as the ghostly Jacob Marley.

Bob Ritchie teaches broadcast journalism at Harding, but his roots are in technical theater. As a Harding student the bulk of his experience with Homecoming musicals came from behind, below or high above the actual stage. After graduation he worked as the Benson’s director of technical services for five years, and as a mass communication professor he has continued to advise and assist technical crews for big productions.

But Bob knows how to be in the spotlight as well as he knows where to point one. As a junior in 1983 he was selected to play Tevye, the lead role in the musical Fiddler on the Roof. Bob said he had only played one small part in a Harding production before becoming a leading man. Ten years later, with Bob returning to Harding as a graduate student and Fiddler on the Roof returning to the Benson stage, he auditioned and landed the part Tevye once again.

For the 1993 performance, Bob’s family was in attendance, including his young son Alex.

“I guess I really didn’t put it together then,” Alex said. “I just went over to the Benson and there was my dad, but he was dressed differently.”

Alex said the memory of watching his father perform that day is dear to him, but it was not responsible for his entry into theater. Rather, he was guided by his family’s long-held passion for music, pressure from his friends and his mother’s collection of Peanuts comic strips. Alex broke into acting as a seventh grader when he starred in Harding Academy’s presentation of “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown.”

The experience convinced him that theater was something worth pursuing. Alex studied the art of acting through classes and delved into the Broadway classics. He involved himself in productions whenever possible, whether he was in the audience, behind the scenes or taking the stage.

“It’s just been this crescendo of theatrical experience since the 7th grade,” Alex said.

Now he finds himself in the shoes his father wore 16 years ago: A Ritchie with a leading role in the Homecoming musical. Bob said he initially had planned to leave this production to his son; his own schedule was too full for rehearsals, and he wanted to watch his senior son perform from the audience for a change.

“My wife and son conspired against me,” Bob said in explaining how he came to change his mind. “They said ‘oh, well you’re not going to get another chance, so you better do it.’”

Director Robin Miller said he gave Bob the part of Jacob Marley because of his history as a lead actor, but also to take advantage of the natural chemistry between father and son.

While rehearsing a scene between Scrooge and Marley, Miller once pulled Bob aside and quietly gave him some additional motivation.

“Here is somebody that you need to reach with an incredibly important message,” Miller said. “What are you willing to do to get through? Do it.”

Alex said he could not hear what Miller said, but he definitely felt the results on the next run.

“This ghost that is supposed to be an imposing figure over Scrooge became my dad being an imposing figure over me in my mind,” he said. “Just for the briefest moment, I was really terrified!”

Bob said that scene was the only instance where he “uncorked” his paternal instincts around Alex.

“I really haven’t had it in my mind that he’s my son. More like another actor,” Bob said. “But when I leave the stage and I look back on stage, he is instantly my son.”

As for Alex, having his father around does not add any pressure or affect his behavior, he said. The theatrical success his father achieved was under different circumstances and through a very different play, so comparing one Ritchie to another is ultimately meaningless. In fact, Bob said, Alex has never been driven to compete with his father over their shared interest.

“Alex has always gone his own way, and we’ve always tried to give him the freedom to do that,” he said. “It’s kind of ironic that he’s ended up in musical and theatrical pursuits anyway.”

It might be a long time before two generations of Ritchies take the same stage again, but Alex said he plans to pass the appreciation of theater onto his own children someday.

“Learning to delve into the mind of someone other than yourself is very healthy,” he said. “It’s good for maturity, it’s good for stretching your mind and opening your eyes to other people’s lives.”

Bob said he sees those qualities in his son now, and he could not be more proud of what Alex has accomplished since his days as Charlie Brown. When asked if he thought the son had finally surpassed the father, he simply laughed.

“Alex has surpassed me in his theatrical and musical abilities. He already knows it,” Bob said. “He may not tell me, but he knows it.”

“Scrooge” will be showing Friday and Saturday night at 8. Tickets are available at the Benson box office or on www.hardingtickets.com.