



BAG&BAGGAGE
PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS

A TUNA CHRISTMAS

by Ed Howard,
Jaston Williams,
& Joe Sears



SHOWING

DEC. 5-21, 2025

INFLIGHT MAGAZINE

WELCOME TO TUNA!



A Tuna Christmas is a comedy set in the fictional town of Tuna, Texas. The plot centers on the town's annual Christmas Yard Display Contest, won 14 times in a row by Vera Carp. A mysterious "Christmas Phantom," known for vandalizing the yard displays, has the contestants on edge.

Among the subplots are Stanley Bumiller's attempts to end his probation and leave Tuna, Bertha Bumiller's struggle to hold her family together at Christmastime, and Joe Bob Lipsey's fight to mount successfully his production of *A Christmas Carol* despite the town controller of the electric company threatening to turn the lights off. The play is both an affectionate commentary and withering satire of small town, Southern life and attitudes.



The many colorful Tuna denizens are performed as it was on Broadway, by two quick-changing comedians playing all 20 zany characters.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

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A Tuna Christmas is the second in a series of comedic plays set in the fictional town of Tuna, Texas. (The play is preceded by *Greater Tuna* and followed by *Red, White and Tuna* and *Tuna Does Vegas*.)

A Tuna Christmas

by
Jaston Williams
Joe Sears Ed Howard

||SAMUEL FRENCH||

The first play, *Greater Tuna*, was born out of a series of improvisations at a party by Jaston Williams, Joe Sears, and Ed Howard (two actors and a director, three friends). *Greater Tuna* premiered in 1981 and soon after had a seven-year residency in San Francisco.

A Tuna Christmas premiered in 1989 and continued to tour starring its original actors until 2012, including two command performances at the White House for George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush.

SATIRE & SMALL TOWNS

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The characters lovingly featured in *A Tuna Christmas* are small-town Everyfolks. The people here are full of Southern charm, earthy humor, and a laundry list of contradictions.

As the New York Times put it, *A Tuna Christmas* cherishes "the cruel kindnesses and tender hypocrisies of small-town life." Everything and everyone is on the table for poking fun, including Baptists, rednecks, sexual deviants, football coaches,



hunters, animal lovers, beauty queens, and more.

But beyond the satire, *A Tuna Christmas* is also a very sincere look into the nature of bonds formed in tightknit rural communities. Despite the fierce independence born from desert life, the denizens of Tuna are determined to care for each other.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR: MANDY KHOSHNEVAN



Q: What makes *Tuna Christmas* the perfect Christmas show for our current time?

This show is a great Christmas show for this year! First of all, it's funny, which I feel like we could all use right now. And while it's a Christmas show, it's also about the everyday struggles that poke their heads into even the most festive times.



The mayhem that these folks are enduring is ridiculous, but also relatable. Also, it's a show that was kind of written at an intersection: these *Tuna* plays are about a small, conservative town, but they were written by two actors who were responding to Reagan and the Moral Majority. Joe Sears and Jaston Williams are also from small southern towns sort of like this. They're writing a satire, but it's about certain types of people that they're very familiar with. More than one of the designers asked, at the first production meeting, if we could set the show in Oregon. I said, er, no – for one thing that would be breaking our contract – but it points to just how familiar a landscape they found it, just from reading the script. I think lots of different types of people will

find this show funny and familiar. These actors even performed two of their shows at the White House – for George H.W. and Barbara Bush. *A Tuna Christmas* ends up much sweeter than *Greater Tuna*; probably because it's a Christmas show, but also because they'd been playing many of these characters on tour for eight years before they wrote *A Tuna Christmas*, and they probably got to know them and be very fond of them. The characters bicker and fight and plot against one another, but they also do find their way to happy endings somehow or other. Spending time with these characters is like maybe spending time with your extended family at the holidays: they may have some opinions here and there that you really, really don't agree with, but also they're funny and familiar, and unexpectedly kind.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR: MANDY KHOSHNEVAN



Q: What was it like working with just two actors to populate a whole small town of characters?

It was really fun working with Sam and Trevor; I've worked with them before, so I know they're really funny and have great vocal and physical skills. It's also great that they've worked together and have a good rapport, because they have to play so many different kinds of relationships. After the first readthrough, we spent the next two days sort of outlining all the characters (all 22 of them!). I made them do some improv as pairs of different characters, which was really fun and very funny! Some of the characters are in two or even three scenes, but a lot of them only appear once, so improv is a good way to find out more about how those characters would behave outside of the few lines they may have in the script. We did some physical and vocal work, trying to make all the characters distinct



from each other. It would be easy to say, "oh the costume will do the work," but if we're just going to be watching these two fellas, there has to be more to it than that. I will say that sometimes in rehearsal I would sort of forget that there were really only two of them, since some of the scenes have five or six or ten different characters running in and out. It was wild!

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR: MANDY KHOSHNEVAN



Q: How has your background as an improv artist prepared you for directing a show like *A Tuna Christmas*?

Having been an improvisor for just about 30 years(!), I felt very prepared to direct a show like this! Greater Tuna, the original Tuna show, was born as a series of improvisations, and this one is in a similar style. Not only did studying and performing improv teach me a lot

about structuring scenes, building characters, and carrying a theme through unconnected scenes with different characters, but the show is also created with an improv aesthetic, visually speaking. The set is very simple and minimal, and almost all the props are mimed (or as I learned to call them in improv land, "space objects"). My myriad improv teachers were mostly from a very theatrical style (the Bay Area features a lot of companies, including ones I worked with for years, who specialize in the full-length improvised play), so I came up focusing very much on making the invisible environment active, alive, and specific.



There are about nine different locations in the play, and only one of them repeats, so we basically had to "set design" each location, using the existing table, walls, and counter (and Christmas tree) and then filling out the rest of the invisible landscape: where is the oven? where is

the buffet table? where is the phone? After we blocked the whole show, we went back and spent about three hours of a rehearsal just finessing the tracking of the invisible props and furniture. What kind of phone is it? What color is it? How do you hang it up, with a button, or by putting it back in the cradle? Are you drinking that coffee out of a mug, or a styrofoam cup, or a cut-glass cup with a handle? How heavy is that cookie? How big is that cat? How long is the cookie sheet when you take it out of the oven?

Also, because most of the props are invisible, if one of the actors came up with a bit that required a specific prop, they could just, boom, magically have it, and we wouldn't have to go through the process of telling the props designer, waiting for them to provide a rehearsal prop, wondering what the real thing would be like, getting the real thing, finding out that the final prop might not work the way we thought, changing the bit and/or cutting it ... (props design is a truly important, sometimes thankless, and sometimes gutting job; kudos to all props designers everywhere!).

THANKS FOR PASSING THROUGH!

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From all of us here in Tuna County, thanks for visiting! We hope you enjoyed your stay!
Y'all come back now, ya hear?

