

## What I Did for Xmas

### Fringe Beat

By Josef Woodard

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**FEASTING IN ANOTHER TIME AND PLACE:** I am not a vegetarian. But I played one at the **Awhahnee Hotel** dining room. The occasion was the rightfully legendary Bracebridge Dinner in **Yosemite**, a unique American phenomenon of lavish seven-course dining and interwoven, Elizabethan-style theater and music that dates back to 1927. Between courses of the three-and-a-half hour event, diners/audience are often courted by performers and drawn into the action. My role was to respond to the teasing query of the queenly **Andrea Fulton**, veteran actor/singer and Bracebridge's inspired producer and director. As the expansively outfitted Housekeeper of Bracebridge Manor, she approached our table and asked me whether the dinner should climax with roast beef (her preference) or pork (the chef's). "I'm afraid I'm a vegetarian," I mumble into her microphone on cue, earning rousing laughter in the house. Later, vegetarian diners approached me as if in solidarity, but I had to confess my thespian lie.

It's fair to say that there's nothing in America — or beyond — quite like the **Bracebridge Dinner**, which is presented in its full and delicious regalia eight times in December. It's not for the faint of wallet, and tickets are hard to come by (and available now on the Web site, [bracebridgedinner.com/main.html](http://bracebridgedinner.com/main.html)). But the experience is rich and memorable, whatever your carnivorous proclivities.

Layers of history and role-playing figure into the dinner's history. It was created in the first year of the classic Ahwahnee Hotel's existence partly as a way of bringing visitors into the park during the winter season. The premise was based on the sketchbook of 19th-century writer **Washington Irving**, an American with a European fixation. The Bracebridge Dinner unabashedly basks in manners and costumes of another time and place, but the fact that this event takes place on the still-young turf of California adds to its enlightening allure.

During our stay, all seemed right with the world for a couple of days, a blissful illusion that often befalls visitors to Yosemite, generally, and to the Ahwahnee Hotel in particular. Lost in the enclosed realm of Yosemite at any time of year, but especially come wintertime, the outside

world can seem, well, outside and extraneous to the Yosemite reality. **John Muir** knew it, **Albert Bierstadt** knew it, and as much as anyone, **Ansel Adams** knew it.

Adams, as it happens, has deep roots in this enchanted valley, and not only in his well-known capacity as a photographer. Adams was actually an aspiring musician before sidling into photography, and he was called upon in the early years of the Bracebridge Dinner to take charge and help shape it. Until 1973, Adams was an active participant in the dinner, often playing the role of the wily jester known as the **Lord of Misrule**. The present-day Lord, **Johannes Mager**, is creating a sensation in the current incarnation of the program, with his finely tuned comic skills.

Skins of historical connections weave through the Bracebridge, including the fact that Andrea Fulton's father, **Eugene Fulton**, was the event's music director from 1934 to 1978, when he died of a heart attack just before a dinner, a poetic finale. Andrea has performed for an astonishing 57 years, starting out as a child villager and now anchoring the show as the queenly housekeeper.

We managed to arrive for a Winter Solstice edition of the dinner, just after a healthy snowfall had whitened the landscape. Skiing always beckons here, up near Badger Pass, but that option must be weighed against the decadent and meditative pleasure of hanging out and reading in the enchanted Ahwahnee's Great Lounge, surely one of the most comforting hotel spaces in the country.

During the Bracebridge period in middle to late December, the hotel's population swells with fine singers — mostly from San Francisco — and during their off hours, they gather to lead carols. Musicians will settle down to the Steinway piano in the lounge, a piano that Ansel Adams helped select. Nostalgic, pre-Internet era passages of "On the Street Where You Live" and "Just the Way You Look Tonight" wafted through the expansive, wood-lined room, with roaring fires ablaze in the oversized fireplaces. The weather outside was frightful. The view and feeling inside — quite the contrary.

Bracebridge matters seep into the hotel's ambience this time of year. In one room in the afternoon, an employee in vintage costume laid out the history and lore of the dinner. He noted that Andrea Fulton calls the tradition "a Christmas that never was, but that lives on in everybody's hearts."

Yosemite remains one of those magnets for our imagination, a natural wonder within driving distance. The Ahwahnee itself has other seasonal events on its winter calendar, including the Heritage Holidays from March 2-4. But it will be the Bracebridge that most stubbornly tugs on the wish list of those who come to know it and love it, present company included.

At the conclusion of our adventure in this faux Bracebridge Hall, the Parson supplied a benediction, one steeped in ceremonial rhetoric but which seemed to have a more intense and telling resonance given the present state of the world. He bid us all, each and every one, to "carry forth the seeds of an abiding peace" and prayed for "a better world in a brighter place." Hear, hear.

*(Got e? fringebeat@independent.com.)*