

Commonweal Theatre Company

presents

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

by Charles Dickens

Originally adapted by the Commonweal Theatre
under the direction of Robert Larson

Directed by Megan K. Pence

Cast

Abbie Cathcart, Elizabeth Dunn, Ben Gorman, Eric Lee & Lewis Youngren

with Daniel and Isabel Eckstrom*/William and Vivienne Hoetzle*

*Appearing in alternating performances

The Story

On Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge sits in his office, working as usual. He is visited by his nephew Fred, who offers him best wishes on the holiday season, and two charitable gentlemen, who come seeking donations to help feed and clothe the underprivileged. All are met with coldness and hostility. Upon closing the store, Scrooge reprimands his clerk Bob Cratchit for desiring to take Christmas Day off and warns him to be all the earlier the following morning.

When Scrooge arrives home and prepares for bed, he is visited by the ghost of his long-dead partner, Jacob Marley. The ghost is draped in chains and warns that Scrooge's behavior, like Marley's had been, will lead to eternal damnation. Marley's ghost also notifies Scrooge that he will be visited on three consecutive nights by three spirits, and he may yet be able to save his soul.

Scrooge falls asleep but is awakened by a strange light in his bedroom and the appearance of the first spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Past. The ghost transports him to scenes of Christmases of his youth: he sees his sister, Fan, rescuing him from a lonely Christmas; his joyful holiday as an apprentice at the Fezziwig establishment; and his early adulthood, when the love of his life, Belle, releases him from emotional commitment to pursue a life of ambition and wealth. After viewing her later in life happily married with a child, Scrooge demands that the ghost return him home.

Again, Scrooge is awakened from his slumber to find his sitting room filled with treasures and a “jolly giant,” the Ghost of Christmas Present. This second ghost conveys him about London, where they see people playing in the wintry weather and poor families bringing their dinners to the local bakers to use the ovens (a custom in nineteenth century England). The merry Ghost blesses one and all with the warmth of the season. Scrooge and the Ghost appear at the Cratchit household and observe Bob, Mrs. Cratchit, Martha, Peter, and Tiny Tim celebrating Christmas as fully as their meager resources allow. The Ghost then carries Scrooge throughout the world to observe how, regardless of situation and location--such as desolate mines, lonely ships, hospital beds, and poorhouses--all celebrate the joy of the season. Scrooge also views the gaiety at his nephew Fred’s house, where Scrooge himself is the object of much good-natured mockery. Finally, the Ghost of Christmas Present reveals to Scrooge the ever-present Ignorance and Want, and cautions that their continued existence must be fought with kindness and generosity.

Scrooge then discovers himself in the company of a dark, silent Phantom, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, who shows Scrooge a very sinister future: local merchants talk of a lonely miser now deceased; a charwoman and laundress pawn the goods of a wealthy dead man; the Cratchits mourn the death of Tiny Tim; and finally, the ghost conducts Scrooge to a graveyard which reveals a headstone belonging to Scrooge himself. Terror-stricken, Scrooge pleads for a chance to change destiny and finds himself back safely in his own room on Christmas morning. Rejoicing at his second chance, Scrooge makes amends with his nephew, bestows much benevolence and generosity on the charitable gentlemen, and promises to take care of the entire Cratchit family while soon even becoming like a second father to Tiny Tim. Scrooge happily becomes “as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew...”

About our Adaptation

A Christmas Carol is perhaps the most adapted piece of fiction in the body of the world’s literature. Dickens’ classic has been brought to life on stage, in film, on television and radio by use of dazzling special effects, smoke, fog, mirrors, cartoon characters, and song. What makes our production unique is that we have returned to what we consider the essence of the magic of theatre: the partnership between the actor and the imagination of the audience. Nearly every word in the script is taken directly from Dickens’ novella, with only five adult and two child actors playing all the characters. The children will be reading the story aloud, and the action will spring from them—thus creating a story from their imaginations, much like we are asking the audience to do. You will see this magical and heartwarming story come to life right before your eyes.

About the Playwright

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England, on February 7, 1812, the second of John and Elizabeth Dickens' eight children. The family moved to London in 1823, and John Dickens met with financial disaster and was arrested for debt and imprisoned in the Marshalsea Debtors Prison.



In those days, debtors prisons were places where entire families lived while working themselves out of debt. Twelve-year-old Charles was sent to live with a distant relative and went to work at Warren's Blacking Factory, labeling bottles. Charles was released from this life of industrial servitude in 1824 when his father received an inheritance and settled his debts. Charles attended Wellington House Academy from 1824 to 1826 and went to work as a clerk in Gray's Inn. Later, he studied shorthand and texts for 18 months at the reading room of the British Museum in order to better prepare for a career as a reporter in the House of Commons. Dickens spent the next six years as a reporter for the Doctors' Commons and newspapers the *True Sun*, *Mirror Parliament*, and *Morning Chronicle*.

In 1833, Dickens published his first piece in the *Monthly Magazine* under the alias "Boz". By his twenty-fourth birthday, Dickens published his first book, a collection of these writings entitled *Sketches by Boz*. He married Catherine Hogarth, daughter of a colleague, on April 2, 1836. His career as a novelist began in earnest with the publication of *The Pickwick Papers* in 1837, establishing the pattern for most of his work. His novels were mainly published in serial form first and organized afterward into novel form. Dickens' body of work includes such well known stories as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and, in December 1843, *A Christmas Carol*.

Dickens spent his entire career writing about the social ills which affected his home city of London, a city swelled by hundreds of thousands of people rushing to find gainful employment in the advent of the Industrial Revolution. The nineteenth century saw the completion of the trend begun a hundred years earlier, the moving from an agrarian to an industrial economic base for the bulk of England's capital. Dickens experienced first-hand the failure of those institutions established to support those left behind by the revolution: the debtors prisons, school system, orphanages, legal system, and government. Throughout his novels, Dickens utilized similar themes and wrestled with the concepts of greed, selfishness, hypocrisy, and corruption.

Dickens' works are classic not only for their perceptive statements about the society in which he lived but primarily for his unerring accuracy in characterizing his fellow

man. His stories are peopled with rich, colorful, idiosyncratic, and delightful characters who, like Ebenezer Scrooge, have become cheerful additions to our culture.

Director's Notes

Every year, *American Theatre* magazine conducts a survey to create a “Top Ten” list of the shows most-produced by the nation’s theatre companies. And every year *A Christmas Carol* is excluded from the results in order to give other shows a fighting chance. Since its publication in 1843, Charles Dickens’ classic has cemented itself in our cultural lexicon, through theatre, countless television specials and films. *A Christmas Carol* is as ubiquitous to our holiday traditions as chestnuts roasting on an open fire.

In his nearly two centuries of existence, Ebenezer Scrooge has taken many forms from Alastair Sim and George C. Scott to Scrooge McDuck and Mr. Magoo. Our production finds Scrooge in Great Depression-era Chicago, shutting his door (and his heart) to those around him. Ignorance and Want are not problems unique to Dickens’ London; they have followed us across continents and centuries. They are a part of our Past, our Present and, if these shadows remain unaltered, our Future.

Yet through this lens of the world’s malaise, Dickens gives us hope, which is the key to this story’s timelessness and popularity. The magic of *A Christmas Carol* comes when we recognize the “Scrooge-iest” parts of ourselves and our own capacity for change. Scrooge reminds us that we too contain multitudes. That we too can find ways to help even the tiniest of Tims in our lives. That we too can learn to honor Christmas in our hearts and keep it all year long...

A Merry Christmas to us all.

—Megan K. Pence

Vocabulary

apparition – ghost, spirit, specter

bide – await

'change (shortened form of Exchange) – a place of trading or business (i.e. The Stock Exchange)

charwoman (chorewoman) – a woman hired to do cleaning or similar domestic tasks

comforter – scarf

fettered – chained

Vocabulary (*Continued*)

humbug – nonsense

odious – hated

persevere – try continually

petrification – having become stone

wassail – hot mulled wine

Why Dickens' character has thrived through the years.



Even though Ebenezer Scrooge was first introduced all the way back in 1843, the old guy is still as popular as ever more than 170 years later. His surname has entered our daily vocabulary to describe anyone who is cynical about the holiday season, who hesitates to part with even a penny, or who is just a generally

unpleasant person. “Scrooge” is even an entry in the Merriam Webster dictionary! Scrooge’s notoriety explains his many appearances and reinventions throughout the decades, in the numerous *A Christmas Carol* adaptations. Many famous actors have tackled the role of Scrooge as the traditional Victorian miser, like Michael Caine in *A Muppet Christmas Carol*, Jim Carrey in the computer-animated movie of 2009, Kelsey Grammer in a musical version, and Patrick Stewart in a TV movie of the classic tale. Others have reimagined Scrooge in modern-day contexts, like Bill Murray playing a greedy television executive in *Scrooged* or Vanessa Williams as the demanding singer, Ebony Scrooge, in *A Diva’s Christmas Carol*. The reason why Scrooge can be transformed into these contemporary jerks and remain an icon is that his bad attitude resonates in the 21st century as much as it did in the 19th. While Dickens may have lived in and written about London amid the Industrial Revolution, the sentiment of putting business and wealth before people’s well-being still prevails today. It seems like Scrooge, with his insatiable appetite for far more money than he needs and his complete disregard for the everyday people his business will hurt, would fit in perfectly on Wall Street.

Dickens wrote not only to entertain readers, but to advocate for social reform by showing the hardships of the poor—issues that resonate today as much as they did more than a century and a half ago. But don’t worry—it’s not all depressing! We usually think of Scrooge at the beginning of the story (the hostile old man) and not

what he's like after he's visited by his deceased business partner and the three Ghosts. The reason Scrooge has survived and thrived through the ages is not just because he is a grumpy geezer, but because he is a grumpy geezer who changes. With the character of Scrooge, Dickens proposes that all humans, deep, deep down, are caring creatures. Some may just need a major wake-up call to realize it!

—courtesy of Actors Theatre of Louisville

Five Things You Might Not Know

1. Dickens was inspired to write *A Christmas Carol* in 1843 after he spoke at a charity night to raise money for the Manchester Athenaeum in England—an institution dedicated to advancement and diffusion of knowledge." The 31-year-old spoke alongside the young Benjamin Disraeli, who would later become prime minister of Great Britain. After their talk, Dickens went on a long nocturnal walk later and had the idea for his "little Christmas book."
2. He started the story in October 1843 and wrote obsessively for six weeks. As Dickens wrote, he wept, laughed, and wandered around London at night "when all sober folks had gone to bed." He finished the novella at the end of November so it could be published in time for Christmas. *A Christmas Carol* hit the shops on December 17, 1843, and sold out in three days.
3. Dickens was the first famous writer to give public readings of his work—and his first reading was *A Christmas Carol*. The reading took place in front of a crowd of 2000 people in the town hall of Birmingham, England, 10 years after the book was published. Dickens opened the reading by saying, "Ladies and gentleman—I have said that I bear an old love towards Birmingham and Birmingham men; let me amend a small omission, and add Birmingham women too. This ring I wear on my finger now is an old Birmingham gift, and if by rubbing it I could raise the spirit that was obedient to Aladdin's ring, I heartily assure you that my first instruction to that genius on the spot should be to place himself at Birmingham's disposal in the best of causes. I now have the pleasure of reading to you tonight *A Christmas Carol* in four staves."
4. Rather than simply read extracts from his stories, Dickens loved to perform them—so he created a special version of *A Christmas Carol* for exactly that purpose. He tore the pages out of an original book, and stuck them into a new, large leafed, blank paged book. Then he filleted the text, cutting out descriptive scenes to create a performance script. He added stage directions for himself all over the text. Such an annotated copy is called a prompt copy.
5. Dickens visited America twice for reading tours. During the second tour—which took place at Christmastime in 1867—he used the prompt copy at the NYPL, once at a Steinway piano hall, and once at a church in Brooklyn. People camped out in the

snow to be sure of a ticket. By opening time, the line was a mile long. The second tour earned him £19,000—about £1.4 million in today’s money, and far more than he was earning from the royalties of his books.

Unusual Facts to Amaze Your Friends

No one exchanges presents in *A Christmas Carol*. (Scrooge contributes a prize-winning bird for the Cratchit’s Christmas feast, but he does not receive a physical gift in return.)

No Christmas tree appears in *A Christmas Carol*, even though Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert, made the tradition of decorating the tree popular in both England and America prior to the publication of the novel.

In the 1976 Christmas episode of *The Six Million Dollar Man*, the exterior used for the Scrooge character’s home was the same façade used for Norman Bates’s home in Alfred Hitchcock’s movie, *Psycho*.

Scrooged was released on November 23, 1988. During the restaurant scene, a close-up of the watch worn by Frank, Bill Murray’s character, shows the date as November 23 even though it is supposed to be Christmas Eve.

In the 1992 *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, Brian Henson (Jim Henson’s son) has said Gonzo and Rizzo were incorporated into the film so that Dickens’ original narration could be included. Yes—Dickens was replaced by whatever creature Gonzo represents, and a rat.

The 2009 version of *A Christmas Carol*, featuring Jim Carrey, was originally filmed live and then turned into the 3D animated version that appears on screen.

A quick search of the IMDB reveals almost 200 titles related to *A Christmas Carol* and almost 100 more films with the name of Scrooge somewhere in the title.

Many steampunk versions of *A Christmas Carol* have been published and performed. A full performance by Murry Hill Theatre & Prodigal 15 Productions is available on YouTube. The Commonweal’s 2012 version was, in fact, steampunk in nature.

And finally—Harry Lloyd, who plays Viserys Targaryen on *Game of Thrones*, is the great-great-great grandson of Charles Dickens.

—courtesy The Pandora Society

Common Ground: What’s Your View?

We invite you to consider the topics below and discuss—either before the play, at intermission, or after the show. Perhaps you will join cast members at Commonweal Encore, our post-performance gathering, so that we can all put our heads together—

audience and artist alike. And you can continue to chat on your drive home, at work next week, or over coffee with friends. We would also love to hear your thoughts which you can share on our Facebook page or you can email us at marketing@commonwealththeatre.org.

1. What is your favorite holiday tradition?
2. How do you keep Christmas in your heart all year long?
3. Have you ever “done a 180” in your life? Who or what propelled you to change?
4. If a spirit were to take you on a tour of your past, which memories do you think you would visit?
5. Tell your favorite ghost story.