

"There poured upon him daily, all through that Christmastime, letters from complete strangers to Dickens which I remember reading with a wonder of pleasure; not literary at all, but of the simplest domestic kind of which the general burden was to tell him amid confidences about their homes, how the CAROL had come to be read aloud there and was to be kept upon a little shelf by itself, and was to do them no end of good."

This passage, written by Charles Dickens' lifelong friend, literary agent, and biographer, John Forster, suggests something of the overwhelming positive response that greeted Dickens upon the publication of *A Christmas Carol*.

This warm response to Dickens' yuletide story is one that many readers around the world have shared over the years. This response is now deepened by familiarity with the story not only on the printed page, but also on the stage and screen.

It is the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a bitter, miserly man, who is visited by four ghosts on Christmas Eve. The first ghost, Jacob Marley—Scrooge's former business partner—visits Scrooge to warn him against his miserly and heartless ways. Marley warns Scrooge that if he doesn't change his selfish behavior and tend to the needs of his fellow man, he will be doomed to an afterlife of misery. In order to redeem himself, Scrooge must accept the visitations of three spirits: the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future.

The Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge scenes from his childhood and early life. Along with such joyous events as a reunion with his sister and a lively holiday party, Scrooge relives many painful memories—including the day he lost the woman he loved.

The Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge a range of Christmas gatherings. One is a lively celebration hosted by Scrooge's nephew, at which the merry group plays a word game that mocks Scrooge's greed. Another is a modest Christmas dinner at the home of Scrooge's employee, Bob Cratchit. The meal is meager but joyous, the only cloud being the illness of Cratchit's son, Tiny Tim. Even Scrooge is touched by the boy's bravery.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows Scrooge horrifying scenes of a dark, dismal future—vagrants looting through a dead man's stolen belongings, laughing and mocking the deceased; an unburied corpse, left alone in an empty room—remnants of a life whose absence from the world is no great loss, and to some a source of joy.

Scrooge's fate depends on his response to the spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. The final moments of the story radiate a spirit of generosity and redemption, as well as sheer, giddy joyousness, which have helped to make *A Christmas Carol* one of the world's most popular tales.

Charles Dickens: A Life of Purpose

Charles Dickens, the great English novelist, was born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, on the southern coast of England. His father lost his job in the Naval pay office when Charles was three, and the family moved to London. The Dickens family moved so often during Charles' childhood that he was unable to attend school regularly.

At the age of 12 Charles had to leave school to work in a rat-infested blacking (shoe polish) factory; two weeks later his father was sent to debtor's prison. Luckily, a small inheritance rescued the family, permitting Charles to return to school for two years; but his formal education was short-lived. At 15 he became a legal clerk and at 18 a court reporter for the *Mirror of Parliament* and the *True Son*. Dickens quickly acquired a reputation as a top reporter.

In 1834, Dickens began to publish short narrative sketches under the pseudonym "Boz" in the *Morning Chronicle*. Two years later he married Catherine Hogarth, daughter of a newspaper editor. Together, they had ten children before they divorced in 1858. Shortly after marrying Catherine, Dickens resigned from the newspaper and became editor of a new monthly magazine. This new job allowed Dickens more time to focus on his writing. He explored the difficult lives of pauper orphans in his second novel, *Oliver Twist*.

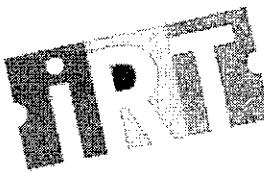
Although Dickens enjoyed great prosperity, the poverty of his youth left him suspicious of the ruling class and sensitive to the plight of the downtrodden. His research on the notorious living conditions in lower-class boarding schools resulted in *Nicholas Nickleby*, in which a youth escapes from a tyrannical schoolmaster.



Charles Dickens
(left) 1843, the year he wrote the Carol;
(right) 1865

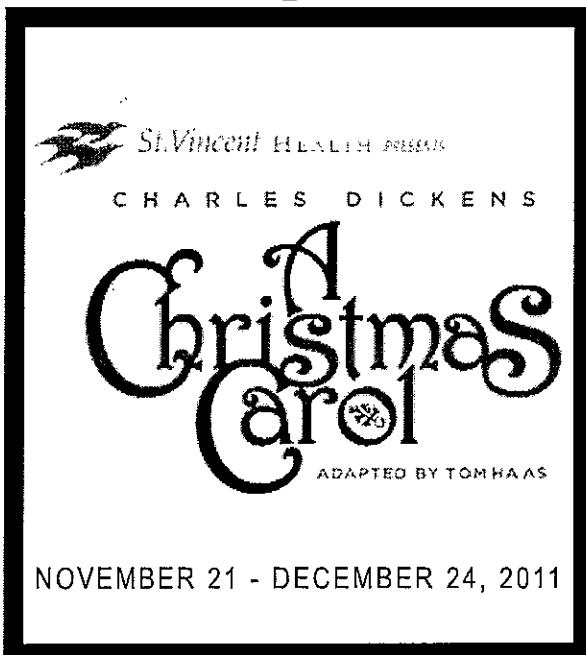
Over the next few years, Dickens capitalized on the popularity of *A Christmas Carol* with several short Christmas stories written in haste for quick reward. Dickens was obsessed with making a sufficient living to support his large family, which included not only his ten children, but his and his wife's parents and siblings. Much of Dickens' writing was done for commercial purposes, which may be a surprising idea for those who consider Dickens a writer of mythic literary greatness.

Dickens continued to incorporate his own life experiences into his works. *David Copperfield*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a young man who struggles through poverty to achieve respect, was an immediate success in 1849. The novels *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Little Dorrit* followed in rapid succession. They followed a similar pattern: Dickens wrote chapters of each



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NOVEMBER 21 - DECEMBER 24, 2011

book for publication in periodicals and later published them as complete novels. In this manner, the author was literally making up the story as he went along.

Dickens spent the last years of his life traveling throughout the world to perform public readings from his novels. He was hailed everywhere as the greatest writer of his age. Though he enjoyed travel and the opportunity to exhibit his acting skill, the combination caused a strain. In June 1870 he suffered a stroke and died instantly at the age of 58. For three days, thousands of citizens passed by his open casket in Westminster Abbey, paying their respects to this most beloved of English writers.



A Christmas Carol on Stage

A Christmas Carol, like all of Charles Dickens' novels, contains a panorama of places and characters brilliantly described by a masterful storyteller. Bringing a novel to the stage is a challenge—the novel is primarily a narrative form and the theatre is a forum for action and dialogue—but it is a challenge the IRT embraces. Stage adaptations of novels recently produced by the IRT include *Dracula*, *Holes*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, *The Giver*, *Crime and Punishment*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and playwright-in-residence James Still's adaptation of Booth Tarkington's *The Gentleman from Indiana*, not to mention last season's production of the non-fiction classic *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

The richness of Dickens' prose makes the task of adaptation to the stage especially daunting. The IRT's adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* uses Dickens' language not only as dialogue, but also as narrative, so we experience the story much as the author wrote it. This technique allows the audience to hear the original language of the novel, where Dickens makes meaning not only through story, but also through his choice of rhythms, sounds, metaphors, and dialects. This uniquely theatrical way of telling a story is a celebration of the craft of the actor and the power of the audience's imagination.

The IRT's adaptation of Dickens' novella was written by former IRT artistic director Tom Haas and produced at the IRT every year from 1980 through 1984. After a twelve-year hiatus, the play was brought back in 1995 and is now making its 16th (or 21st) appearance.

The IRT production of *A Christmas Carol* varies from year to year, but always features Dickens' wonderful storytelling, presented by actors who play several roles. This year's production will be directed by the IRT's resident dramaturg, Richard J. Roberts, who directed last year's production as well as the IRT's productions of *The Giver*, *The Power of One*, and *Twelfth Night*.

As for the cast, some will return from previous years, some will be new, and some will be returning but in new roles. Ryan Artzberger, who has played many different roles in the Carol over the years, will play Scrooge for the second time. Lighting

designer Michael Lincoln will fine-tune his special lighting effects. The production continues to use music by composer Andrew Hopson.

Every year Murrell Horton's elaborate period costumes must be refit or rebuilt to suit a new company of actors; five years ago, new dresses for the

scenes in Christmas past and new uniforms for Fred, Topper, and Nutley were built.

One thing that will not change this year is the snow. Audiences and actors alike delight in this production's endless snow-covered field, first envisioned by scenic designer

Russell Metheny. During the performance actors make tracks through the snow, symbolizing their individual journeys. Hidden objects and trap doors under the snow add to the mystery and spirit of this production. With the stage masking stripped away, the theatre's backstage area is revealed. This allows the audience to experience the magic of the story while seeing how it is created.

A Christmas Carol brings to mind visions of Christmas cheer and scenes of a distant past in which we wish we could participate: a merry gathering at the Christmas dinner table with roast goose and a steaming plum pudding; a lively dance of country folk on Christmas Eve; a family toast in which a poor boy calls forth the spirit of Christmas with a simple, "God bless us, everyone!" These impressions of *A Christmas Carol* are the essence of its lingering charm and create moments of celebration in the theatre. The IRT's production will be filled with such visions and much more; for these visions can inspire a spirit of generosity and goodwill that we need not only at the holiday season, but all the year through.

... I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time when it has come round ... as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut up hearts freely.... And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!"

—Charles Dickens,
A Christmas Carol

Renderings by costume designer Murrell Horton for (clockwise from up left) Felicity's coat, the Laundress, the Solicitor, and Felicity's sisters' wigs.

(below) Preliminary sketch for Scrooge's office by scenic designer Russell Metheny.

Charles Dickens & the Victorian Christmas

During the nineteenth century, as England became less rural and more industrial, old Christmas customs were lost. In *A Christmas Carol*, written and published in 1843, Charles Dickens found a way to both celebrate and revitalize old country holiday traditions by transplanting them to an urban setting.

As Scrooge revisited his childhood, readers were reminded of their own childhood celebrations, or those they had heard about from their parents and grandparents. When Scrooge journeyed with the Spirit of Christmas Present, readers encountered lavish and lengthy descriptions of a wide variety of holiday celebrations, from the humblest to the most luxurious. In reality,

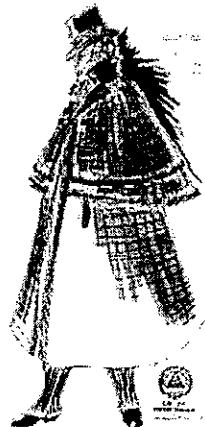
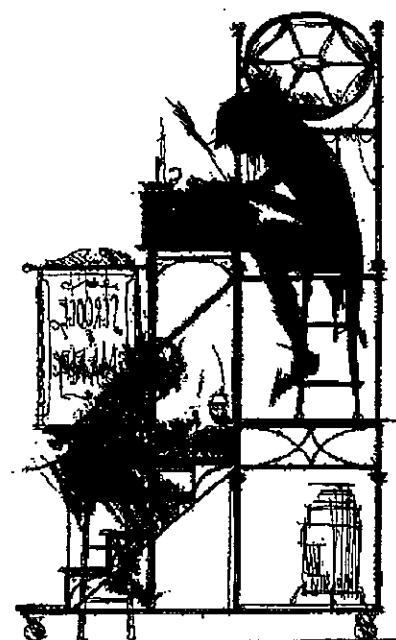
such Christmas revelry was largely a product of Dickens' imagination. But *A Christmas Carol*, along with Dickens' other Christmas stories, enjoyed a wide audience, and these tales inspired the Victorian people in their own holiday celebrations.

Dickens was not alone in revitalizing the holiday. The same year *A Christmas Carol* was published, the first Christmas card was printed, and three years later Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband, introduced the German Christmas tree to England. But it was Dickens who became so synonymous with Christmas that, when he died in 1870, a little girl in London asked, "Mr. Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?"

Fun Facts about Stage Snow!

Each 25-pound box of plastic "snow" (made of the same plastic as milk jugs) covers a 7-by-7-foot square on stage. To cover the entire stage with snow requires 23 boxes of "snow" or 575 pounds.

During the full run of *A Christmas Carol*, the IRT uses about 40 of these boxes, or 1,000 pounds. That's half a ton!



*Footnotes

Scrooge—the colloquial expression "scrooge" means to crowd or squeeze someone. An excellent man of business—Scrooge is a financier, or money-lender. He does not provide goods or services; he deals in the exchange of money. **counting house**—a building, room, or office used for keeping books and transacting business. "Bah! Humbug!"—*Bah* is an exclamation of disgust, and *Humbug* means ridiculous nonsense. **seven years**—Traditionally, the number seven has supernatural powers; it is said to be fatal to men. Note that the name Scrooge has seven letters. In the original novel, Dickens uses the number seven in reference to Marley's death seven times. **district work houses**—Housing provided for the poor in exchange for hard labor. These people were given very little food and water for their work. Strict discipline was enforced, and men and women were segregated. It was considered disgraceful to have to go to a work house. **half-a-crown**—A half-crown equals 2 1/2 shillings, one-sixth of Bob's weekly salary of 15 shillings. **"A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December."**—It was not unusual in this era to work on Christmas Day. **your apprenticeship at the mill**—At this time, an apprentice was bound to work for a prescribed number of years in exchange for room and board and the opportunity to learn a trade. **a twice-turned gown**—When a dress became worn, it could be turned inside out to get further wear from it. A twice-turned gown would be so worn on the inside that the outside is once again the best side. **the pudding singing in the copper**—The copper was a large kettle kept in the wash-house for laundry. In this kettle Mrs. Cratchit steams the traditional Christmas Pudding. This pudding is not the creamy pudding that we are used to. It is more like a cake with a gooey center. Flour, milk, and eggs are combined with dates, figs, and nuts. This batter is put into a tin mold and steamed in very hot water. The Cratchit family uses a cloth instead of a tin mold as it is less expensive. **charwoman**—A servant hired to do housework.

Activities

Look up holiday traditions from different religions and cultures around the world. What holiday traditions do we celebrate here in the United States that originated in other countries? Share your findings with your class.

Find the rules of Blind Man's Buff or other Victorian parlor games and play them. What similar games do we play today?

Look up recipes for a Christmas pudding or wassail and try your hand at preparing them. Ask an adult first!

If one box of *A Christmas Carol* snow costs \$55.00, how much does the IRT spend on snow each year?

Like other authors of the Victorian era, Charles Dickens made a second career of reading his own works in public performances. Today that tradition continues in a different format with books on tape. Listen to one of the many recordings of *A Christmas Carol* (Patrick Stewart's, for instance) or another Dickens novel. What does the reader's use of voice and expression add to the experience?

Writing Projects

Scrooge visits Christmases from his past, the present, and the future. Write about a memorable winter celebration in your life from the past. What made it memorable? What were the sights, the sounds, and the smells? Or imagine a celebration in your future. Let your imagination run wild.

Write a review of the play. What moments made an impression on you? How do the elements of scenery, costumes, lighting, and sound work with the actors' performance of the text to tell the story? What ideas or themes did the play make you think about? How did it make you feel?

A Christmas Carol is a holiday story told to teach its audience a lesson. Write a holiday story of your own that has a moral or teaches a lesson. Share it with your class and family.



The Fezziwig Ball; illustration by John Leech, 1852

Questions for Critical Thinking

Although he gives us scenes from Scrooge's past, Dickens does not dwell on the motivation behind Scrooge's dark view of the world and of Christmas in particular. What hints are included in the story that might suggest the source of his miserly attitude? Imagine other events in Scrooge's past, not depicted in Dickens' story, which might help explain Scrooge's outlook.

Imagine Scrooge's future. What would the last year of his life have been like if the ghosts had not visited him? What changes—in his workplace, in his home, in his daily life—will Scrooge make as a result of his transformation?

The IRT production of *A Christmas Carol* uses very little scenery; the audience is asked to imagine the many environments suggested. Picture a particular scene from the play in your imagination. How large or small is the space? Picture the floor surface, the walls and ceilings, the windows, the furniture. Compare and contrast your ideas with those of your classmates.

The actors in *A Christmas Carol* each play a number of different characters. Choose one actor and think about his or her performance. What acting tools did the performer use to differentiate between characters? Think about posture, voice, gesture, costuming, and make-up. How effective were the transformations between characters?

Compare the IRT production of *A Christmas Carol* to other stage or film adaptations you have seen of the same story. What scenes and elements seem to be common to all adaptations? What scenes appear in some versions and not others? What scenes have you seen that are inventions of the adaptors and not found in the original book? Why do you suppose the creators of these adaptations made the choices they did? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the IRT's use of narration?

Do some research to learn more about the history of child labor in America. What types of jobs did children do? Who were early advocates for children's rights? Where in the world today is child labor still practiced? How would you feel if you had to go to work in a factory instead of going to school? How would that situation affect your future opportunities?

Discuss some of the different charities in your community that help people during the holidays. Are you involved with them? What else could you do to help your community at this time?

On-Line or at the Library

To Learn More about Dickens or *A Christmas Carol* ...

WATCH:

The Muppet Christmas Carol (1992), surprisingly faithful to the original story

A Christmas Carol starring George C. Scott (1984), an excellent TV version

Disney's animated film of *A Christmas Carol* (2009), with Jim Carey as Scrooge and all three ghosts

Other Dickens novels adapted for stage and television

CLICK ON:

<http://www.victorianweb.org/index.html>

Literature, history, and culture in the age of Victoria; the section on Dickens is quite extensive

<http://www.fidnet.com/%7Edap1955/dickens/>

Charles Dickens Page, dedicated to bringing the genius of Dickens to a new generation of readers

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/bleakhouse/animation.shtml>

Watch an animation on Dickens' life, or play the Dickens on-line game and fight your way through Dickens' London to get to the author himself.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/victorians/>

Children in Victorian Britain—an interactive history

READ:

What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew by Daniel Pool

The Friendly Dickens by Norrie Epstein

Other books by Charles Dickens: *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield*

LOOK UP:

England • London • Industrial Revolution • Queen Victoria • Benjamin Disraeli

Debtor's Prison • British Empire • British Class System

Wassail • Carols • Christmas Tree • Christmas Cards • Plum Pudding

Complete the Carol

The terms below are used by playwrights and novelists, including Dickens himself, to craft their stories. Fill in the correct term next to each definition. Then, use the circled letters to spell out the name of a character from *A Christmas Carol*.

OOOOOO OOOOOOO

1. Part of speech that modifies and/or describes a noun
2. To provide the audience with a clue or hint about what will happen later on in the story
3. A smaller section/segment of an act in a play
4. Compares two things to each other without using "like" or "as"
5. An object used to convey a bigger meaning (ex. flag representing patriotism)
6. An idea, moral or message of the story
7. A moment when the story jumps from the present back to an event in the past
8. The character who tells the story directly to the audience
9. Compares two things to each other using "like" or "as"
10. A fictional or real person represented on stage
11. Use of words/phrases to help us visualize vivid pictures in our imagination (ex. gentle rain, angry thunder)

— O — V —
F — O —
S O —
— T — O —
— Y — O —
T — O —
— O — H —
N — O —
S — O —
— H — O —
I — O —



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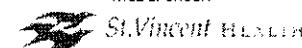
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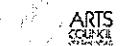
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Going to the Theatre

You, the audience, are one of the most important parts of any performance. The theatre is a group activity shared not only with the actors, but also with the people sitting around you. Your attention and participation help the actors perform better, and allow the rest of the audience to enjoy the show. Here are a few simple tips to help make each theatre experience enjoyable for everyone:

- Leave CD players, mp3 players, cameras, cell phones, beepers, and other distracting and noise-making electronic devices at home.
- You may think textling is private, but the light and the motion are very annoying to those around you and on stage. Do not text message in the theatre.
- Food and drink must stay in the lobby.
- The house lights going out signal the audience to get quiet and settle in your seats: the play is about to begin.
- Don't talk with your neighbors during the play. It distracts people around you and the actors on stage. Even if you think they can't hear you, they can.
- Never throw anything onto the stage. People could be injured.
- Remain in your seat during the play. Use the restroom before or after the show or during intermission (a 10-minute break half-way through some plays).
- Focus all your attention on the play to best enjoy the experience. Listen closely to the dialogue, and look at the set, lights, and costumes. These elements all help to tell the story.
- Get involved in the story. Laugh, cry, sigh, gasp—whatever the story draws from you. The more emotionally involved you are, the more you will enjoy the play.
- Remain at your seat and applaud during the curtain call because this is part of the performance too. It gives you a chance to recognize a job well done and the actors a moment to thank you for your attention.

Mark Goetzinger,
Jennifer Johansen,
Jerry Richardson,
& Ryan Artzberger
in the IRT's 2010
production of
A Christmas Carol.

