

Anthem.

presents

A Christmas Carol

BY CHARLES DICKENS

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY TOM HAAS

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 small appointment in the navy pay office when Charles was three, and the family moved to London. Indeed, the Dickens family moved so often during Charles's 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*. In 1836, on his 24th birthday, *Sketches of Boz* was published. That same year Dickens 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 *Morning Chronicle* and became editor of a new monthly magazine. This allowed Dickens more time to focus on his writing. He explored contemporary conditions for pauper orphans in his second novel, *Oliver Twist*.

Although Dickens enjoyed great prosperity, the poverty of his youth left him with a distrust of the ruling class and an acute sensitivity for the downtrodden. He traveled to Yorkshire in 1838 to gather material for a novel dealing with the notoriously severe living conditions in lower-class boarding schools. The result was *Nicholas Nickleby*, in which a youth escapes from a tyrant schoolmaster.

Dickens held strong views about the relationship between a lack of education and social oppression. He was convinced that education was the solution to England's problems. He was expressing this belief at a meeting when he conceived the idea of *A Christmas Carol*. Shortly thereafter, in the fall of 1843, he started writing the short book.

He composed it in a frenzy, alternately laughing and crying at the images that occurred to him; and he polished it in his mind while walking the streets of London at night. With illustrations by Dickens's friend John Leech, the book was published at Christmas 1843.

Dickens generously ordered the volume to be handsomely bound but sold at an extremely low price. Thus, in giving England *A Christmas Carol*, he lost approximately the amount of money an average family in England would make in a year. Dickens followed this story with several other short Christmas stories written in haste for quick reward. (Recall that in this period Charles and Kate Dickens were producing a large family—their fifth child was born in January 1844—and Dickens was obsessed with making a sufficient living to support his growing brood. Much of his writing was done for commercial purposes—that is, to feed his family—which is a startling fact to remember for those who consider Dickens a writer of mythic greatness.)

Dickens continued to incorporate his own life experiences in his works. His semi-autobiographical 1849 novel, *David Copperfield*, about a young man who struggles through poverty to achieve respect, was an immediate success.

The novels *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Little Dorrit* followed in rapid succession, and all took on a similar pattern. He wrote chapters of each book for publication in periodicals and later published them as complete novels. In this manner, Dickens was literally making up the story as he went along.

The last years of Dickens's life were characterized by extensive travel throughout the world to perform public readings from his novels. He was hailed everywhere as the greatest writer of his age. Though he enjoyed traveling and the opportunity to exhibit his acting skill in public readings, 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 to pay their respects to the most beloved of English writers. ★



Charles Dickens
1844

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The Story of A Christmas Carol

“**T**here 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 Dickens's life-long friend, literary agent, and biographer, John Forster, suggests something of the overwhelming positive response which greeted Dickens upon the publication of *A Christmas Carol*.

This warm response to Dickens's Yuletide story is one that many of us have shared, a response now deepened by our 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 ways 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 that same night accept the visitations of three spirits: the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future.

The Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge both happy and unhappy 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 ended his engagement with the woman he loved, devoting himself entirely to his money-making business.

The Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge two contrasting 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. The other 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 and hope.

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

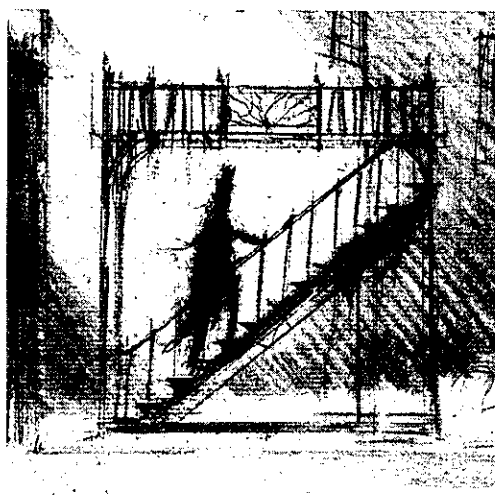
Scrooge's fate depends on his response to the spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future. The final moments of the story radiate a spirit of generosity and redemption, as well as sheer, giddy joyousness, which have helped to make *A Christmas Carol* one of the most popular books ever written. ★



In bringing the story of *A Christmas Carol* to life, director Scott Wentworth believes it will require a collective consciousness—from actors and audience members alike—of past remembrances.

A prominent member of the IRT acting company during the early 1980s, and now an IRT associate artist, Wentworth hopes the actors and audience will engage their imaginations to connect with this stirring story of memories and the struggle of the human spirit. You may think you know the story of *A Christmas Carol*, but the IRT's new production is something different.

Preliminary sketches by scenic designer Russell Methany suggest how one central unit might be used to represent several different locales in the story (below left to right): Scrooge's counting house, Scrooge's lodgings, and Fred's parlor.



Bringing a Classic *Carol* to Life

This adaptation of Dickens's novella was written by Tom Haas (former IRT artistic director) and produced at the IRT every year from 1980 through 1984. Wentworth was the Narrator for three of those productions and made his directing debut with a fourth. For 1996, Wentworth is revising Haas's script so that more than ever it is focused on Scrooge and his journey to redemption.

Actor Frank Raiter is returning to play Scrooge for the fifth time at the IRT. Raiter sees Scrooge as a sort of "Everyman": someone with whom all people can identify in at least some measure. "The audience recognizes themselves in Scrooge. I think children know him best because he's so honest. Scrooge is

himself will participate in the storytelling process by returning to the role of the Narrator. But this production also features new elements to capture the theatregoer's eye, heart, and soul.

The scenery designed by Russell Methany has a new visual concept. The masking of the stage is stripped away, revealing the bare bones of the theatre, allowing the audience to experience the magic of the story and at the same time see how it is created. The floor is covered with a field of white snow; during the performance actors make tracks through the snow, symbolizing their individual journeys. Hidden objects and trap doors under the snow will add to the magic and spirit of this telling of *A Christmas Carol*.

Nanzi Adzima has designed costumes which reflect the fashions of the 1840s, when the novel was written, as well as earlier and later periods seen in Scrooge's mystical travels. For this new IRT production, the three ghosts who journey with Scrooge have been reconceived. Lavish and colorful, each of the ghosts sports a pair of wings. These wings reflect the popularity of angels not only in present-day society but also in Dickens's lifetime. The Ghost of Christmas Past, dressed for 1814, might represent Scrooge's mother. The costume she wears is green and white with holly and mistletoe for trimming. The Ghost of Christmas Present is reminiscent of Queen Victoria. She represents the traditional Christmas, with lavishly decorated trees and garlands. This costume is very colorful, with rich reds and golds—in fact, it may remind one of a wrapped Christmas gift. Finally, the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, dressed for the 1880s, represents a lady in mourning, with her black dress and veil. Nineteenth century society was obsessed with funerals and

memorializing the dead. This fearful image disturbs Scrooge and helps bring about his change.

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 create in us a spirit of generosity and goodwill which we need not only at the holiday season, but all the year through. ★

bombarded with the past and terrified of love. What he has loved in the past has always been taken away. I fight to keep the humor and emotion in the character of Scrooge. The audience has to laugh at Scrooge but yet have empathy for him—learn why he's the way he is and what he can become."

When asked what new elements he brings to this role after a twelve-year hiatus, Raiter replies, "Age! Each year I age, I learn more about the human condition. I now feel that I'm the right age to play this role. Every time I play Scrooge I go away feeling fulfilled."

The IRT's new production will have the wonderful storytelling Dickens is known for, enacted by actors who play several roles. Besides directing the production, Wentworth

Nanzi Adzima has designed dozens of costumes for the production, including (opposite above) Marley's Ghost, (this page, left to right) the Narrator, Tiny Tim, Scrooge, Mrs. Fezziwig, Mrs. Fred, and the Charwoman.



Glossary

“buried with a stake of holly through his heart”—Scrooge evidently views anyone who would waste his money celebrating Christmas as little better than a murderer, as murderers were traditionally buried at crossroads with stakes through their hearts.

“Why did you get married?” ... “Because I fell in love.”—In agreement with contemporary economists, Scrooge does not approve of his nephew’s marrying before he had sufficient income to support a family. To marry for love was sentimental nonsense to many Victorians. Note that there is a strong suggestion that Scrooge himself refuses to marry Belle because she has no dowry.

District work houses—The Poor Law of 1834 provided that two or more parishes (townships) unite to provide a home for the destitute where they might labor in exchange for their room and board. The able-bodied were put to hard labor, and their dependents were kept in the house, where as little as possible was spent on food and shelter. The work houses were characterized by strict discipline. The sexes were segregated and classified. It was considered a disgrace to go to such a place. Dickens fiercely attacked these institutions.

“A poor excuse for picking a man’s pocket every twenty-fifth of December.”—It was not unusual to work on Christmas Day in Victorian England.

Camden Town—Once a suburb, now a part of London, east of Regent Street, known for its small cottages and cheap houses; Dickens lived there as a boy.

chaise—a carriage of pleasure drawn by one horse.

“Old Fezziwig laid down his pen and looked up at the clock, which pointed to the hour of seven.”—Fezziwig has chosen to close the shop early; the usual hour of closing was nine o’clock.

“outside the baker’s they had smelt the goose, and known it for their own”—Poor people such as the Cratchits did not have ovens in their homes, so their holiday goose was roasted by the local baker for a small fee.

“the pudding singing in the copper”—The copper was a large kettle kept in the wash-house for laundry. In this kettle Mrs. Cratchit boils the traditional Christmas bread pudding.

ubiquitous—being in many places at once; omnipresent.

(right) Gustav Doré’s depiction of the narrow, crowded streets of London.

(below) The first known Christmas card was created by John C. Horsley in 1843, the same year Dickens published A Christmas Carol.



IRT PLAY GUIDE

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