A Christmas Carol
A Christmas Carol
by CHARLES DICKENS
adapted by LAVINA JADHWANI
directed by JOSEPH HAJ
November 12 – December 31, 2022
Wurtele Thrust Stage

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Spirit, conduct me where you will. I went forth last night on compulsion, and I learnt a lesson which is working now. Tonight — if you have aught to teach me, let me profit by it.

Ebenezer Scrooge
in A Christmas Carol

About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for additional content.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Thanks for your interest in A Christmas Carol. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
Charles Dickens took Scrooge’s tale of transformation on the road beginning in 1853, standing at podiums and reading a self-edited version of A Christmas Carol in front of large crowds from London to Boston and beyond.

**Synopsis**

Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly businessman, moves through the streets of London with tight fists and a closed heart. He shuns the light and love offered by those around him and greets each Christmas with a scowl and a “Bah! Humbug!”

On Christmas Eve, the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, appears before him wrapped in the chains of his own greed and callousness. Marley warns Scrooge of the similar fate that awaits him if he doesn’t change his ways. Before vanishing into the darkness, the ghost tells Scrooge to expect visits from three more spirits on successive nights.

As promised, when the clock strikes one, the Ghost of Christmas Past appears and draws Scrooge through past memories to recall the misfortunes, joys and heartbreak of his youth. Next, Scrooge is introduced to the world around him when the Ghost of Christmas Present shows him the happiness and community of people in his life who celebrate the holiday with gratitude no matter their wealth or poverty. Finally, Scrooge is visited by the silent Ghost of Christmas Future, who reveals his dark fate if he remains on his current path.

Scrooge awakes to discover that it’s Christmas morning — and he fully resolves to be a new and better man. He greets everyone with a positive outlook, begins to make amends to those he has wronged and embraces all the happiness his second chance offers.
Setting and Characters

SETTING
London, December 24–25, 1843

CHARACTERS
Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly businessman
Bob Cratchit, his clerk
Mrs. Cratchit, Bob’s wife
Martha, Belinda, Tiny Tim and Youngest Cratchit, their children
Fred, Scrooge’s nephew
Fred’s Wife
Two Collectors, raising money for the poor
Jacob Marley, the ghost of Scrooge’s old business partner
Ghost of Christmas Past
Ghost of Christmas Present
Ghost of Christmas Future
Boy Scrooge, Scrooge as a schoolboy
Fan, Scrooge’s sister
Mr. Fezziwig, Scrooge’s former employer
Mrs. Fezziwig, Mr. Fezziwig’s wife
Three Fezziwig Daughters
Young Scrooge, Scrooge as a young man
Dick Wilkins, a fellow clerk at Fezziwig’s
Belle, Scrooge’s former fiancee
Belle’s Husband
Ignorance
Want
Old Joe, a junk salesman
Laundress
Charwoman
Father, indebted to Scrooge
Mother, indebted to Scrooge
Poulteress, a purveyor of poultry
Various Londoners, Townspeople, Carolers and Party Guests
There poured upon its author daily, all through that Christmas time, letters from complete strangers to him 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 many 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 all no end of good. Anything more to be said of it will not add much to this.

There was indeed nobody that had not some interest in the message of the Christmas Carol. It told the selfish man to rid himself of selfishness; the just man to make himself generous; and the good-natured man to enlarge the sphere of his good nature. Its cheery voice of faith and hope, ringing from one end of the island to the other, carried pleasant warning alike to all.

John Forster
The Life of Charles Dickens, Volume Two, 1874

I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it.

Their faithful Friend and Servant, C.D.

Charles Dickens
A Christmas Carol, December 1843

Nothing is more Dickensian than the Dickens Christmas. It is a Christmas in which hobgoblins are more apparent than the Holy Spirit, a Christmas which may seem to glorify the Altar less than the Hearth; and, since more households have hearths than they have altars, a Christmas which has dominated the home-festival for well over a century.

Eleanor Farjeon
Introduction to Christmas Books by Charles Dickens, 1954 edition

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Eleanor Farjeon
Introduction to Christmas Books by Charles Dickens, 1954 edition

As much as A Christmas Carol is about spiritual redemption, it’s about money and poverty and work. ... If Dickens bequeathed us a consoling vision of Christmas, he also bequeathed us an image of urban poverty. When we think of the working poor in a city — the evictions, the health problems — the image that haunts our minds is essentially one that Dickens first vehemently brought to our attention.

Jerome Weeks
“What the Dickens?” American Theatre, December 2000

Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness.

Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray
Fraser’s Magazine, February 1844
About Charles Dickens
1812–1870

By Carla Steen
Resident Dramaturg

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in Portsmouth, along the southern coast of England, on February 7, 1812, and was the second child of Elizabeth Barrow and John Dickens. The family moved frequently during Charles’ childhood, and he recalled an especially happy time of several years in Chatham, Kent. The family moved permanently to London in 1822, and their finances deteriorated as John Dickens was never particularly responsible with money. At age 12, to help his family, Charles was sent to work at Warren’s Blacking Factory, where he put in 10-hour days pasting labels on shoe polish bottles, sometimes working at a window in full view of passersby, for which he earned six shillings a week.

Several days after Charles started to work, John Dickens was arrested for debt and put in the Marshalsea Prison. As was the custom, his family joined him there — all but Charles, who boarded near the blacking factory. The dashed hopes, family separation and horrible conditions of this work experience stayed with Charles into adulthood; it inspired not only instances and characters in his writing but his advocacy to improve conditions for the poor and working classes.

An inheritance relieved the family’s pinched economics, eventually allowing Charles to quit the factory and spend the next two years at school. At age 15, he left school for good to begin work in a solicitor’s office. He also taught himself shorthand and began to work as a court stenographer. From there, it was a short jump into journalism. Although politics and the law didn’t interest him particularly, he was fascinated by the people he encountered and began to write sketches of urban life, which were published in periodicals. In 1836, he collected these pieces into the book *Sketches by Boz* (Boz was the nickname for his youngest brother). Shortly afterward, on April 2, he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of his editor at the *Evening Chronicle*.

That same year, Dickens began writing *The Pickwick Papers*, a weekly serial that continued into 1837, which was met with enormous popular acclaim and solidified his reputation. The next few years saw a burst of activity, both personally and professionally, as he produced the novels *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*; began to edit the new monthly periodical *Bentley’s Miscellany*; and, with Catherine, welcomed the first four of their 10 children.

In 1842, Dickens and Catherine took a six-month sightseeing tour of the U.S. where his work was extremely popular. He met American authors Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edgar Allan Poe but raised hackles when he spoke out against slavery and pressed for an international copyright. (His work could be printed in America without permission or remuneration.) Later that year, he published his impressions of the U.S. in *American Notes for General Circulation*, which did not flatter the young country and soured his reputation there.

His next serialized novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, wasn’t as successful as he hoped (despite sending Martin to America for a brief sojourn), so for both financial and socially conscious ends, he published a Christmas book in 1843. Taking inspiration from a short story he’d written in *The Pickwick Papers* (“The Story of the...
Goblins Who Stole a Sexton”) and voicing his concern after reading a Parliamentary commission on children’s employment and visiting a ragged school for destitute children, Dickens wrote the now-iconic redemption story of Ebenezer Scrooge in only six weeks. He consciously began to mine his own life in writing A Christmas Carol, indirectly addressing his childhood experience in the blacking factory through Scrooge’s memories and experiences. The novella was published on December 19, 1843, selling 6,000 copies in five days.

He published four more Christmas novels between 1844 and 1848: The Chimes, The Cricket on the Hearth, The Battle of Life and The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain. The rest of the decade saw the publication of Pictures From Italy, Dombey and Son and finally David Copperfield, a semiautobiographical novel and Dickens’ personal favorite. With these latter novels, he combined the cheerfulness and sentimentality characteristic of his earlier work with more realistic depictions of life.

By the end of the decade, his marriage to Catherine had begun to deteriorate, and the financial needs of his large family and travels pressured him to maintain his strenuous writing schedule.

In 1850, Dickens founded the weekly periodical Household Words, which he replaced with its successor, All the Year Round, in 1859. He became a champion of other writers, publishing their fiction, and continued to point out the social ills he saw around him. The novels of this period grew darker in tone and included Bleak House, Hard Times, Little Dorrit and A Tale of Two Cities. He also permanently separated from Catherine and fell in love with actor Ellen Ternan.

In 1853, Dickens had begun to give public readings of A Christmas Carol for charity. Five years later, he became a professional reader of excerpts of his own works and a special cutting of A Christmas Carol. Besides the substantial income these readings provided, they scratched the theatrical itch Dickens had held since childhood and allowed him to bask personally in his adoring public. In 1859, a journalist in New York suggested that Dickens undertake a reading tour to the U.S., but Dickens ultimately decided against it. Instead, he published an essay collection, The Uncommercial Traveller, and two novels, Great Expectations and Our Mutual Friend.

By 1867, Dickens had changed his mind about an American reading tour. He arrived in November for a tour that extended into April. Among the reasons that a tour appealed to him, besides a financial gain, was that he wanted to read his work for a new audience. He traveled to numerous cities from Baltimore, Maryland, to Albany, New York, performing more than 70 readings for audiences as large as 2,500 people. Whatever bad blood existed between Dickens and the U.S. since the publication of American Notes had evaporated. He was as popular as ever, and he later noted that the U.S. had changed considerably over the previous 25 years.

Although Dickens’ health had been declining and the readings were physically taxing on him, he gave a farewell tour in England in 1870 and started writing The Mystery of Edwin Drood, which remained unfinished upon his death on June 9, 1870. Dickens was buried in Poets’ Corner at Westminster Abbey.
A Novel Petition for London’s Poor

By Jo Holcomb

In the spring of 1843, Charles Dickens began work on a pamphlet titled “An Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man’s Child.” Although beloved for his fiction, Dickens was first and foremost a political writer and reformer.

Not long after conceiving the idea for his political pamphlet, he changed course. In October 1843, he began writing *A Christmas Carol* and finished it in six weeks. Truth be told, Dickens was in a bit of a financial crisis himself. He was 31, already raising four (of what would be 10) children and the returns from his recent serial, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, were disappointing. He “dashed off” *Carol*, and it was published on December 19, 1843 — just in time for late holiday sales and the Dickens’ family Christmas.

The fact that Dickens considered income when writing *Carol* should in no way diminish his own commitment to social reform and his arguments on behalf of the poor. The realities of his own life led him to recognize the serious need for reforms that would provide more comprehensive care for the poor — particularly the children of poverty. As a child, Dickens experienced the fear and uncertainty of his family’s diminishing resources. His father was sent to prison for not paying his debts, and the rest of the family joined him there with the exception of 12-year-old Charles, who was left behind to earn his keep at Warren’s Blacking Factory putting labels on pots of blacking boot polish.

As an adult, having pulled himself out of the mire of poverty, Dickens never forgot the experience of his youth and, in many ways, continued to be damaged by it. His writing would reflect his memories, as evidenced in the hard road of *Oliver Twist* or the semiautobiographical *David Copperfield*. By the year he wrote *Carol*, child labor in Great Britain had reached a critical tipping point. Children who didn’t attend school worked in factories, mines, shipyards, construction or any number of menial jobs. Many children began working at age 3 in some of the most dangerous places, averaging 16 hours of hard labor a day. Life expectancy was low, as they rarely lived beyond their mid-20s.

In Dickens’ day, only a fraction of the population received a formal education and thousands of children in London didn’t attend school of any kind. “Ragged schools” were established by charity institutions to provide a free, rudimentary education for destitute children.

Leading up to the novella’s writing, Dickens was particularly struck by two factors directly related to the treatment of poor children. Earlier in 1843, he had read a government report on child labor with statistics that were supported by interviews with child laborers. He learned that girls who sewed for a new market of the middle class were housed above the factory floor and worked 16-hour days, much like Martha Cratchit. Another report revealed that 8-year-olds dragged coal carts through underground tunnels for 11 hours a day. Sadly, these stories represented a norm — not an exception.

Dickens also visited the Field Lane ragged school at the behest of a friend and philanthropist, which further incited Dickens to take action with his pen. He was sickened by what he called the “atmosphere of taint and dirt and pestilence.” In *Carol*, Dickens made a plea for the poor by writing about the living and education situations for poor children and adults alike and contrasting it to the grasping Scrooge — an attempt to reveal not only the need for Scrooge’s reclamation but the need for a radical change of heart across London’s entire population.
An Enduring and Changing Legacy

By Carla Steen
Resident Dramaturg

*Dina Christmas Carol* was published nearly 180 years ago on December 19, 1843. The story touched a cultural nerve then and has continued to remain a vital, relevant story for every generation since. The reasons for its longevity may lie in the story’s chameleon-like ability to be to each age what that age requires. Various aspects and themes of the story have resonated at different times since the 1840s. Read on for an overview of the novella’s reception since its debut.

**1843**

Upon publication, *A Christmas Carol* is reviewed to nearly universal acclaim. Second and third printings are required after 6,000 copies sell in five days. The novella has 10 printings by early 1845.

One thing that sets Dickens apart is that unlike a wistful predecessor such as Washington Irving, who seemed content to lament the passing of those grand and glorious celebrations of yore and the general malaise of the society around him, Dickens was convinced that he had the tonic for what ailed his countrymen. His approach was to restore Christmas, not lament its passing.

*Les Standiford*
*The Man Who Invented Christmas, 2008*
1844
The story finds success with audiences of all kinds and is almost immediately pirated. By January 6, Peter Parley’s Illuminated Library prints the first installment of its “reoriginated” version, and by February, eight theater companies are performing an adaptation of the novella, only one of which is sanctioned by Dickens.

1840s to 1850s
In The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge, Paul Davis notes that the original audience for the Carol receives it as a tale of their time, with the sections about Christmas Present, the Cratchits and depictions of an urban Christmas with its markets and street life of most interest. They recognize the Christian religious undertones in the story but mostly see it as a story accurately reflecting their own lives. The Cratchits and their plight are the heart of the story, with Bob sometimes displacing Scrooge as the story’s central figure. The spiritual power of the story is secular and sentimental — not theological.

Dickens’ story proved that urbanization had not destroyed Christmas. In the British imagination, Christmas was associated with the manor house, peasant revels and baronial feasts. ... Dickens’ story provided celebratory proof that despite dour dissenting tradesmen who condemned Christmas revels, the old Christmas could flourish in the new cities. Scrooge’s reformation thus became urban Britain’s counter-reformation to puritanical excess.

Paul Davis
The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge, 1990

1857
In July, Dickens reads A Christmas Carol for the first time to a commercial audience in London. Eventually, he edits a 90-minute version for these readings.

1860s
Before A Christmas Carol, goose is the typical fowl served for Christmas dinner. By the late 1860s, however, the standard dish becomes turkey. Scrooge’s purchase of the prize turkey for the Cratchits’ holiday dinner has profound influence on the goose (near disaster) and turkey (huge boon) industries.

1867–1868
On his second visit to the U.S., Dickens makes a five-month reading tour, with the most popular programs being A Christmas Carol and Trial From Pickwick. In total, Dickens reads A Christmas Carol at least 125 times in the U.K. and U.S., preserving his own version of the story and reaching audiences who may not have read the novella.

1870
Charles Dickens dies on June 9, 1870. In the latter part of the Victorian era, after Dickens’ death, the understanding and appreciation of the Carol shifts, with readings taking on more overtly religious overtones, identifying the Cratchit family with the Holy Family and Scrooge with the wise man making a pilgrimage to visit the humble child.

1885
The British weekly magazine Punch publishes the first of its annual parodies of A Christmas Carol, complete with illustrations that echo the original John Leech drawings, and uses Dickens’ story for social and political commentary. Punch’s satirization runs counter to most adaptations’ tendency to retain some reverence for the story, but this isn’t the last time the Carol is used for satire.

1900–1920
A Christmas Carol enters the public domain, and many editions are published with new illustrations. During his life, Dickens was frustrated with the lack of copyright protection for authors. With all strictures lifted, stage editions, music hall versions, audio recordings, satires and silent films of the Carol joined the litany of publications to make the story what Paul Davis calls “common cultural currency.”

Now a full generation or two removed from his death, Dickens is more likely to be remembered as the author of favorite childhood novels and characters; thus A Christmas Carol enters the realm of “children’s classic.” Critics and other writers associate Dickens and A Christmas Carol with childishness, a fairy tale with little appeal to the adult mind of the early 20th century. The fun and games at Fred’s party come to the fore as a model for children’s celebrations, and the scenes featuring children are emphasized.
1910
One of the earliest film adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* is a 10-minute silent film by Edison Studios with Marc McDermott as Scrooge and Charles Ogle as Cratchit.

Post-World War I
Fairy tale innocence ends with World War I. In the wake of so many “Tims” dying in war, scholars debate whether Tiny Tim survives in the novella (Dickens’ clarification, “who did NOT die,” was a late addition to the text). Some war-scarred cynics even see Dickens not as the “inventor of Christmas” but its destroyer, having stripped it of spiritual significance and leaving it mere function.

1930
Although the occasional version of *A Christmas Carol* draws parallels between Scrooge and the fat-cat capitalist and Cratchit and the exploited worker, they’re the exception, not the rule, during the Great Depression. Most versions lean into escapism and the fantasy of being released from economic needs.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt sometimes reads from the *Carol* during his Christmas Eve radio addresses, drawing lessons for his New Deal from the text (see sidebar).

1935
A pre-World War II film starring Seymour Hicks (who first played Scrooge onstage in 1901) emphasizes British unity and Scrooge’s isolation from society, including a scene of people singing “God Save the Queen.”

1951
A feature film starring Alastair Sim as Scrooge becomes, for some, the gold standard of film adaptations. It captures a post-World War II, post-Freudian interest in psychology.

1962
An animated TV holiday special, “Mister Magoo’s Christmas Carol,” is broadcast, bringing a new pop culture flavor to the story’s “common cultural currency.”

A Christmas rite for me is always to reread that immortal little story by Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*. Reading between the lines and thinking as I always do of Bob Cratchit’s humble home as a counterpart of millions of our own American homes, the story takes on a stirring significance to me. Old Scrooge found that Christmas wasn’t a humbug. He took to himself the spirit of neighborliness. But today, neighborliness no longer can be confined to one’s little neighborhood. Life has become too complex for that. In our country, neighborliness has gradually spread its boundaries — from town, to county, to state and now, at last, to the whole nation.

For instance, who a generation ago would have thought that a week from tomorrow — January 1, 1940 — tens of thousands of elderly men and women in every state and every county and every city of the nation would begin to receive [Social Security] checks every month for old age retirement insurance — and not only that, but that there would be also insurance benefits for the wife, the widow, the orphan children and even dependent parents? Who would have thought a generation ago that people who lost their jobs would, for an appreciable period, receive unemployment insurance — that the needy, the blind and the crippled children would receive some measure of protection, which will reach down to the millions of Bob Cratchits, the Marthas and the Tiny Tims of our own “four-room homes”?

President Franklin D. Roosevelt
From a radio address on December 24, 1939
1975
The Guthrie Theater produces the first of what will become decades of consecutive productions of A Christmas Carol, sparking a holiday tradition at numerous regional theaters.

Late in 1974, when I took up my post as literary manager at the Guthrie, Artistic Director Michael Langham asked me to write an adaptation of the Dickens novella for the 1975 holiday season “as a gift to the community.” …

During the first few years of production, I used “bookend” scenes of the Charles Dickens family, and the author himself strolled among the players, talking to us, the audience. My dramaturgical reason for putting Dickens in the play sprang from my need for a strong narrative voice. How can you do Carol without starting with “Marley was dead to begin with”?

Dickens wrote the book because he was pressed for money, but in the course of writing it, he underwent a conversion worthy of Scrooge. Creating the novella ended up giving him boundless joy, and it was fun for the audience to share this double reformation.

Barbara Field
New Classics From the Guthrie Theater, 2003

1988
Bill Murray stars as the cynical television executive Frank Cross in a film adaptation called Scrooged.

Scrooged is nothing if not contemporary. Frank Cross’ passionately delivered final speech, in which he endorses the power of love and the importance of old-fashioned family values, might have come out of the recent Presidential campaign.

Vincent Canby
In a review for The New York Times, November 23, 1988

1992
The film release of The Muppet Christmas Carol, starring Michael Caine as Scrooge, Kermit the Frog as Bob Cratchit, Gonzo as Charles Dickens and Rizzo the Rat as Dickens’ sidekick, becomes the new standard for Carol interpretations.

2019
A dark, dystopian TV miniseries released by the BBC and FX, featuring Guy Pearce as Scrooge, Andy Serkis as Christmas Past, Joe Alwyn as Bob Cratchit and Vinette Robinson as Mary Cratchit, brings the story into the #MeToo era.

This Christmas Carol has darker ideas for how Scrooge would maliciously dehumanize people, going so far as to get Scrooge verifiably canceled. One can’t help but think that a story involving him harassing Mary Cratchit was added in part because of a recent public reckoning with high-profile predators. … [B]ut the execution is tone-deaf (as is the handling of Scrooge’s own history of abuse), especially with its place in a story of forgiveness.

Nick Allen
In a review on www.rogerebert.com, December 18, 2019

1994
Perhaps in a full-circle moment (echoing the events that spurred Dickens to write A Christmas Carol in the first place), TIME magazine puts a caricature of Republican Newt Gingrich on its cover with the label “Uncle Scrooge” for a feature story about the incoming Speaker of the House’s political agenda.

So maybe all Ebenezer Scrooge needed was a spin doctor, someone who would warn him to stop calling the Christmas spirit “humbug” and reterm it “misguided compassion.” But Gingrich is right to be concerned about whether the GOP revolution is seen as spirited or mean-spirited. House Republicans have come roaring into Washington promising not just to remake welfare but to pull down the whole edifice of federal poverty programs.

Richard Lacayo

2021
The Guthrie Theater premieres Lavina Jadhwani’s adaptation of A Christmas Carol, directed by Joseph Haj.

2022
Ryan Reynolds and Will Farrell star in the A Christmas Carol-inspired comedic film Spirited.
CULTURAL CONTEXT

It is often said that Charles Dickens “invented” modern Christmas. While this may be a slight exaggeration, it is no exaggeration to suggest that he radically shaped — and continues to shape — the way we celebrate Christmas today.

The historical Christmas origin tale is generally well known: Christian belief mixed in with the Roman traditions of Saturnalia, the Scandinavian Yule traditions of feasting and merriment and a mixture of northern European cuisines — combined with a heady mixture of North American commercialism. But it was not always this way, and Dickens is largely responsible for the festive, family-oriented celebration we know today.

There is no date given in the Christian Bible for the birth of Jesus, but beginning in late antiquity and continuing through the Middle Ages, the Feast of the Nativity was usually celebrated on December 25.

Dickens and the Christmas Tradition

By Matt McGeachy
In the early Middle Ages, Advent was a time of general merriment. Harvest festivals, feasting and revelry began on the Feast of St. Martin de Tours on November 11 and lasted for 40 days. When Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day 800 A.D., the actual celebration on December 25 gained greater prominence so that by the later Middle Ages, Christmas was the dominant feast of winter.

Christmas in the Middle Ages was a very public affair. Communities celebrated together, and it was a time to solidify relationships through gift giving. Employers and servants would exchange small gifts, as would landlords and tenants. On occasion, a manorial lord might give his manor the gift of a feast or some ale. All people of means would give alms to the poor. In England, where *A Christmas Carol* takes place, Christmas became a widely celebrated party with lots of food, wine, dancing and card playing.

Following the Protestant Reformation, the Puritans in England sought to eliminate the celebration of Christmas. Since it had no Biblical basis, they viewed it as a Catholic invention and decried the lax morality of drinking and dancing to celebrate the Nativity. Following the English Civil War (1642–1651), the Puritans effectively banned Christmas in 1647, which remained in effect throughout the Commonwealth and Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell. Christmas became legal again with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, but celebration remained sparse, and even church services for Christmas were poorly attended until the early 19th century.

Dickens' *Christmas Carol* has become such an essential part of Christmas that we can hardly imagine the holiday season without it.

Theodore and Caroline Hewitson
*A Chronicle of Dickens’ Christmas Carol*, 1951

Thus by the time Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, Christmas was a fairly subdued affair. It was neither the community festival of the Middle Ages nor the important religious celebration of late antiquity nor the ribald celebration of the 17th century. But the tide was turning. The royal family began decorating and displaying Christmas trees — borrowed from their German heritage — and Christmas dinners became more elaborate and common. So when Dickens proclaims that Christmas is a “good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time,” he is hearkening back to a well-established tradition of merriment, charity and reverence, combining aspects of Christmases past.

Dickens focuses his holiday not in the commons but at the family hearth. It becomes a personal celebration and a time for reflection. Dickens both reflects his society’s views about the importance of hearth and home as well as projects his own social conscience into Christmas. Dickens’ Christmas is not solely inward-looking, portraying an idealized scene of Victorian domesticity; it also requires that each person admit that humankind is their business — it is an opportunity to make the world a better place. For Scrooge, perhaps Dickens’ most famous invention, Christmas is an opportunity for rebirth. No doubt Dickens hoped Scrooge would be an example to keep Christmas in one’s heart, always, and not to shut out the wisdom the season offers us.
apprenticeship — To learn a skilled trade or craft, young people were apprenticed to a master in that field. Their parents paid a fee to the craftsperson and signed articles of apprenticeship. The apprentice had to obey the master and keep trade secrets, and the master provided room and board while teaching the apprentice the trade. Most apprentices began their training between ages 10 and 14, and training could take up to seven years.

Bedlam — A famous hospital for the mentally ill in South London.

Camden Town — A northeast suburb of London. As a boy, Charles Dickens and his family lived there for a while after their move from Chatham to London.

charwoman — A servant who is hired by the day to do odd household chores.

doornail — A nail used to stud doors to increase strength or ornamentation.

dowry — Money or property a woman brings to a marriage.

humbug — A pretense, sham or fraud.

milliner — A person who makes hats and other accessories. A millinery apprenticeship in Dickens’ day usually lasted two to three years.

pound — British currency is based on the pound. In 1843, one pound = 20 shillings = 240 pence. Equivalencies in today’s money can be tricky to calculate, but roughly speaking, one pound in 1843 would be worth about $1,100 today. Bob Cratchit’s weekly earnings of 15 shillings is worth about $850 today for an annual salary of about $44,000.

prisons and workhouses — Individuals unable to pay their expenses might be put into debtor’s prison, as Dickens’ father was for a few months in 1824. A person in jail couldn’t work to pay off their debt, but after three months, they could choose, if able, to give their personal property to creditors to get out of jail. In 1834, the New Poor Law in Britain established the workhouse system to provide relief to the poor. People had to show eligibility at a regional workhouse, such as being born or apprenticed in the parish. Because the goal was to keep workhouses from being flooded, conditions were made unappealing and inhospitable: poor ventilation and food, uniforms, separation of families and laborious work like breaking stones.

pudding — Christmas pudding, also known as plum pudding, is traditionally made five weeks before Christmas. Made with a mixture of fresh or dried fruit, nuts and sometimes suet, the rich, heavy pudding is boiled or steamed. Then it is kept in a cool, dry place until it’s steamed again a few hours before serving. It might be decorated with a spray of holly, doused in brandy or set on fire (or all three).
## A Scrooge Primer

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<tr>
<td>Invite invitations.</td>
<td>Judge poverty with severity.</td>
<td>Kick those who are down.</td>
<td>Lend to the rich.</td>
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<td>Quiz the quite helpless.</td>
<td>Ruin rich relations.</td>
<td>Seldom believe anything.</td>
<td>Tell only others’ secrets.</td>
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<td>Undermine antagonists.</td>
<td>Vilify the unpopular.</td>
<td>Watch women warily.</td>
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<td>Xtol elegant extravagance.</td>
<td>Yield your convictions readily.</td>
<td>Zeal is very ridiculous.</td>
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As printed in *Punch* magazine, 1859.
EDUCATION RESOURCES

Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities

SCROOGE’S SELF-REFLECTION
Discussion Questions
• What are the different ways the ghosts prompt Scrooge to participate in his journey of redemption?
• Which of the three ghosts’ lessons do you think had the greatest effect on Scrooge and why?
• What lessons would you want to learn from the three ghosts?

Classroom Activity
Invite the students to write a letter to themselves in three parts, one from each ghost, guided by the three prompt questions below. Then have them seal the letters inside envelopes and ask them not to open it until the next Christmas Eve.

• What would you say to your younger self? Describe a happy or treasured memory.
• What would you like to say to yourself now? What are some things you are grateful for?
• What do you want your future self to know? What are your hopes and future goals?

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE
Discussion Questions
• Describe in your own words why you think Scrooge is so unhappy about Christmas.
• Why does Fred continually invite Scrooge to Christmas Eve dinner every year despite always getting rejected?
• Do you agree with Bob Cratchit’s reasons to raise a toast to Scrooge? Why or why not?

Classroom Activity
Have each student write out a list of three reasons stating why they either agree or disagree with Fred and Bob’s reasons to be grateful for Scrooge. Then, split them into two groups, with one group agreeing and one group disagreeing. Invite them to discuss and share their lists with each other.

STORY ADAPTATIONS
Discussion Questions
• Adapting a novella for stage or film creates many challenges. After seeing A Christmas Carol, how did the production’s theatrical elements — lighting, scenic design, music and sound effects — capture the spirit of Dickens’ story?
• When do you think the theatrical elements were most successful or surprising?
• What do you feel is the central theme of this adaptation?

Classroom Activity
Many different adaptations have been made of A Christmas Carol. In small groups, invite the students to imagine their own modern-day adaptation of the story and choose a few elements they would change. Ask them to consider the setting, characters and plot. In which time period would their story take place? Where would it be set? How would they describe their Scrooge? What lessons would the ghosts teach? Ask each group to present their adapted elements or scenes, and discuss the differences as a class.
**THE CAROLS IN A CHRISTMAS CAROL**

**Discussion Questions**
- When does music come into play during *A Christmas Carol*?
- How do the songs and music set different tones for the scenes?
- Describe the different ways music can be used to enhance the storytelling onstage.

**Classroom Activity**
Have each student write a short list of songs that fit each of these three moods: cheerful, haunting and nostalgic. Ask the students to share how and why they made their song choices with the class.

**SCROOGE’S HOLIDAY SPIRIT**

**Discussion Questions**
- Do you believe that Scrooge had a true change of heart? Why or why not?
- In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge participates in the holiday spirit by giving to charity, adding to the Cratchit family feast and visiting his nephew, Fred. How would you describe the “spirit” of Christmas or other holidays you celebrate?
- Why was it important for Scrooge to allow his spirit to change?

**Classroom Activity**
Have each student write out three ways they believe Scrooge positively affected people’s lives through his choices on Christmas Day. As a class, discuss how charity can affect a community. Invite the students to share actions they think Scrooge can take to be the most charitable and make a list for the class.

**SHIFTING GENRES**

**Discussion Questions**
- Were there elements in *A Christmas Carol* that felt frightening or haunting to you? Why or why not?
- Describe three moments in the play that you found joyous or cheerful and explain why.
- Which aspects of the play are comedic? Which aspects of the play are tragic? How do these aspects affect the storytelling?

**Classroom Activity**
Individually or in groups, ask the students to describe how theatrical elements define the story of *A Christmas Carol* as either a comedy or tragedy. How do lighting and sound choices affect a scene or the characters? What theatrical effects help create a comedic or tragic mood? Invite the students to share their thoughts with the class.
The Business of Directing and Adapting

Joseph Haj and Lavina Jadhwani have both directed and adapted plays, but they’ve never collaborated in their respective director and adapter roles on the same play until our 2021 production of *A Christmas Carol*. So we invited them to chat and share what it feels like to move between the roles they both know — and do — so well.

**LAVINA ➔ JOSEPH**

**LAVINA JADHWANI:** Hi, Joe! Let’s start by talking about Charles Dickens.

**JOSEPH HAJ:** My dad loved Dickens, so I didn’t read *any* Dickens at first. [laughs] But in my 20s, that surliness subsided; I read everything he wrote and became a lifelong fan. I love him as a writer entirely. The characters he writes and the ways he threads storylines are deeply satisfying. Dickens has a genius way of presenting numerous plots and then intersecting them in ways that thrill the reader. So I’m astounded that *A Christmas Carol* came from the same writer because there’s not even a B story. There’s one story with a singular purpose. Everyone in the rehearsal room understands that purpose and feels the responsibility to share something beautiful with our community who loves this holiday tradition so dearly.

**LJ:** There are countless *A Christmas Carol* scripts out there. What drew you to mine?

**JH:** Your adaptation captured us because it felt enormously faithful to Dickens’ novella. It does a magnificent job of showing us that Scrooge wants what we all want: He wants to be better. He’s bad at it. He’s scared of it. He’s cynical about it. But deep down, he wants to change. To show Scrooge as an active participant in his own redemption is a compelling theme I’m excited to explore. It’s a different journey for Scrooge than we usually see.

**LJ:** Why did you want to direct *A Christmas Carol*?

**JH:** During the pandemic, I didn’t want to go a year without doing *A Christmas Carol* for our community. Together with my friend and filmmaker E.G. Bailey, we made *Dickens’ Holiday Classic* in 2020, a film based on the performance script Dickens adapted from his novella for his public readings. While making the film, I fell deeply in love with the material. I’m fascinated by its structure and the questions it poses. Something I’ve continued to contemplate is why Dickens titled his novella *A Christmas Carol*. It’s almost like he knew it would become a tradition, in the same way we sing “Silent Night” every year or participate in holiday rituals with our friends and family. We revisit *A Christmas Carol* again and again to remind us that what matters most shouldn’t be sacrificed for what matters least. Perhaps that’s why this story has not been out of circulation in two centuries. It has always been in favor.

**LJ:** What has it been like having me in the rehearsal room with you?

**JH:** I have an outstanding relationship with dead playwrights. That’s where I spend so much of my time. [both laugh] In all seriousness, it’s been awesome. With every play, you always wonder what the writer was thinking. It’s amazing to just turn to you and ask, “What do we think is happening in this scene?” I love having many collaborators and great thinkers in one room. It makes the play feel like a living thing.
JOSEPH → LAVINA

JH: Why did you decide to adapt this story, Lavina?

LJ: I’ve been excited to have this conversation with you! I think it was two things. In the first play I adapted, The Sitayana (Or How to Make an Exit), there’s a breakup scene at the end where Sita says to Ram, “I release you.” Everyone told me it reminded them of A Christmas Carol. Secondly, I was interested in the idea of business, which keeps coming up in the rehearsal room. What does it mean to be a good person of business or for mankind to be our business? Being Sindhi, there is much of Scrooge’s humanity that I see reflected in my own culture and family. The journey that the theme of business takes in the text was of great interest to me.

JH: What was your writing process like?

LJ: Until now, the closest I’d ever been to A Christmas Carol was when I worked as a marketing assistant at the Goodman Theatre and handed out candy canes to audience members. It’s a whole different world to experience it as a creator. I started tooling around with the text during the pandemic. I became part of a Chicago-based company of artists called “The ShakesZoom” who read Shakespeare plays online three times a week. The only two readings of my script prior to rehearsing it at the Guthrie were done by that virtual company. I wouldn’t be here without those incredible people.

JH: How did the idea of Scrooge being an active participant in his redemption emerge?

LJ: Dickens has a particular sense of humor, and I’m into it. [both laugh] For example, early in Stave Two, Scrooge has a tear on his face. When the spirit asks him about it, he says it’s a pimple. But he starts crying right away; something is ready to crack open. I grew up in a household that’s big on the idea that people aren’t so much defined by their past as by what comes next. Maybe that comes from being Hindu and growing up in a culture that believes in reincarnation, but on the page, Scrooge’s desire to change is evident. And I think the story is not only better but funnier when we see him wrestling with that early on. Yes, I’ll leave with a Christmas tune in my heart, but I’ll also wonder what kind of life Scrooge is going to lead after all this, which makes me look inward and ask, “What kind of life am I going to lead?”

JH: What is it like being an adapter and working with another director, especially being a director yourself?

LJ: During my first day of tech rehearsal while directing As You Like It at the Guthrie in 2019, I remember thinking, “Someone needs to make a lot of decisions. Oh, right — that’s me!” [laughs] So it’s been great fun to sit back and watch you make the decisions because you know and love this story intimately. Your vision for it is exquisite. I recently had dinner with some friends who work at the Minnesota Orchestra, and I learned that your renowned local conductor [Osmo Vänskä] is retiring this year. They said that when he conducts, they hear parts of the music they’ve never heard before, even though they’ve always been written in the score. So seeing my script in a director’s hands, yours to be specific, is hopeful and exciting. ☺

Edited and adapted from the Guthrie’s 2021 A Christmas Carol program.
A Legacy To Celebrate

On October 5, 2022, we lost Sheila Livingston, a beloved member of the Guthrie Theater family, at age 93. Sheila stood at the heart of the Guthrie for over 50 years and passionately advocated for the art onstage and its ability to impact the Twin Cities community, especially the lives of young people.

Among the Guthrie’s staff and amateur historians, Sheila was well known for having inspired our annual holiday tradition when she boldly suggested in 1974 that former Artistic Director Michael Langham commit to producing *A Christmas Carol*.

Below, we’ve reprinted Sheila’s essay from the early 2010s about how our annual production of *A Christmas Carol* began and why it continues.

For me, the story of *A Christmas Carol* dates back to November 1970.

I was a volunteer then, and Michael Langham, who was to become Artistic Director in 1971, was guest director for *A Play* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. It was a beautiful but grim and dark play about life in a Stalinist labor camp. My family was having Thanksgiving dinner when the phone rang. The crisp, English voice said, “Michael Langham here.” I was frozen in space — my feelings about artistic directors and artists were a mixture of hero worship and pure fear. While I was an avid theatergoer, I had no confidence in my knowledge of theater. He went on, “I am very upset. There are only 350 people in the theater tonight. It’s not fair to the actors — what are you doing about it?”

I was literally trembling but managed to utter, “It’s Thanksgiving, you know, and most everyone is at home with their families.”

“It won’t do,” he said, and hung up.

Shortly thereafter, he returned to London, but the memory of that call stayed with me as I tried to
do something about it. Michael did become Artistic Director in 1971. I was asked to join the staff to work on education programs. Our seasons were shorter then — the Guthrie Theater had begun as a summer festival theater in 1963 running from May 7 through September 21. During the next couple of years, the theater flourished and the season stretched out.

We opened *The School for Scandal* in November 1974. One December morning, Michael summoned Marketing Director Doug Eichten and myself to his office and said no one was coming to *The School for Scandal.* This time I was prepared — I had three years and many conversations with Doug to think about it. I blurted out, “But Michael, why should people come in December to see a play they can see in January? Don’t you think we should be doing a holiday play during that time?”

“Like what?” he said sharply.

“Like *A Christmas Carol,*” I said with some confidence. He said, “That’s a novel and a screenplay — there is no script.” I meekly responded that stories become plays — indeed our slogan that year was “good stories well told.” Michael asked Barbara Field, our Dramaturg and Literary Manager, to adapt Charles Dickens’ novel, and on December 12, 1975, we opened our full-blown production of *A Christmas Carol.*

It was unbelievable — an unqualified artistic and box office hit. People began ordering tickets for the next year the moment it was announced. Each year, the phone has rung off the hook! Stephen Kanee directed the first production, and we continued to stage *A Christmas Carol* over the Langham years. Then as Alvin Epstein, Liviu Ciulei and Garland Wright became artistic directors, each of them said, “We’ll do it this year, but next year we’ll do something else.” I always said, “But it means so much to the community and to the students.” I and others only had to make that argument for the first year. After that, the first title of a show written down when planning a season was *A Christmas Carol* — it became obvious that it warmed the hearts and the coffers.

When Joe Dowling became Artistic Director in 1995 and saw *A Christmas Carol,* he said, “I love it and I think it’s time to make it even better.” He actively sought funding to make a new production possible, and Barbara revisited the script and rewrote parts of it; new sets and costumes were constructed.

This might be the point where I declare, “And the rest, as they say, is history.” But the life and energy of *A Christmas Carol* thrives. Each director brings their own sensibility to the production, and numerous actors have embodied and rediscovered the familiar characters. Staging ideas have been revisited, costumes have been reinterpreted and each year, the experience provides something special for that particular audience in that particular season.

Let me share with you what I believe this production has meant for the Guthrie. It has introduced countless people to the theater, including 12,000 to 15,000 students each year. It has enabled theatergoers to include their children and grandchildren in the thrilling experience of watching live theater. Families celebrate the holiday season with our show. Companies have their Christmas parties here.

But it has done other things as well. The transformation of Scrooge in the play has transformed many of us. For example, Dennis Behl, who served as our press representative, began an annual food drive where audience members and staff could bring food gifts to the theater to be distributed to families in our community. Many acting families, parents and children, have appeared onstage together, bringing a special warmth and love to the play.

*A Christmas Carol* at the Guthrie is — and has been for two generations — a very special experience to a great number of people. Tyrone Guthrie would often define a classic as a play that would live forever. I believe *A Christmas Carol* is a classic. I know it will continue to delight and inspire forever.
For Further Reading and Understanding

BOOKS

The Annotated Christmas Carol by Michael Patrick Hearn.

Charles Dickens by Jane Smiley.

Christmas Books by Charles Dickens.

Christmas Stories by Charles Dickens.

The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge by Paul Davis.

Oxford Reader’s Companion to Dickens by Paul Schlicke.

The Penguin Dickens Companion by Paul Davis.

The Victorian Christmas Book by Antony and Peter Miall.

ABOUT CHARLES DICKENS

Charles Dickens by Michael Slater.

Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph by Edgar Johnson.

Dickens by Peter Ackroyd.

Dickens: A Biography by Fred Kaplan.

Dickens and Women by Michael Slater.

The Invisible Woman: The Story of Nelly Ternan and Charles Dickens by Claire Tomalin.

The Life of Charles Dickens by John Forster.
London: Chapman and Hall, 1872-1874. The entire text is available online at www.gutenberg.org/files/25851/25851-h/25851-h.htm.

WEBSITES

www.stormfax.com/1dickens.htm
The text of Charles Dickens’ “A Christmas Carol.

www.charlesdickenspage.com
David Perdue’s Charles Dickens page includes information on Dickens — on the page, onstage and in life.

manybooks.net/titles/chestertother09CD-1.html
Free download of G.K. Chesterton’s biography, Charles Dickens, 1906.

www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/1859map/
Searchable map of Victorian London from the UCLA Department of Epidemiology.

www.victorianweb.org
Site designed and edited by professor George P. Landow for Brown University as a resource for students studying Victorian literature.

FILMS AND VIDEOS

www.imdb.com/list/ls003558245/
A list of films adapted from Dickens’ novels and short stories.

A SELECTION OF CHRISTMAS LITERATURE

EDITOR’S NOTE: Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol is one among many stories arising out of the Christmas holiday. What follows is a selected list that may include many of your own favorites.

NOVELS, SHORT STORIES AND POEMS

The first Christmas. Luke, chapter two, Bible.

“The Legend of Befana,” traditional European story.

“Baba Yaga,” folktale, probably Russian in origin, 19th century.

“The Nutcracker and the Mouse King” by E.T.A. Hoffmann, 1816.

The Sketch Book by Washington Irving, 1819-1820.

“The Night Before Christmas” by Clement Clarke Moore, 1822.

“The Fir Tree,” “The Snow Queen” and “The Little Match-Seller” by Hans Christian Andersen, 1845.

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott, 1869.

“How Santa Claus came to Simpson’s Bar” by Bret Harte, 1870.

Christmas Every Day and Other Stories by William Dean Howells, 1892.

“The Burglar’s Christmas” by Willa Cather, 1896.

“Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus” by Francis P. Church, The New York Sun, 1897.

The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus by L. Frank Baum, 1902.

The Tailor of Gloucester by Beatrix Potter, 1902.


The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis, 1950.


“A Christmas Memory” by Truman Capote, 1956.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas! by Dr. Seuss, 1957.


“Santaland Diaries” from Holidays on Ice by David Sedaris, 1992.

Santa’s Twin by Dean Koontz, 1996.

PLAYS

Babes in Toyland by Victor Herbert and Glen MacDonough, 1903.

The Man Who Came to Dinner by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, 1939.

Black Nativity by Langston Hughes, 1961.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever by Barbara Robinson, 1972.

Christmas on Mars by Harry Kondoleon, 1983.


They Sing Christmas up in Harlem: A Lenox Avenue Christmas Carol by Eric L. Wilson, 2000.

Mrs. Bob Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge by Christopher Durang, 2005.


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Peter Ackroyd.

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