



GUTHRIE  
THEATER

Wurtele Thrust Stage / Nov 14 - Dec 30, 2017



Bell  Bank presents

# A Christmas Carol

by CHARLES DICKENS  
adapted by CRISPIN WHITTELL  
directed by LAUREN KEATING

PLAY GUIDE

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The Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963, is an American center for theater performance, production, education and professional training. By presenting both classical literature and new work from diverse cultures, the Guthrie illuminates the common humanity connecting Minnesota to the peoples of the world.

## Guthrie Theater Play Guide

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# Synopsis



The cast of *A Christmas Carol* in rehearsal

PHOTO: DAN NORMAN

Scrooge, a miserly and miserable old man, torments everyone he sees on most days, but is especially cranky on Christmas. He shouts at carolers, refuses to give money to charity and threatens a small beggar boy. His ebullient nephew Fred comes to visit him at his frigid office to invite him to Christmas dinner. Scrooge, predictably, declines. Fred leaves, and Scrooge grudgingly agrees to give his clerk, Bob Cratchit, Christmas off with pay, though Scrooge feels ill used by this. Cratchit leaves. When approached by his faithful housekeeper, Mrs. Dilber, for the same benefit, he refuses and demands that she be at work the next day. Scrooge closes shop and changes into his dressing gown.

Settling in for the night, Scrooge is disturbed – and alarmed – by the ghost of his old partner, Jacob Marley. Marley warns him to mend his ways or he too will be forced to roam the earth in the chains he forged for himself with his cruel ways. Scrooge will be visited by three spirits, Marley tells him. He would do best to listen to what they have to say. No sooner has Marley left than the clocks in Scrooge's house go berserk

and the Ghost of Christmas Past appears. Together they journey back to Scrooge's sad school days, his delight at seeing his sister Fanny, and to a grand Christmas party thrown by his early employer, Old Fezziwig. Scrooge begins to realize that Fezziwig's joy was infectious, that it spread to all his employees, and that this joy is worth more than whatever the party cost him. We also see Scrooge woo, and then lose, the beautiful Belle. The ghost tells Scrooge, "I show you only what is good, and fine, and beautiful. So that should you glimpse it again – as you glimpsed it once – you will grasp it as if your life depends on it." As quickly as she arrived, the ghost is gone, leaving Scrooge alone again in his bed.

Scrooge is soon visited again by the Ghost of Christmas Present. The ghost takes Scrooge to see how the Cratchits celebrate Christmas. Though they are poor and have little to eat, they are happy with what they have and to be in each others' company. Scrooge also learns that Tiny Tim, Bob's wise young son, is very ill and will likely die without proper care. Despite how poorly Scrooge treats him, Cratchit offers him a

toast nonetheless, grateful for what he has.

The scene shifts to his nephew Fred's, and we see simultaneously how the other (richer) half live and that Fred, too, knows how to keep Christmas with friends and family. Generously, Fred proposes a toast to his uncle as well, hoping that Scrooge will find some happiness in life. Games abound, food is plentiful and a good time is had by all. Scrooge begins to wonder if he is truly missing something special. Before the spirit leaves him, he reveals two small, sick children – Ignorance and Want – and Scrooge, moved, inquires if they have no place to stay. The spirit throws Scrooge's words back in his face: "Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?" Christmas Present, too, fades away.

The next visit, from Christmas Future, shows Scrooge his fate if he does not mend his ways. Poor Tiny Tim has died; as has Scrooge. At Tim's funeral are many grief-stricken people; Scrooge has not a single mourner. Mrs. Dilber begins to sell off his possessions, and Scrooge realizes that he must mend his ways or he will simply die forgotten and unloved. The transformation of Scrooge is profound: he awakens to Christmas bells, gives money to charity, sends a huge turkey to the Cratchits, sings along with the carolers, and gives Bob a big raise. He even reconciles with his nephew. Scrooge's story of redemption, beloved by audiences for years, remains as powerful and uplifting as it ever was. From that point forward, we're told, no one kept Christmas as faithfully or fruitfully as old Ebenezer Scrooge.

# Characters



The cast of *A Christmas Carol* in rehearsal

PHOTO: DAN NORMAN

## SETTING

London, December 24–25, 1843

## CHARACTERS

**Ebenezer Scrooge**, a miserly businessman

**Bob Cratchit**, his clerk

**Mrs. Cratchit**, his wife

**Martha, Peter, Belinda and Tiny Tim**, their children

**Fred**, Scrooge's nephew

**Kitty**, Fred's wife

**Mrs. Polkinghorne**, Kitty's mother

**Jane, Sally and Mabel**, Kitty's sisters

**Topper**, a suitor to Sally

**Jacob Marley**, the ghost of Scrooge's old business partner

**Ghost of Christmas Past**

**Ghost of Christmas Present**

**Ghost of Christmas Future Ignorance and Want**

**Youngest Scrooge**, Ebenezer Scrooge as a schoolboy

**Fanny**, Scrooge's older sister

**Mr. Fezziwig**, Scrooge's former employer

**Mrs. Fezziwig**, his wife

**Daisy, Dora and Deirdre Fezziwig**, their daughters

**Daniel, David and Donald**, suitors to the Fezziwig daughters

**Young Scrooge**, Ebenezer Scrooge as a young man

**Young Marley**, Jacob Marley as a young man

**Dick Wilkins**, a fellow clerk at Fezziwig's

**Belle**, Scrooge's former fiancée

**Belle's Husband**

**Mr. Wimple**, Scrooge's tenant

**Mrs. Dilber**, Scrooge's housekeeper

**Old Joe**, a junk salesman

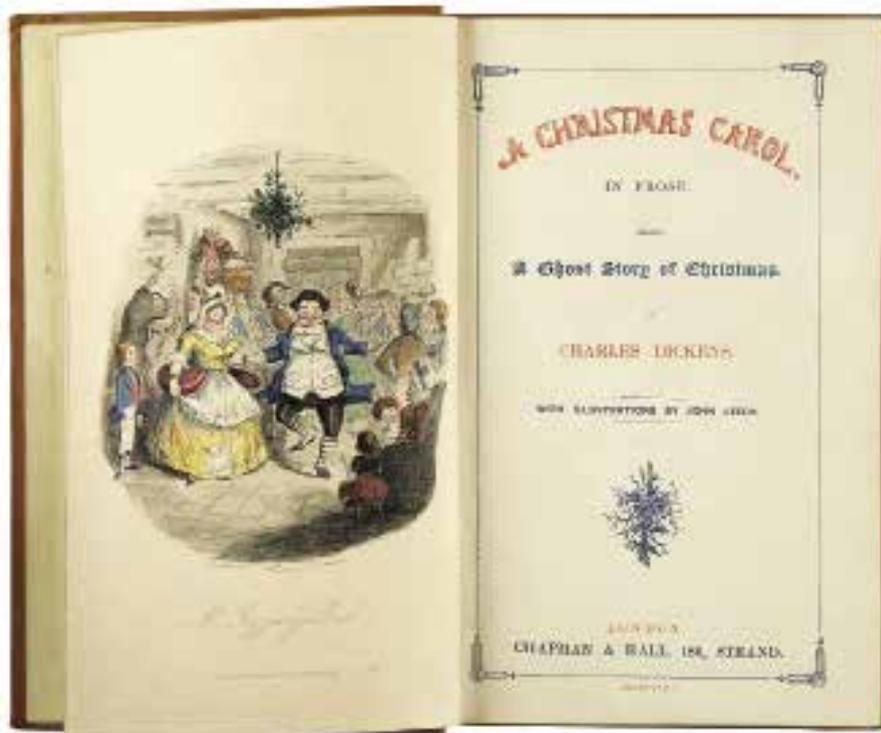
**Scrooge's Priest**

**Bunty and Bumble**, taking a collection for the poor

**Various carolers, revelers, children, Fezziwig guests, citizens of London**

# “This Ghostly Little Book”

comments on *A Christmas Carol*



I have endeavored 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

[A Christmas Carol] is a national benefit, and to every man and woman who reads it a personal kindness.

**William Makepeace Thackeray**

*Fraser's Magazine*, February 1844

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, that if the duties of Christmas were wanting, no good could come of its outward observances; that it must shine upon the hearth and warm it, and into the sorrowful heart and comfort it; that it must

be kindness, benevolence, charity, mercy, and forbearance, or its plum pudding would turn to stone and its roast beef be indigestible.

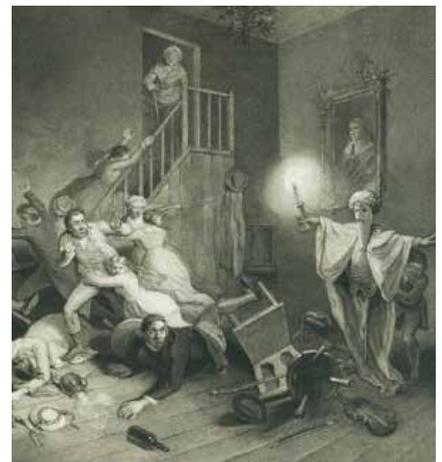
**John Forster**

*The Life of Charles Dickens*, 1874

The narrow space within which it was necessary to confine these Christmas Stories, when they were originally published, rendered their construction a matter of some difficulty, and almost necessitated what is peculiar in their machinery. I never attempted great elaboration of detail in the working out of character within such limits, believing that it could not succeed. My purpose was, in a whimsical kind of masque which the good-humour of the season justified, to awaken some loving and forbearing thoughts, never out of season in a Christian land.

**Charles Dickens**

Preface to a collection of his *Christmas Stories* published in 1852



(Top) Image of *A Christmas Carol*, first edition, 1843

(Above) A boy dressed as a ghost upsets a gathering of friends. Print by John Massey Wright, 1814, part of the British Cartoon Prints Collection

# Charles Dickens' Plea for the Poor

by Jo Holcomb  
Production Dramaturg

Over the years, Charles Dickens has often been credited as the “man who invented Christmas” (F.G. Kitton, 1903). But while Dickens' Christmas stories, certainly the most beloved of which remains *A Christmas Carol*, helped to change the celebration of Christmas, it was not the author's original intent. Charles Dickens was first and foremost a political writer and a reformer. The experiences of his own life led him to recognize the serious need for reforms that would provide more comprehensive care for the poor and particularly the children of poverty.

As a child, Dickens had experienced the fear and uncertainty of his family's diminishing resources. When his father was sent to the workhouse for not being able to meet his debts, the rest of the family joined him there, with the exception of 12-year-old Charles, who was left on his own to make his keep in a blacking factory. It was grueling work and his losses were great. To Dickens, the most severe loss was his inability to continue serious education.

As an adult, having pulled himself out of the mire of poverty, he never forgot the experience and in many ways continued to be damaged by it. His writing would

reflect that memory, whether through the hard road of *Oliver Twist* or the autobiographical *David Copperfield*. By the year of the writing of *Carol*, 1843, child labor in Great Britain had reached a critical point. Children who did not attend school worked. They worked in factories, mines, shipyards, construction or any number of menial jobs. Many children worked from the age of 3 years and in some of the most dangerous places. Life expectancy for these young laborers was no older than mid-20s.

In the mid-19th century, well over 100,000 children in London had never attended a school of any



kind. Of those who did receive education, some attended schools run by private owners for the purpose of making a profit; these were called “ragged” schools. Ragged schools were “charity” institutions created to provide a rudimentary education for destitute children.

Leading up to the writing of *A Christmas Carol*, 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 whose statistics were supported by interviews with child workers themselves. The report revealed that girls were sewing



DICKENS' DREAM, ROBERT WILLIAM BUSS, 1875

for a new market of the middle class, working on average 16 hours a day and, like the character Martha Cratchit, they were housed above the factory floor. There was news of 8-year-old children who dragged coal carts through underground tunnels for 11 hours a day. These stories represented a norm, not an exception.

In the spring of 1843, in response, Dickens began work on a pamphlet called "An Appeal to the People of England on behalf of the Poor Man's Child."

A visit to the Field Lane ragged school further incited Dickens to take action with his pen. He

made the visit on behalf of a potential donor and was sickened by what he called the "atmosphere of taint and dirt and pestilence." At this point, Dickens decided to turn his political pamphlet into a story. In October 1843, he began work on *A Christmas Carol* and finished it in six weeks. He wrote about the living and educational situations of poor children as well as the general conditions of the destitute, all of which he contrasted with the grasping Scrooge and the need not only for Scrooge's reclamation, but also for a change of heart for the whole population. 

**SCROOGE**

Spirit, is there a particular flavor you sprinkle upon them?

**CHRISTMAS PRESENT**

There is.

**SCROOGE**

Would it apply to any kind of dinner on this day?

**CHRISTMAS PRESENT**

To any kindly given. But to a poor one most.

**SCROOGE**

Why to a poor one most?

**CHRISTMAS PRESENT**

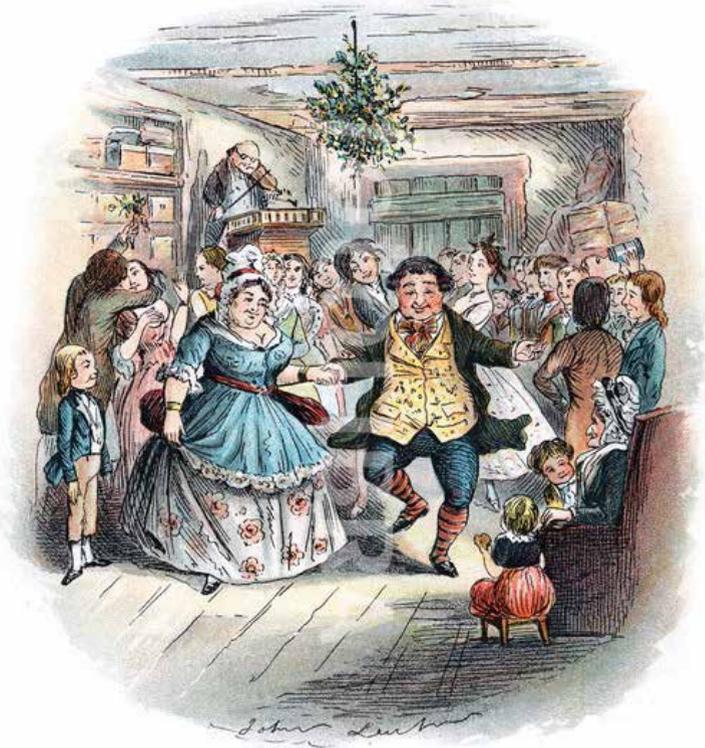
Because it needs it most.

Crispin Whittell, *A Christmas Carol*

# Dickens and the Christmas Tradition

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



Theater, like the Holiday season, is laden with traditions. Everyone knows never to utter the word “Macbeth” in a theater; never to wish an actor “good luck” but rather to “break a leg;” and to always keep the ghost light on. Similarly, the Holiday season brings with it many well-established traditions: trips to visit Santa at an insanely crowded mall; the decoration of Christmas trees and the hanging of mistletoe; huge dinners of turkey or ham; Midnight Mass; or Chinese dinner and a movie.

Since 1975, the Guthrie's annual production of *A Christmas Carol* has been a Minnesota tradition both for audiences and artists alike. This tradition, like the theater itself, is living and organic.

This section is designed to explore Holiday traditions and invite you to come and take part, once again, in the living tradition of the Guthrie's presentation of *A Christmas Carol*. ...

It is often said that 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.

Our 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. 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 forty 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; the ban 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 relatively poorly attended until the early nineteenth century.

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 seventeenth 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 as well as celebration. 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 Mankind is his 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 all: to keep Christmas in one’s heart, always, and not to shut out the wisdom the season offers us.

### Matt McGeachy

written for the 2010 play guide for *A Christmas Carol*.



## CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS AROUND THE WORLD

### Did you know that...

- in Sweden, Christmas Eve is often called “Dipping Day” from a tradition in which families gather in the kitchen to soak the juices of their Christmas meat with rye bread?
- in Iran, Christians call Christmas the “Little Feast” and celebrate Easter as the largest religious celebration of the year?
- the ceremonial main course of a medieval Christmas feast was a boar’s head, and that this tradition persists today at Queen’s College, Oxford?
- in Oaxaca, Mexico, December 23 is celebrated as the “Night of the Radishes,” and that as part of the festivities, large radishes are carved into the characters of the Nativity story?
- on Christmas Eve, the President of Estonia declares an annual Christmas Peace?
- in Finland, Children receive gifts from Joulupukki, the Christmas goat?
- in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and others, Saint Nicholas visits good little children on December 6 each year to leave goodies in their shoes?
- in China, Christians celebrate Christmas by decorating trees and having a large family meal, but gifts are exchanged at the Chinese New Year celebration in January or February, accompanied by massive displays of fireworks?

This piece was adapted from the 2006 program for *A Christmas Carol* at the Guthrie.





## FROM THE DIRECTOR: Lauren Keating

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I truly can't think of a better way to have spent the past month than in the world and spirit of *A Christmas Carol*. It's an honor to helm this production, to be trusted with this tradition, and to work with the all-star Guthrie team and this all-Twin Cities acting company.

I'm a self-confessed *A Christmas Carol* nerd, and I grew up with a lot of Christmas traditions. My family would go to *Carol* every year at the McCarter Theatre in New Jersey. And that would always be around the same time we would go cut down our Christmas tree. I grew up in a very rural part of New Jersey, and we would get our saw, we would get our sled, and we would trudge down the hill to this tree farm every year. The man who owned the farm was always very jolly and very welcoming, and my dad referred to him as Mr. Fezziwig. I thought it was so cool that Mr. Fezziwig from *A Christmas Carol* was selling us a tree. It was maybe around age 12 when I was extremely disappointed and devastated to learn that this was not in fact *the* Mr. Fezziwig. I was talking to my mom about it recently, reminiscing, and I asked her what our "Mr. Fezziwig of the Tree Farm's" real name was. Nobody knows!

I share all that to say: There literally isn't a single production that I could direct for which my family would be more proud or excited than this one.

The magic of *Carol* is something I've always appreciated. I feel like it bonds families, creates memories and makes community. We as theater makers have the power to create this safe space, to hold this space in the middle where you can bring your family – any of your family members no matter their points of view – and you can have this shared experience. That is truly the most powerful and meaningful work that we do.

So when Joe Haj asked me if I'd be interested in directing *A Christmas Carol*, I was deeply honored and jumped at the opportunity. And then, like with anything I direct, I started thinking, "Why now? What is the artistic imperative with this show?" And it didn't take long for me to answer those questions. If you listen to the news or scroll through Facebook, you can plainly see the reason. Our community and our world need this story. It's the story of healing, of redemption, of transformation. We need it more than ever. We need to remember our common humanity and celebrate it. 



## Keith Thomas

### Composer for *A Christmas Carol*

**Q: Not every production has music or a composer. How do you feel the music and the choice to include a composer in the artistic process adds to *A Christmas Carol*?**

Keith Thomas: Well, when you have artists dedicated to creating

original music for a production, a director gets to work with that composer to specifically enhance what's going on in the play, instead of having to finding pre-existing songs to meet the same end.

**Q: What was your artistic process in terms of composing the music for *Carol*?**

KT: Everything comes from the script. I'll read through the new adaptation of the script and mark places where I think there could be some music, and I also mark where the mood or tone changes, places where I think I could support a moment with some music. I go through the entire script making all my notes, and then I meet with the director, Joe Chvala. At this meeting we compare our notes, and hopefully we agree on where there is music and how that music should sound and feel. I always try to get myself into the mindset of the director in order to support his or her vision.

**Q: What made you want to become a composer and, for students interested in the arts, what advice do you have on getting started?**

KT: I started out as an actor. I went to school for acting, and I acted professionally for 10 years. During that time, I would compose music on the side, and eventually I decided to do music full-time. Since I knew the people in the theatre community, I began composing music for plays. It took some time for my colleagues to wrap their brains around me being a composer instead of an actor, but eventually, I stopped acting entirely and said, "No, I don't act anymore. I'm a composer. Take me seriously as a composer." Eventually people did. If you love creating music, just keep making it. By following my passion, I totally changed careers at 40 years old.



## Matthew J. LeFebvre

### Costume Designer for *A Christmas Carol*

**Q: What artistic choices did you make to support the concept of *A Christmas Carol*?**

Mathew J. LeFebvre: When first approaching the design, the director and I were really looking at a number of different worlds. There is the London of present Scrooge, the world of his past memories and finally there's the world of his future. With the costumes we also wanted to represent the different class and economic structures within the London of Scrooge, especially the difference between the upper class and those individuals who are poor and destitute.

Representing this distinction of class is a big theme in many of Dickens' stories and novels, and is really apparent in the costuming of the Cratchit family, who are barely making ends meet. It is really important to the telling of the story to show their poverty in their clothes, so every article of clothing they wear is really worn and has been mended over and over and over again. I hope the audience empathizes with them, and the clothing helps us to do that because it feels a little bit more concrete and real, not cartoony.

In contrast, the first big scene taking place in Scrooge's past is

the Fezziwig party where we see Scrooge as a young man, before he changes into his present miserly self. We see him fall in love, but we also see him begin to change and become more and more concerned with money. Since the scene spans several decades of Scrooge's life, we hoped to show the progression of, not only time, but also of Scrooge's character. Practically speaking, each of Fezziwig's parties involves a lot of dancing, and the costumes are very colorful and bright to reflect the festive mood. It really is a stark contrast to the London of the older Scrooge we see later in the play, with his dark and muted colors.

In each of these time periods, texture plays a big role in my designs, such as the ragged clothing of the poor Londoners or the richer fabrics of the upper class characters. Texture helps the audience feel and understand the lives of these characters without having to know their full history.

**Q Is there a character you had the most fun designing?**

ML: This show in particular has many characters, and is very demanding in terms of the number of costumes needed. With this particular production and adaptation, we started a number of years ago with the intent of creating the costume designs in phases, focusing on different parts of the play, one at a time, and then over the next several years adding new costumes in phases. As you may have guessed, that is a much different process than designing costumes for a show that is only produced once and then goes away.

The costumes are really like my children, so I hesitate to say which one is my favorite.

Each one presents a different challenge. For example, the main Ebenezer Scrooge (or present Scrooge) costume needed to be texturally rich. To achieve that, we carefully selected fabrics that have amazing texture and then concentrated on making those into a extremely well-tailored suit. Another example is Mrs. Cratchit's costume, which is fairly simple and pragmatic. However, there is such a sense of wear, as well as a functional quality about it. Even though her costuming reflects her impoverished circumstances, there's something really beautiful in its spare simplicity.

**Q: What excited you most about the designing process and this production in general?**

ML: Well, it's such an amazing story. There's a reason why so many theater companies produce this story every year. It's really an uplifting story, and it renews our faith in humanity. It's also a really great challenge, for no other reason than the sheer number of costumes and the several decades represented in the play. The play has costumes that are very stark and spare, and also has costumes that are lush and vibrant. To be able to do all of those in one production is great.

The Guthrie is one of my favorite theaters to work with because the costume technicians - who are called drapers and tailors - and the crafts people, and the wig people are of some of the best in the field. They're some of the most skilled that I've ever worked with, and I am always excited about how my designs will look in their capable hands.

**Q: What led you to becoming a costume designer, and what advice do you have for students interested in the arts and costume**

**design specifically?**

ML: I took a roundabout path to designing costumes. Like many others, I started out in theater training to be an actor. While pursuing my theater degree in college, I was required to take a number of design courses. I've always liked to draw, so when I took a costume design class, it really clicked that I should transition from being on stage to behind the scenes. And I believe my actor training makes me a stronger costume designer because I do think about the costumes as being an extension of the character. I recommend that anybody who is interested, specifically in theatrical costume design, should take some acting classes. I think it's important that a designer understands what it's like to wear a costume on stage and how that costume supports the work that the actor does. It's also important to see a lot of theater. Seek out a wide range of performance aesthetics. It's sometimes a difficult career to make a living in, but being able to design for a wide variety of theater and performance styles helps with that. I learned probably as much, if not more, about design by watching other productions and seeing how other designers solve challenges than I did from sitting in a classroom.



# Crispin Whittell

Playwright/Adaptor  
of *A Christmas Carol*

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**Q: How do you feel the message gained from *A Christmas Carol* is still relevant today?**

Crispin Whittell: Oh my goodness! It's one of the great, great, great, stories. It's so completely relevant that it's kind of hard to know where to begin. It's relevant because there are still people who think that money is the most important thing in life. Recently moving back to England got me to think about what *A Christmas Carol* would look like in London in 2016. Witnessing the way Britain and America right now are reacting to who Dickens' called the "other." As long as there are people who are less fortunate than the Scrooges of this world, and as long as people chase after money believing it to be the be all and the end all, these issues will be staring us in the face. So, yes, I was thinking, "How would one do a modern version of *Carol*?" Well, Tiny Tim would be Syrian or Iraqi and Scrooge wouldn't be the old man with a bent back and a candle. He'd be working on Wall Street or in the city.

**Q: What inspired you to create this specific adaptation?**

CW: Well, this adaptation has now gone on quite a journey. This is the sixth year of this adaptation being produced at the Guthrie, and I've written sort of a new version each time. I think it's great that that happens and it's essential for a story and production like this one.

It needs to change, if possible, each year just because it's a strange show to try and keep fresh. Really, the start of this adaptation came when former Guthrie Artistic Director Joe Dowling asked me if I would you write a new *A Christmas Carol*.

The previous version used by the Guthrie has a narrator, and I thought that I didn't want to have a narrator. I wanted the piece to feel like a play instead of a story being told to the audience. To begin the play, I thought of Tiny Tim, or a tiny voice in the middle of an enormous stage. Then I just kept going from there. Each year, I think the play becomes closer to Dickens' original novella. And something you might not know unless you are English is that we aren't afraid to mess about with Shakespeare and even Dickens. In my opinion, the British feel that Dickens' reputation is solid, so we don't feel squeamish about messing with his stories. Dickens is one of the greatest people in history, but I didn't go into adapting his story thinking that I have to show reverence to him. I wanted it to be un-boring, alive, funny and be modern in feel. It's an important show for the Guthrie to try and get as right as possible for the families who come and see it.

**Q: What made you become a playwright?**

CW: I think I was always going to be a playwright. I wrote my first

play when I was about 11 or 12 years old, in school. After being an actor I starting directing, but I continued to write. So when I started directing, I thought, "Why would I direct plays that people have done before? I may as well write them from scratch." Writing words that come out of other people's mouths is not something that I learned; it's just something I could always do.

**Q: How would you encourage students to get started in playwriting?**

CW: Just do it. There's a fantastic Fringe Festival in Minneapolis! If I were in Minneapolis and I were 18, that's what I would be doing. I'd write and I'd direct a Fringe show every year, and I'd make it as good as it could possibly be...also, I'd try to make it funny, not too long, and not boring. That's what I'd do. Just do it.



# Patricia Olive

## Props Master for *A Christmas Carol*

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### **Q: What was your favorite prop to create for this production and why?**

Patricia Olive: Sometimes it's just the little things. The kids have coins in a tin cup. Well, the coins are naturally going to fall out, they're going to get lost, and it's going to be a problem. So, what can we do to avoid that? So it could be a prop challenge that small. A lot of what I love is the set decorating for Scrooge's house and all of the shops. If people ever have a chance to really look into the shops they will see how much detail there really is, like all of the baked goods in the bakery shop. The pawn shop was fun, too. Creating that level of detail is actually my favorite part.

### **Q: How do you decide how much detail is relevant for such a large stage?**

PO: That is a topic we spend a lot of time talking about in preparation for *A Christmas Carol*. Not only do we have to come up with a way to tell the audience what needs to be told, but we also need to listen very carefully to what the director and the designers want. We then pull all those things together. And sometimes, just for extra measure, we sneak things into the set that we like, too. We strive to be as realistic as possible so that we don't distract the audience. We want to make sure that the props actually help tell the story.

We also hold to something called the "10-Foot and Squint Rule." This rule helps us to better understand what the audience will see, since most of the time we build the props so close to our faces that we see every minute detail in that prop. To see what the audience will experience, we set the prop down, take a few steps back (usually about 10 feet) and squint our eyes just slightly to see what it looks like. This prevents us from obsessing over any one prop.

### **Q: On average, how long does it take to make a prop?**

PO: It varies. It could take an hour to come up with a prop made with paper and a pen. Or, it could take multiple hours to quilt a comforter. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's quilt on his bed was handmade from different pieces of fabric, which was all done in our prop shop. We also make a lot of our own furniture, a task that typically takes multiple people. For example, one person will build the furniture's framework while somebody else upholsters the piece. Props like Scrooge's bed were made from scratch, and then we have people who purchase other pieces of furniture, either at yard sales or at antique shops. For a different production, we made a full size Rolls Royce in our shop, which took 12 people and a lot more time than it took to complete Scrooge's bed. We tend to go from one extreme to

the other, and it can take an hour or many days to prepare a prop for the stage; it just depends.

### **Q: Does this show have any "magic moments," and how do they work?**

PO: We do have one. It's one that our actor playing Scrooge, JC Cutler, happens to really like. It's actually a simple thing: a puff of air is pushed through a hole in Scrooge's counting table, which "magically" blows some papers up into the air. This trick is all about making sure that the air gets to where it needs to go and also making sure that the papers are in the right spot on the table. This effect helps portray a moment when Scrooge senses his former partner Marley's ghostly presence. It's just something super simple, just a puff of air, but we have to make sure that it's the right amount of pressure to set the right tone. We don't want it to be a comical moment. It's a mystery moment, and probably my favorite one in the show.

### **Q: How did you get into props and, for students interested in pursuing the arts, specifically props, what is your advice for getting started?**

PO: I did high school theater, where I thought I wanted to be onstage. Then I was talked into doing props for a couple of shows, which I really enjoyed. Since I was mostly interested in auto mechanics and woodworking in

college, I was studying to be a shop teacher. After school, I taught industrial education, or shop class, for nine years. On top of being a school teacher, I was required to participate in an outside extracurricular activity. I was assigned to build the scenery for a school play. From there I just stuck with theater, working summer stock because I had the summers off. Then a mentor of mine convinced me to do something I didn't even know was possible, which was quit teaching and pursue a career in prop making full time. And that's been my career for the past 35 years.

If you like to do crafty things, or if you like to go to yard sales and thrift stores, or if you love making things into other things, then you have the basic skills for props making. At the Guthrie, our props people can do fine wood and metalworking. They also weld, sew and upholster. If students are interested in technical theater, my advice to them is: it's great that you

can use a hammer, but if you can weld, that will put you at the top of everybody's hiring list. Also, find somebody to be your mentor, even as early as high school. Your high school drama teacher probably knows people in your local theater community. Finally, any time that you can get into a theater and do whatever you can to learn about the process, you put yourself a step-and-a-half ahead of others even before you get to college.



Props from *A Christmas Carol*

# Discussion Questions and Classroom Activities

## THE ROLE OF THE NARRATOR

Discussion Questions: The role of the narrator is important to this adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*. Which characters serve as narrators in this production? How do the narrators propel the action of the play? Do you feel like the narrator is talking directly to you when speaking? How does this differ from how characters usually interact on stage?

Classroom Activity: Select a book or story that you know well. If you were retelling this story in the role of narrator, what would you include? What would you leave out? Create the role of narrator for this story and, using a selection of the book or story you chose, narrate that section for your peers.

## THEMES AND IDEAS

Discussion Questions: What do you believe is the central theme, or main idea, of *A Christmas Carol*? Where in the play is the theme most obvious? Which characters help to express the theme of the play? Do you believe this play has a moral? If so, what do you believe it is? Can you think of examples of other books, movies, stories, songs or other works of art that have a similar theme?

If you are familiar with other works by Charles Dickens, can you find similar themes in his other works? How does Dickens utilize character, plot, subject matter, and narrative style to express these ideas and themes? Are there other artists who come to mind that are concerned with the same themes as Charles Dickens?

## SOCIAL STUDIES / HISTORY

Classroom Activity: Much of Charles Dickens' work is focused on 19th century England and disparities between the classes. Select a topic from below and research it through the lens of 19th century England and how the topic relates to *A Christmas Carol*. Then report back to the class to paint a more complete picture of the setting for the play.

- Labor laws (especially child labor laws)
- Ghosts and ghost stories
- English royalty
- Homelessness
- Clothing
- Crime
- Religion
- Music and Songs
- Women in Society
- Industrial Revolution
- Slavery
- Printing / Publication
- Satire
- Science / Evolution
- Colonialism
- Other Writers of the Era (Bronte, Carroll, Conrad, Kipling, Thackeray, etc.)

## GENERAL TOPICS

### COMEDY VS. TRAGEDY

Do you believe that *A Christmas Carol* is a comedy or a tragedy? What do each of these classifications mean to you? What aspects of the story are comic? Which are tragic? Which do you feel is most effective in *A Christmas Carol*? How does one support the other in the telling of the story?

## MARLEY'S CURSE

According to the story, Marley is condemned to "walk the earth." Why do you think this is his punishment? For what deeds or omissions is he being punished? Do you believe the chains that he wears are a metaphor? If so, what do they represent, and how is this metaphor central to the story's plot? What do you believe is implied by the multitude of fettered spirits that accompany Marley's ghost?

## SCROOGE AND CRATCHIT

How would you describe the relationship between Scrooge and Bob Cratchit at the beginning of the story? Do you think that their employer/employee relationship is representative of 19th century labor laws and customs? Why or why not? Do you think their relationship would be typical today? What has changed, if anything, between employers and employees as well as with labor laws?

## HUMBUG!

What does the word "humbug" mean? What words are the modern day equivalent of "humbug"? Thinking back on the play, what aspects of the Christmas celebrations does Scrooge call "humbug"? When is the first time in his life that Scrooge uses the term? Why do you think Scrooge has such a dour outlook on these celebrations? What events led to his feelings about Christmas? Are there any aspects of the holiday season that you believe are "humbug"? Explain.

## NATURE VS. NURTURE

For centuries, philosophers and scientists have tackled the question of whether humans are born with instincts that define their conduct throughout life, or whether their behavior is the result of education, the influence of family, etc. How do you think this story of Scrooge supports one theory vs. the other? Do you think Scrooge is the product of his environment, or was he born that way? How do you explain his transformation based on your assessment?

## THE LESSONS OF THE GHOSTS

Each of the ghosts that visit Scrooge is meant to teach him a lesson. What do you believe Scrooge learns from the Ghost of Christmas Past? The Ghost of Christmas Present? The Ghost of Christmas Future? Each Ghost in this Guthrie production is very different from the other — in terms of appearance, costuming, demeanor, gender, voice and movement. Why do you think each Ghost has been created to appear the way they do? How does the appearance complement the lesson to be learned from that particular Ghost?

If you were the central character of *A Christmas Carol*, what would the Ghosts have revealed to you? What lessons do you think they would have wanted you to learn? How would the Ghosts in your story appear?

Do you believe the lessons from the Ghosts have any meaning in your own life? Did you learn or discover anything from the play that might change your behavior or attitudes? If so, what? Do you believe it is possible to enrich or understand your own life in a deeper way through seeing plays, listening to music, reading books or experiencing other types of art?

Can you think of an example of art you have experienced that has made you think or feel differently about yourself or some aspect of the world?

## WHAT MAKES A CLASSIC?

Every year, productions of *A Christmas Carol* are staged in theaters around the world. Why do you think this story has remained so popular for so many years? Some scholars believe that a classic is a story that both defines its own era and transcends its time. Do you believe *A Christmas Carol* qualifies by this definition? Do you think this makes it a classic? What qualities do you think a book has to have to be a classic? What other books have you read that you believe are classics? Why should those books be considered?

## ADAPTATION

Adapting a novel for the stage poses many challenges. After seeing *A Christmas Carol* at the Guthrie and reading the book, find examples of moments from the play that were adapted from prose — not dialogue. How did the play use theatrical elements — lighting, symbolism, music, setting - to capture Dickens' novel? When do you think this was most successful? Were there elements of the book that were "lost" in the production? Were there moments in the production that are not found in the book?

Classroom Activity: Ask students to select a novel (other than *A Christmas Carol*) of their choice — preferably a favorite book they have read and know well. Ask students to select one section of text from their book that includes both dialogue and descriptive prose. Then, have them translate that section into a theatrical script and encourage them to capture as much of the prose as they are able

through theatrical means — either as additional dialogue, lighting or setting instructions, movement, music or any other element they choose. Finally, have students read their scenes aloud for one another and discuss the challenges and choices they made on behalf of their own adaptation.

Classroom Activity: Read a passage from the book *A Christmas Carol* aloud. What aspects of the text are effective as spoken language? What aspects of the text seem most appropriate for theatrical staging? How does the written text differ from that scene as it was staged in the production?

Classroom Activity: Many TV and film adaptations have been made of *A Christmas Carol*, including "A Diva's Christmas Carol" starring Vanessa Williams for VH1, "Mickey's Christmas Carol" by Disney and *Scrooged* starring Bill Murray. If you were going to write a modern day version of *A Christmas Carol*, where would you set the story? Who would be your Scrooge? In what industry would they work? Individuals or small teams should work to develop scenes from their modern day versions of the story to present for one another.

## THEATRICAL STAGING

Often, the most theatrical moments in a production highlight or point to the play's most significant themes. In this production, what do you believe are the most theatrical moments? Do you believe these moments indicate the play's central themes?

How does the Guthrie production create the atmosphere of Dickens' 19th century London? What do we learn about Scrooge and his world through the set, costumes, props, lights and sound? How do costumes help us understand

characters' social or economic class? What changes in fashion are apparent in the costumes for the scenes from Scrooge's childhood (set around 1790), to the Fezziwig party (set around 1800), to the party at Fred's (set around 1840)? Select a scene or image you remember from the play and describe each of the elements that you can recall and how it supports the scene.

**MUSIC**

Christmas carols and songs are incorporated throughout this production. Describe the different ways music is used throughout the play. How does the live music set a tone for a scene, advance the action of the story, define characters and contribute to the overall production?

**HOLIDAYS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

Classroom Activity: Interview a parent, grandparent or older relative about their favorite memories of a past Christmas or holiday tradition of their own culture. What foods, smells, sounds, images and people do they recall from that holiday? Write a description of these memories that captures as many details as possible. Think about your own favorite holiday memory and do the same. Try to capture as many sensory details as possible. Imagine a future holiday when you are an older adult, and again write a detailed description of what you imagine your perfect holiday will be.

**THROW A VICTORIAN HOLIDAY PARTY**

Classroom Activity: As a class, plan a Victorian holiday party complete with food, games, songs, dances and costumes of the era. Be as authentic as you can! Ask each student to come as a character

from the play or from the Victorian era. Meet and mingle in character as you enjoy the festivities.

**HOLIDAY TRADITIONS AROUND THE WORLD**

Classroom Activity: Christmas is celebrated differently throughout the world. In certain cultures, Christmas is not a holiday but other wonderful celebrations take place and are honored. Ask each student to either a) select a country

to research specific Christmas traditions or b) select a holiday other than Christmas to explore in detail. Ask each student to prepare a report or create a poster board that features pictures, images or samples of holiday fare.



The cast of *A Christmas Carol*

PHOTO: DAN NORMAN

# For Further Information

## BOOKS

Dickens, Charles. *Christmas Books*. London: Oxford University Press, 1954.

Dickens, Charles. *Christmas Stories*. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.

Davis, Paul. *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Davis, Paul. *Penguin Dickens Companion*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Hearn, Michael Patrick. *The Annotated Christmas Carol*. New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1976.

Miall, Antony and Peter. *The Victorian Christmas Book*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

Schlicke, Paul. *Oxford Readers' Companion to Dickens*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Smiley, Jane. *Charles Dickens*. The Penguin Lives Series. New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc., 2002.

## FILMS AND VIDEOS

[http://us.imdb.com/M/person\\_exact?Dickens%2C+Charles](http://us.imdb.com/M/person_exact?Dickens%2C+Charles)

A list of films adapted from Dickens novels and short stories

## WEBSITES

<http://www.stormfax.com/1dickens.htm>  
The text of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*

<http://www.charlesdickenspage.com>  
David Purdue's Charles Dickens Page includes information on Dickens — on page, onstage and in life

<http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/CD-Chesterton-CD.html>  
G.K. Chesterton's biography, Charles Dickens, 1906

<http://lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/CD-Forster.html>  
Entire text of John Forster's biography, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 1872-74

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

Interactive BBC site about children in Victorian England, designed for children from 9-11

<http://www.wwnorton.com/nael/victorian/welcome.htm>  
Norton Topics Online site provides illuminating primary documents relating to British society in the Victorian Era

<http://www.ph.ucla.edu/epi/snow/1859map/>  
Searchable map of London in 1859, from the UCLA Department of Epidemiology

<http://www.victorianweb.org>  
Site designed and edited by Professor George P. Landrow for Brown University as a resource for Brown students studying Victorian literature

## 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 which may include many of your own favorites.

Novels, Short Stories and Poems:

*The First Christmas*, Luke, chapter 2

*The Legend of Baba Yaga*, traditional European story  
*Baba Yaga*, folktale, probably Russian in origin (19th century)

*The Nutcracker*, E.T.A Hoffman (1816)

*The Sketch Book*, Washington Irving (1819-20)

*The Night Before Christmas (A Visit from St. Nicholas)*, Clement C. Moore (1822)

*The Fir Tree*, Hans Christian Anderson (1845)

*The Snow Queen*, Hans Christian Anderson (1845)

*The Little Match-Seller*, Hans Christian Anderson (1846)

*Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott, chapters 1-3 (1869)

"How Santa Came to Simpson's Bar," Bret Harte (1870)

*Christmas Every Day and Other Stories Told for Children*, William Dean Howells (1892)

"The Burglar's Christmas," Willa Cather (1896)

"Yes, Virginia, There is a Santa Claus," Francis P. Church, *The New York Sun* (1897)

*The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus*, L Frank Baum (1902)

"The Tailor of Gloucester," Beatrix Potter (c. 1902)

"The Gift of the Magi," O. Henry (1906)

*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, C.S. Lewis (1950)

*A Child's Christmas in Wales*, Dylan Thomas (1954)

*A Christmas Memory*, Truman Capote (1956)

*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, Dr. Seuss (1957)

*The Polar Express*, Chris Van Allsburg (1985)

*The Santaland Diaries, Holidays on Ice*, David Sedaris (1992)

*Santa's Twin*, Dean Koontz (1996)

Plays:

*Babes in Toyland*, Glen MacDonough and Victor Herbert (1903)

*The Man Who Came to Dinner*, George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart (1939)

*Black Nativity*, Langston Hughes (1961)

*The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, Barbara Robinson (1972)

*Christmas on Mars*, Harry Kondoleon (1983)

*Reckless*, Craig Lucas (1989)

*The Eight Reindeer Monologues*, Eric Goode (1994)

*They Sing Christmas Up in Harlem: A Lenox Avenue Christmas Carol*, Eric LeRoy Wilson (2000)

*Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge*, Christopher Durang (2005)

The cast of *A Christmas Carol*

PHOTO: DAN NORMAN

