

2020
2021
SEASON

OLNEY THEATRE CENTER

STREAMING ONLINE

**A
CHRISTMAS
CAROL**

**A GHOST STORY
OF CHRISTMAS**

BY **CHARLES DICKENS**

ADAPTED AND PERFORMED BY
PAUL MORELLA



A NOTE FROM JASON AND DEBBIE



Dear Friend of Olney Theatre Center,

No matter who we are or where we come from, traditions unite us and allow us to celebrate the best of ourselves and our community. That's why in a year where so many traditions have been placed on pause, we felt it especially important to create this streaming version of Paul Morella's solo *A Christmas Carol*.

In a normal year, the Olney Theatre campus would be buzzing right now with activity — a big musical on our Mainstage bringing together multiple generations to create memories; in our Historic Theatre young audiences and performers in the Olney Ballet Theater's *Nutcracker* would be getting their first taste of a Christmas classic; and of course, in the Multz-Gudelsky Theatre Lab, audience members would be personally welcomed into Dickens's tale by Paul Morella in our most intimate (and now, newly renovated!) theatre space.

We held out hope that we would be able to produce *A Christmas Carol* as it was meant to be experienced, live, if only for a small, masked, audience in a large, mostly empty theatre. It was not to be, but through the talent and hard work of a small and dedicated team, observing strict COVID-19 protocols, this streaming performance gives us a small triumph over some of what has been lost this year. We're particularly grateful to Senior Associate Artistic Director Jason King Jones and Digital Brand Journalist Emily Jerison for their amazing work translating the show to this digital format.

And as the season's über-classic, *A Christmas Carol* is extra-poignant this year, isn't it? The Cratchett's financial duress and life-or-death healthcare woes feel much less remote. As the stock market hits another all-time high the gap between the haves and have-nots feels particularly Dickensian. So, appropriately Dickens' dynamic tale of greed transformed to generosity pointedly reminds us what the season is truly about: with a simple act of grace we can change ourselves and our world for the better.


We know there are many entertainment options for you to choose especially during this time of year, but we think you've made a vivid and engaging one, because our production ignites your imagination in the most remarkable way. Paul Morella, one of our theater's best-loved performers, takes on every role, from the Ghost of Christmas Past right down to Tiny Tim, and weaves his tale with an effortless magic. It's a thrill to behold. Wherever you are, imagine that Charles Dickens himself is reading his novella to you by the quiet, haunting crackle of fire in his Victorian parlor, while a light snow falls on the gas-lit streets of London.

Whether this is your first experience of Paul's virtuoso performance or the 100th, we hope it "may haunt your houses pleasantly." And before you know it, in 2021 you'll be back at the theater, for real! Let us know what you think at: Jason@olneytheatre.org or Debbie@olneytheatre.org.

Thanks for being a big part of our tradition and we wish you a happy and healthy 2021!

Jason Loewith
Artistic Director

Debbie Ellinghaus
Managing Director

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Olney Theatre Center is a non-profit arts organization with a mission to create professional theater productions and other programs that nurture artists, students, technicians, administrators, and audience members; to develop each individual's creative potential using the skill and imaginative possibilities of theater and the performing arts.

Streaming Beginning: Tuesday, December 15, 2020

OLNEY THEATRE CENTER

Jason Loewith
Artistic Director

Debbie Ellinghaus
Managing Director

presents

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

A GHOST STORY
OF CHRISTMAS

Adapted by Paul Morella from the novella by Charles Dickens

A Christmas Carol - A Ghost Story of Christmas was first produced in partnership with the City of Gaithersburg at the Arts Barn Theatre on December 3, 2009

featuring

Paul Morella*

Lighting Designer
Sonya Dowhaluk

Original Sound Design
Edward Moser

Original Projection Design
Patrick W. Lord

Production Consultant
Jeffery Westlake

Production Stage Manager
Ben Walsh*

Director of Production
Josiane M. Jones

Senior Associate Artistic Director
Jason King Jones

*Member, Actors' Equity Association
Mr. Morella is a National Player Alumnus

Special thanks to our Lead Production Sponsors:
Olney Theatre Center Board of Directors

WHO'S WHO



Paul Morella (Adapter/Director/Performer) will be presenting *A Christmas Carol* for the 11th year at Olney Theatre Center, after having first workshoped the production at the Arts Barn Theatre in 2009. His regional appearances include leading roles with the Folger Theatre, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Arena Stage, Signature Theatre, Shakespeare Theatre Company, The Studio Theatre, Round House Theatre, Potomac Theatre Project, Theater J, Mosaic Theatre, Everyman Theatre, Rep Stage, The Delaware Theatre Company, Two River Theatre and The Kennedy Center. A multiple Helen Hayes Award nominee, Mr. Morella has previously appeared at Olney Theatre in *Mary Stuart*, *The Crucible*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Awake and Sing!*, *The Tempest*, *Rancho Mirage*, *Over the Tavern*, *Witness for the Prosecution*, *Opus*, *Dinner With Friends*, *A Passion For Justice*, *The Millionaire*, *Rabbit Hole*, *Brooklyn Boy*, *Sight Unseen*, *The Mousetrap*, *Private Lives*, *'Art'*, *Coffee with Richelieu*, *The Laramie Project*, *The Rivals*, *Becket*, *Broken Glass*, *M. Butterfly*, *Monster*, *Night Must Fall* and *The Time of Your Life*. An M.F.A. (Acting) graduate of Catholic University, he has also starred opposite Julie Harris and James Farentino in *All My Sons*, and Marsha Mason and Fred Thompson in *The Best Man*, both for LA Theatre Works.

Sonya Dowhaluk (Lighting Design) is delighted to be returning to Olney Theatre for another year of *A Christmas Carol*. Olney Theatre: *Ken Ludwig's A Comedy of Tenors*, *Dial 'M' for Murder*, *Godspell*, *The Tempest*, *Grease* (co-design), and *National Players Tour 63*. Television: Assistant Lighting Director at CNN. Education: BA, The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; MFA, The University of Maryland.

Patrick W. Lord (Original Projection Design) NEW YORK: *Where Words Once Were* (Lincoln Center); *The Tempest* (R. Evolución Latina); *The Bodyguard: The Musical* (White Plains Performing Arts Center). DC: *Earthrise*, *Voyagers*, *Digging Up Dessa*, *Where Words Once Were* (The John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts); *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night* (Shakespeare Theatre Company); *Fame: The Musical* (Gala Hispanic Theatre); *A Christmas Carol* (Olney Theatre Center); *Love and Information*, *Building the Wall*, *Blackberry Winter* (Forum Theatre); *Mnemonic* (Theatre Alliance); *Bridges of Madison County*, *Big Fish*, *Outside Mullingar*, *American Idiot*, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* (Keegan Theatre); *Outside the Lines* (Arts on the Horizon); *Columbinus* (1st Stage); *A Human Being Died That Night* (Mosaic Theatre Company of DC); *Knuffle Bunny: A Cautionary Musical*, *Jumanji* (Adventure Theatre), *The Color Purple* (Riverside Performing Arts Center); *The Happiest Place on Earth*, *Redder Blood*, *Leto Legend* (The Hub Theatre); *Don Juan* (Taffety Punk). REGIONAL: *South Pacific* (Flatrock Playhouse); *Beauty and the Beast*, *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (Croswell Opera House); *Peace On Your Wings* (Ohana Arts). MFA, The University of Texas at Austin. www.patrickwlord.com.

Ben Walsh (Production Stage Manager) Previous Olney Theatre Credits: *A Christmas Carol* (2013 & 2015), *The Amateurs*, *Ken Ludwig's A Comedy of Tenors*, *Labour of Love*, *Every Brilliant Thing*, *Thurgood*, *Fickle: A Fancy French Farce*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Forever Plaid*, *Cinderella*, *Spring Awakening*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, *The Submission*, *Over the Tavern*. DC AREA: Signature Theatre: *Masterpieces...*; Shakespeare Theatre Company Academy for Classical Acting: *Hamlet*, *Women Beware Women*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Duchess of Malfi*. REGIONAL: Finger Lakes Musical Theatre Festival: *Working*, *Grand Hotel*; Gateway Playhouse: *Cabaret*; Montana Shakespeare in the Parks: *You Never Can Tell*; Riverside Center for the Performing Arts: *The Buddy Holly Story*, *Oklahoma!*, *Sister Act*, *9 to 5*, *The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber*, *Monty Python's SPAMALOT*; Busch Gardens Williamsburg's Christmas Town. EDUCATION: University of Kentucky, Howard Community College, James W. Rouse Scholars. Ben is a proud alumnus of Olney Theatre Center's Apprentice Training Program..

Jeffery Westlake (Production Consultant) was the Artistic Director of the Arts Barn Theatre Series when he commissioned this production of *A Christmas Carol* in 2009. Past producing credits include: Producing Artistic Director of NOVA SummerStage and the Associate Producer of High Tor Summer Theater — at the time, one of the last of the classic summer stock theaters in New England.

WHO'S WHO

Debbie Ellinghaus (Managing Director) was born in Washington, DC. Her mother was a Montgomery County Public School math teacher and her dad was a college professor. She can trace her mother's family back to the 1500's when they were ousted from Spain because they were Jewish. Other family ancestry connects her to Eastern Europe. In 1976, her parents moved to Columbia, MD, where she was raised in the "new planned city" built to encourage racial, ethnic and religious harmony in a suburban utopia. Debbie, the older of two, did not inherit her dad's speed on the football field, her mom's quick serve on the tennis court, or her sister's strength in the swimming pool; instead she found her feet in the theater, thanks in large part to her grandmother, who took her to see *Annie* at the Kennedy Center in 1978. But also thanks to her parents, who spent Sunday mornings listening to Broadway show-tunes on the record player before turning on the football game. Despite her suburban upbringing, Debbie longed for the city life. So, upon graduating from the University of Maryland, she moved to New York. In the Big Apple she had many jobs and met many interesting people, including Andrew, whom she married. After getting hitched, they moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where they had their kids, Madeline and Griffin, and spent some years enjoying life in New England. Career and family twists and turns eventually brought them to Howard County where they now live. Debbie volunteers in the community where she lives: as immediate past Chair of the Board of the Downtown Columbia Arts and Culture Commission and in the community where she works: as a member of the Board of the Directors for Medstar Montgomery Medical Center. She's also a proud member of Leadership Montgomery's Class of 2019. She's frequently found applauding loudly for her daughter, who's got the "performing bug"; cheering wildly for her son at track meets; grooving to her husband's music (he's a drummer in a band); and spoiling her dog, a 75 lb pit-bull rescue. In her down-time she likes to run, swing kettlebells, and do the occasional yoga from the privacy of her own home. She's been employed since age 12 when she had a paper route; thankfully, gigs at universities and non-profit organizations followed. She's been Managing Director of Olney Theatre Center since August 2014.

Jason Loewith (Artistic Director) grew up in Fairfield, Connecticut, and on weekends he took the train to New York with his family to see shows. His dad was the comptroller of a Formica manufacturing company, and his mom was the first woman in the state to be president of a conservative synagogue. After her parents became ill, she took over their dress shop in a now sadly derelict part of Bridgeport. Jason particularly enjoyed hiding in the poufy dresses on the rack, and selling costume jewelry during the store's annual sidewalk sale. He inherited his father's love of numbers, working part-time as a bank teller, and leading Math Team in high school and as a bookkeeper for various nonprofit organizations as an adult. From his mother he inherited a dedication to Jewish causes, joining the international Board of United Synagogue Youth and working at the Jewish Home for the Aged during high school, and serving as chair of Brown University's Committee for Soviet Jewry as an undergraduate. Jason seriously considered studying to become a rabbi, but the theater intervened, taking him to Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, New York City, Chicago, and finally the Washington, DC region, where he's been for eight years. Jason has directed some 30 plays, written a handful (one of which, *Adding Machine: A Musical*, won a lot of awards in Chicago and New York), managed or produced hundreds, and done just about every other job there is to do in a theater— all of which has helped him learn the value of a dollar, the importance of honesty, and the fact that you do not put a silk suit in either the washing machine or the dryer. On days off, Jason loves to cook (ask him how he learned to make bouillabaisse), hang out with his twelve nieces and nephews, play Civilization, bike and jog (just don't ask the last time he did either), vacation in faraway places, and listen to music written between 1950 and 1986. He volunteers for local and national arts organizations, serves on the Board of theatreWashington, and has entered his second year mentoring a fantastic teenager in Anacostia for BestKids. He lives in Carderock Springs with his partner Ned and their dogs Mortimer and Eliza, where he uses power tools most weekends to keep the house that is majority-owned by Sandy Spring Bank from falling apart.

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A
CHRISTMAS
CAROL

by Charles Dickens

Preface

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.

December 1843



Scenes By Stave

STAVE ONE: MARLEY'S GHOST

- Out upon Merry Christmas! - God bless you, merry gentlemen!
- Scrooge's Fireside.
- The Ghost. - The Ghost's departure.

STAVE TWO: THE FIRST OF THE THREE SPIRITS

- Another unearthly Visitor.
- Scrooge's School Days.
- The Fezziwig Ball. - Scrooge's old Love.

STAVE THREE: THE SECOND OF THE THREE SPIRITS

- Christmas Shops.
- At Bob Cratchit's. - Tiny Tim and Mr. Scrooge.
- Games at Forfeits. - Ignorance and Want.

STAVE FOUR: THE LAST OF THE SPIRITS

- A Death has occurred. - Ghoules.
- Poor Tiny Tim! - The Ghost.
- The Name of the dead man.

STAVE FIVE: THE END OF IT

- A delightful Boy.
- Scrooge reclaimed by Christmas.



DRAMATIS PERSONAE

- | | |
|--|---|
| Ebenezer Scrooge , a miserly man | A Fiddler |
| Bob Cratchit , his clerk | Housemaid |
| Mrs. Cratchit , Bob's wife | The Baker |
| Martha , their oldest daughter | The Cook |
| Peter , their oldest son | The Milkman |
| Belinda , their second-oldest daughter | Young Scrooge |
| Two young Cratchit children , boy and girl | Belle , Scrooge's onetime fiancée |
| Tiny Tim , their son, on crutches | Dick Wilkins , a fellow clerk |
| Fred , Scrooge's nephew | Other revelers |
| Kitty , Fred's wife | Ghost of Christmas Present |
| Portly Gentlemen , fundraisers for the poor | Ignorance |
| Young caroler | Want |
| Jacob Marley , the ghost of Scrooge's old partner | Ghost of Christmas Future |
| Ghost of Christmas Past | Three businessmen , acquaintances of Scrooge |
| Youngest Scrooge | Charwoman , Scrooge's house cleaner |
| Schoolboys | Mrs. Dilber , a laundress |
| Fanny , Scrooge's sister, Fred's mother | Undertaker's man |
| Old Fezziwig , Scrooge's jolly old employer | Old Joe , a junk salesman |
| Mrs. Fezziwig , his wife | Christmas boy , sent to buy the Christmas turkey |
| Three Miss Fezziwigs , their daughters | Good-humoured fellows , three or four |
| Topper , Fred's bachelor friend | Various revelers, children, denizens of London |
| The Plump Sister , Kitty's sibling | Fred's housemaid |

A Dickensian Glossary

stave: An archaic form of “staff,” a stanza of a poem or song.

the ruler: Scrooge threatens a young caroler with this essential tool of his trade, used in making charts and graphs to record his monetary gains and losses. Later, Bob contemplates using it on Scrooge when he thinks he (Scrooge) has gone mad.

blindman’s-buff: A parlor game in which one player, blindfolded, tries to catch and identify someone from among the other players in the room.

“like a bad lobster in a dark cellar”: A comic incongruity, but also invokes the idea of a face after burial, with the stench and phosphorescent glow of decay. Rotting crayfish do appear to glow in the dark.

lumber room: A storeroom, sometimes used for firewood, but more often for unused household items.

gruel: Oatmeal or other cereal boiled in lots of water. Interestingly enough, this meager fare was also the staple diet in prisons and workhouses at the time.

“when the bell tolls One”: The ghost of Hamlet’s father, too, enters when the bell tolls one in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

dull conversation with the Ghost: Ghosts and spirits were believed to speak in dull or monotonous tones

plain deal forms: Long, unpainted and unfinished school benches made of deal wood or pine.

Jack Robinson: A very popular saying in the late seventeenth century, meaning fast or immediately. The story goes that Robinson was an old man in the habit of calling on his friends and leaving unexpectedly before his name was even announced

forfeits: Any of the many popular parlor games played at Christmas in which a fixed penalty is demanded of the player who misses his or her turn.

negus: A mixture of port wine and hot water, sweetened with sugar and flavored with lemon,

nutmeg and other spices, first concocted in the eighteenth century by Colonel Francis Negus.

“Sir Roger de Coverley”: A dance similar to the Virginia reel. It was the best known and most raucous of country-dances in the nineteenth century and traditionally the last one performed on a night of merry-making.

mourning dress: “Black dress” in the 1867 Ticknor and Fields Public Reading edition.

a dowderless girl: Apparently, the woman (Belle) is mourning the loss of one or both of her parents, who have left her penniless.

“More than eighteen hundred”: Eighteen hundred and forty-two, to be exact.

dressed out but poorly in a twice-turned gown, but brave in ribbons: Wearing a used dress, but splendidly adorned.

the copper: A boiler; it’s kept in the washhouse because the rest of the year Mrs. Cratchit uses it to boil her laundry.

“A smell like washing day!”: The pudding was cooked in a cloth, here in a boiler generally used for laundry

half of half-a-quartern: A tiny bit of spirits, as a quartern is only one fourth of a pint.

“if a lunch is provided”: It was customary at the time that no matter how cheap the funeral some food should be provided for the mourners.

beetling shop: a small and dirty pawnshop with an overhang.

“The colour hurts my eyes”: Black. Mrs. Cratchit and the girls are sewing their mourning clothes in memory of Tiny Tim.

“Walk-ER!”: A Cockney expression of surprise or ridicule of a questionable statement.

a strait-waistcoat: A straitjacket, used in restraining violent prisoners and patients by binding their arms and bodies.

smoking bishop: A popular Christmas punch, made by pouring port wine over ripe bitter oranges. The mixture was then heated and spices were added. The name “Bishop” was derived from its purple color.

May it haunt their houses pleasantly

In 1883, forty years after *A Christmas Carol* was first published, Vincent van Gogh wrote a letter to his brother Theo telling him that he had just purchased a new sixpenny edition of the Charles Dickens novella. “I find all of Dickens beautiful,” van Gogh wrote, “but this tale, I’ve re-read it almost every year since I was a boy, and it always seems new to me.”

In that simple but heartfelt sentiment, the artist touched upon the extraordinary legacy and enduring afterlife of this “Ghost Story of Christmas” and why it continues to remain one of the most popular and endearing of all holiday entertainments – quite possibly the greatest Christmas story since the original one. Dickens may not have invented Christmas, but he’s offered up a parable that transcends the season and given us a narrative that touches upon our most primal and basic human needs, sensibilities, and inclinations. It’s a story about understanding human nature, a chronicle of one man’s self-discovery, and a powerful moral tale with a contemporary relevance and essentialness that is...well, downright spooky.

Since its publication in 1843, *A Christmas Carol* has become such an integral part of Christmas tradition and folklore that no holiday season would be complete without a visit from the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, or an incarnation of Ebenezer Scrooge, Bob Cratchit, and Tiny Tim. It’s a story that endures because it always speaks to the present time, and it remains a heartwarming moral fable filled with glorious energy, flavor, and humor. It may be a short book, but it’s also a great one.

Over the years, Dickens’s novella has been adapted for the stage, film, television, radio, opera, and ballet. There are sequels, prequels, musical versions, animated versions, silent versions, Disney versions, all-canine versions, and even a zombie version. Who doesn’t know it?

But how many of us have actually *read* it?

Sure, we see copies of the book in libraries, in bookstores, in gift shops, on coffee tables, and even on our own bookshelves.

We quote from it and we refer to it, but when was the last time we really sat down and read it? Aloud?

When the opportunity arose for me to first present this story, I thought it would be foolish to let anyone but Dickens himself do the talking. In reacquainting myself with the original novella, I was overwhelmed by the power of the narrative itself – by the vibrancy of his detail, the richness of the characterizations, and the



compassion of its message. The journey from darkness to light, from misery to redemption, from selfishness to generosity, and from loneliness to communion resonated in very profound and moving ways. In other words, it was – and is – storytelling at its simple best.

Like the greatest of writers, Dickens drew upon the life around him, as well as his own experiences. His humble childhood certainly informed his works, and his prose reflects his deep and abiding sense of obligation and responsibility toward those driven into poverty and destitution. He never lost sight of this moral vision, no matter how popular and successful he had become, and his fervent belief in our shared humanity permeated all his works. He routinely reminds us that though life is hard, we possess a common need to refresh and embrace our connection with each other and to revel in the joys and responsibilities of this shared humanity.

It is also important to recognize that *A Christmas Carol* was written during a period when the old English traditions of Christmas were in a state of decline. Nineteenth-century industrial capitalism was threatening to bury the season in an avalanche of greed, somberness, and misery. The polarization between the rich and the poor was a great cause of social concern. It was indeed, “a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt and Abundance rejoices.” Sound familiar?

What Dickens gives us is a narrative of redemption, rebirth, and renewal. His story is one of conversion and transformation; of one man’s journey from the loneliness of his own dark prison into the liberating light of our common humanity. It reflects Dickens’s desire that we embrace this humanity and seek to reacquaint ourselves with the child within us all – endeavoring to capture that joyful energy, eagerness, compassion, and delicacy that the childlike spirit can conjure.

Several years ago, I had a director tell me that the greatest and most powerful sound one can experience in the theater is the sound of a beating heart. My intention tonight is simple – to let the pulse of this wonderful story unfold as Dickens originally envisioned, and to allow you to bring your own imagination to bear on his rich, compassionate, potent, and glorious prose. Let it “shine upon the cold hearth and warm it, and into the sorrowful heart and comfort it.” Its message is as relevant and resonant today as it was in the London of

the 1840s.

“May it haunt their houses pleasantly,” Dickens wrote in the preface to his “Ghostly little book.” Just try to wrap your mind around that.

Paul Morella



From these garish lights I vanish now...

Was Charles Dickens the first pop star? That is the comparison drawn from his public readings, 150 years ago. His gruelling tour itineraries read like Madonna's or Eminem's. People sometimes fainted at his shows. His performances even saw the rise of that modern phenomenon, the "speculator" or ticket tout. (The ones in New York City escaped detection by borrowing respectable-looking hats from the waiters in nearby restaurants.)



As well as being our greatest novelist, Dickens developed a new, composite art form in his stage performances, acting out specially adapted passages from his own works and varying his expressions and speech patterns, so that it seemed as if he were becoming possessed by the characters he created. His reading tours won him huge popular acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. And in all probability they contributed to his premature death, from a stroke, in 1870.

Why did Dickens take his show on the road? His first public readings were for charity, beginning with two performances of *A Christmas Carol*, before a crowd of 2,000 working-class people in Birmingham. Soon, though, the offers of payment were coming in, and Dickens, always with an eye for the business opportunity, was tempted. But if money was a motivation, it was far from the only one. Dickens was fascinated by the stage: he had seriously considered becoming an actor as a young man, and had a small theatre fitted up at his house in Tavistock Square. He also clearly relished the chance of coming face to face with his readers, to whom he spoke so personally in the prefaces to his novels.



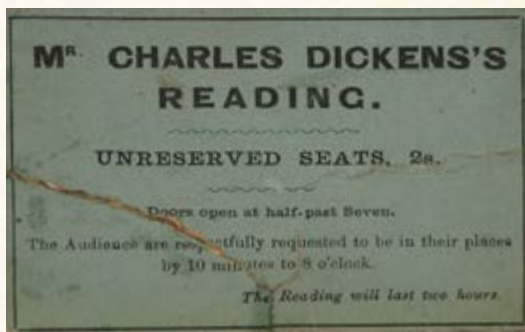
What Dickens's public got was something of a spectacle. Like a Victorian magician, Dickens performed against simple but striking stage architecture, with a vivid maroon backdrop and a red reading stand that he had designed himself, with "a fringe around the little desk for the book". On top of the stand, Dickens kept the reading copies that he made of his texts – special versions of the Christmas books and passages from his novels, pasted into volumes with extra-wide margins, to allow for his scribbled alterations and stage directions to himself. Continually changing while in repertoire, these adaptations developed into new, free-standing versions of the old favourites.

Many people found Dickens's performances hypnotic; the author is known to have experimented with mesmerism. One audience member describes a particularly popular rendition, of the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes in *Oliver Twist*: "Warming with excitement, he flung aside his book and acted the scene of the murder, shrieked the terrified pleadings of the girl, growled the brutal savagery of the murderer... Then the cries for mercy: 'Bill! dear Bill! for dear God's sake!...' When the pleading ceases, you open your eyes in relief, in time to see the impersonation of the murderer seizing a heavy club, and striking his victim to the ground."

Up to this point Dickens had been following a text that reads (with prompts in his own hand, marked here in italics): "Laying his hand upon the lock (*action*), he reached his own door - he opened it softly (*xx Murder coming xx*)."

Not everyone fell under his spell so easily. Mark Twain was disappointed by the performance that he saw: Dickens, he said, did not enunciate properly, and was "rather monotonous, as a general thing; his voice is husky; his pathos is only the beautiful pathos of the language - there is no heart, no feeling in it - it is glittering frostwork." But even he was taken with the sight of such a celebrity, fascinated to have in front of him the famous head, that "wonderful mechanism" that had governed the directions of so many literary characters. "I almost imagined I could see the wheels and pulleys work."

For all the extraordinary effect that they had, the story of Dickens's public readings does not have a happy ending. By the late 1860s, the author's family and friends were becoming concerned that the tours were taking too great a toll, particularly after the Sikes and Nancy scene was added to the bill. "The finest thing I ever



heard," Dickens's son Charley told him, "but don't do it." As with most other things in his life, Dickens pursued his readings with a compulsive energy that allowed him little time to rest. He maintained an exhausting schedule, and suffered from bouts of depression. He grew weak and weary, and as his health faltered, he developed chronic influenza.

Dickens's friend and doctor, Francis Carr Beard, finally called time on the public performances. His medical notes, show that Dickens's heart rate was raised dramatically each time he read, particularly when his text was Sikes and Nancy. His final readings, like the others, were a huge success, but he ended them like Prospero: "From these garish lights I vanish now for evermore." Within three months he was dead.

The Greatest Little Christmas Book in the World

A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens remains one of the most famous and popular stories ever penned in any language. Why has this “Ghostly little book,” as Dickens himself called it, been so enduringly praised and embraced?

Why did Dickens write *A Christmas Carol*?

Appalled by the polarization between the rich and the poor, particularly the children of poverty, and stressing the need for education, regardless of wealth, he originally intended to write a cheap pamphlet entitled, “An Appeal to the People of England, on Behalf of the Poor Man’s Child.” At that time, Christmas was celebrated in a muted fashion, and Dickens thought it would be the perfect backdrop for the form and themes he intended to address. Money was also a factor. In 1843, though only 31, he had found success with *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby*; however, his latest novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, hadn’t been the triumph he hoped for. Burdened with the need to support a large family, and struggling with financial woes himself, Dickens was quite anxious for the story to succeed.

Why did he call it *A Christmas Carol*?

The title suggests a song or ballad of joy celebrating Christmas. Dickens wanted to establish a whimsical tone to lend the story a certain musicality and rhythm. Furthermore, he wrote the story in five “staves” or stanzas, instead of the normal “chapters,” implying that he wanted it read like a piece of music as well. He maintained the conceit in the two subsequent Christmas books by setting off their chapters in accordance with the stories’ titles: *The Chimes* is divided into four “quarters,” like the tolling of a clock, and the divisions of *The Cricket on the Hearth* are called “chirps.”

How did he write it?

By drawing freely from an earlier work, *The Pickwick Papers*, where a Christmas interlude, called *The Story of the Goblins who Stole a Sexton*, is told. In it, the narrator tells of Gabriel Grub, a misanthropic gravedigger who silences a young caroler by hitting him on the head with a lantern. He is ultimately redeemed, however, by a band of goblins who visit him, drag him underground, and show him visions of impoverished families who derive comfort from their love of one another, after which he mends his mean-spirited ways.

How long did it take to write?

Six weeks. He spent all hours of the day and night, abandoning other projects and canceling appointments. He told a friend, “I was so closely occupied with my little *Carol*, that I never left home before the owls went out; and led quite a solitary life.” He would take long walks through London, sometimes 20 miles a night, as he fleshed out the story in his mind and raced to get it into print before Christmas. It was officially published as a book on December 19, 1843.

How well was it received?

From the first day of publication, sales were tremendous. The first run of 6,000 copies (mostly priced at five shillings) sold out by Christmas Eve, with 9,000 more sold before the end of the year. Because of the high cost of the book (he insisted on a lavish format for the 66-page novella) Dickens’ early profits were limited — 250 pounds for the first printing —

and while the critical response was overwhelmingly positive, the financial benefit Dickens had hoped for was somewhat muted.

How real were the characters?

Dickens rarely created characters that were not in some way based on people from his own life and experiences. For example, Jacob Marley's name came from Dr. Miles Marley, an Irishman who practiced medicine near Dickens' home. While at a party, when the subject of the novelist's interest in unusual names came up, Dr. Marley mentioned that he thought his own surname was quite unique. Dickens reportedly replied, "Your name shall be a household word before the year is out." The Cratchit family echoed the author's own impoverished family, with the six Cratchit children corresponding to the six Dickenses. Tiny Tim in particular may have been based on a combination of Dickens' own frail nephew, who died of tuberculosis at the age of nine, and Dickens' younger brother Frederick (the boy was originally called "Little Fred" in the manuscript, which Dickens changed during his early revisions). Ebenezer Scrooge's namesake was apparently Ebenezer Scroggie, an Edinburgh town councilor, who was a charitable and jovial libertine, unlike his miserly fictional counterpart. In his diaries, Dickens states that while taking an evening walk in 1841, he stumbled across the grave marker for Scroggie in an Edinburgh cemetery. The marker identified Scroggie as a "meal man" (corn merchant), but Dickens misread this as "mean man," due to the fading light. Dickens wrote that it must have "shriveled" Scroggie's soul to carry "such a terrible thing to eternity."

What was wrong with Tiny Tim?

Just what was Tiny Tim's mysterious disease? Some prominent pediatricians have suggested that the boy possibly suffered from Pott's disease, also called spinal tuberculosis, which commonly strikes children under ten years old. Tuberculosis infected half the population in nineteenth-century England, and while primarily a respiratory illness, Pott's disease can spread to the bones and joints. However, tuberculosis was not curable at the time, so other experts speculate that Tim had a kidney disease, renal tubular acidosis, with symptoms that include muscle weakness, stunted growth and softening of the bones. Another popular theory within the medical establishment is polio, and proper medical attention might have halted the disease. Interestingly enough, the original manuscript makes no mention of the fate of Tiny Tim. Dickens realized when going over the galley proofs that he must reassure his readers that Tim survived, so he added the statement, "...and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, (Scrooge) was a second father."

Why the enduring popularity?

A Christmas Carol appeals to both religious and secular-minded readers, and offers one of the most popular themes in myth and fiction: redemption. There is a little Scrooge in all of us, and it is gratifying to see him transformed into a man who empathizes with the unfortunate and the downtrodden. As Dickens' biographer Peter Ackroyd wrote, "Beyond the hearth were the poor, the ignorant, the diseased, the wretched; and do we not enjoy the flames of the Christmas fire more because of the very shadows it casts?" Of course, let's not forget, everyone loves a good ghost story.





Charles Dickens in 1839

The fairies came to his christening. One said, "My gift is early hardship; as a child, he shall know the ugliness of life." The second said, "My gift is his abandonment; he shall be a castaway." The third, "His school shall be the streets." The fourth, "I will give him a sensitive spirit, so that he may feel early pain sharply, and remember it vividly all his life." The last fairy said, "I will give him genius. Out of the hardship shall come the power to live a hundred lives. The castaway shall have the freedom of the whole world of men and women. The education of the streets shall provide him with boundless treasures of comic and tragic invention. The humiliations of the child shall fertilise the imagination of the poet."

R. J. Cruikshank

Charles Dickens and Early Victorian England

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ABOUT OLNEY THEATRE CENTER

Mission

Olney Theatre Center for the Arts produces, presents, and tours extraordinary performances for a diversity of audiences, and educates and inspires the next generation of theater-makers.

Vision

We strive every day to unleash the creative potential of our artists and audiences, and in so doing, become a nationally-prominent destination for the most impactful theater performance and education.

History

Once a summer stock retreat in rural Maryland, Olney Theatre Center is now an award-winning, year-round regional theatre surrounded in a 15-mile radius by 1.6 million people representing three of the most ethnically diverse counties in America. Since our founding in 1938, some of the biggest names in theatre have appeared on our stages: from “Golden Era” stars like Helen Hayes and Tallulah Bankhead to contemporary artists like Sir Ian McKellen, Robin De Jesús, and many others. OTC welcomed Artistic Director Jason Loewith and Managing Director Debbie Ellinghaus in 2013 and 2014, respectively, who established a new artistic strategy to broaden programming with the goal of nurturing a diversity of voices and audiences. Olney Theatre Center now produces musicals and plays under the three rubrics of Classic, Contemporary, and Family programming. Since 2013, Olney Theatre Center has twice won the Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Musical Production, the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play, and presented six world premieres. Complementing this work, OTC fulfills its mission as a teaching theater with educational programs like the Our Play program in local 5th grade classrooms, a summer camp, and a year-round professional apprentice program. National Players, now in its 71st Season, is the hallmark outreach program of OTC, a unique ensemble touring innovative theater to communities large and small across the United States.

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