

## **A Christmas Carol Study Guide**

The Shaw Festival Presents – *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens

Directed by Molly Atkinson

Adapted and originally directed by Tim Carroll

Designed by Christine Lohre

Lighting designed by Kevin Lamotte

Original music and music direction by Paul Sportelli

Music direction by Ryan deSouza

Movement and puppetry by Alexis Milligan

### **The Story**

Ebenezer Scrooge is a selfish, greedy, and unkind man. He cares only for making money, and is unfeeling towards the poor people who are hurt by his business practices.

Scrooge hates Christmas, and thinks it is an excuse for laziness and missing work. He refuses to acknowledge the goodwill and charity that comes with the season, and he makes sure that everyone knows he thinks Christmas is a “humbug.”

One evening, just before Christmas, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley. In life, Marley was just as cruel and uncaring as Scrooge. He warns Scrooge that if he continues to ignore the suffering of others, he will be doomed to spend all eternity as a ghost, dragging the weight of his crimes over the earth each night. Marley tells Scrooge that three ghosts will visit him. If Scrooge heeds their message, he can avoid Marley’s awful fate in the afterlife.

As Marley vanishes and Scrooge falls asleep, the ghostly visitations begin. The spirit of Christmas Past shows Scrooge scenes from his past life as a child and as a young man, beginning his career and being in love. The Spirit of Christmas Present shows him the warmth and goodness Christmas inspires in people, and the happy (but poverty stricken) home life of his employee, Bob Cratchit.

But Scrooge is also shown images of the bleak future that awaits them all, should he fail to heed the ghosts’ lessons. Frightened by what he sees, Scrooge promises the spirits he will change his ways.

When Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning, he is a completely changed man. Realizing that he has wasted his life so far, Scrooge vows to become a better person, helping those who are in need, improving the life of Bob Cratchit and his family, and keeping the spirit of Christmas all year round.

## The Author

When Charles Dickens began writing *A Christmas Carol* in October 1843, he probably had no idea of the impact his “little Christmas book” would have on people. In fact, Dickens wrote the story out of economic necessity – his wife Catherine was expecting their fifth child, they had mortgage payments to make, and a large extended family to care for.

It’s likely that Charles Dickens’ childhood greatly influenced the topics he chose for his stories. Dickens was born in England in 1812, and grew up in a lower middle-class family. His parents struggled to provide for their eight children, and by the time he was 10, Charles and his family had lived in six different houses, each poorer than the one before.

At age twelve, with the family’s finances in dire straits, Charles Dickens was forced to leave school and sent away to work in Warren’s boot-blackening factory. He worked 12 hours a day, six days a week, in a dark room with other children, covering pots of boot polish and gluing on labels. The building was rat-infested and falling apart. Separated from his family and utterly alone, he earned just six shillings a week – less than half of an adult’s already-low wages.

Soon afterwards, Dickens’ father was imprisoned for failing to pay off his debts, and the rest of Dickens’ family were moved into the Marshalsea debtor’s prison in London. Charles continued to work, but likely felt abandoned and ashamed of his family’s circumstances.

Although he wrote about the plight of the poor in many of his novels, Charles Dickens only shared the truth of his childhood with a few people during his lifetime.

Dickens eventually left the factory and got work in a law office, but was drawn towards writing. He soon began work as a newspaper reporter, covering the proceedings of the English parliament. He was very good at his new job, and after teaching himself shorthand in order to take accurate transcripts of the speeches and debates, he became known as London’s fastest political reporter!

Around the same time, Dickens began writing magazine stories, and then novels, in the new, and popular, “serialized” format. A serial novel was bought on a payment plan – the reader would pay for and read the story one chapter at a time. Books were still expensive to buy in Dickens’ time – but the introduction of serialization made them much more affordable for middle-class readers. Dickens became a master of the serialized storytelling format, and he was skilled at building suspense into his stories.

Charles Dickens could be considered the first real “celebrity” author – and much like George Bernard Shaw, he used his status to strongly and passionately criticize the many social injustices of Victorian society.

Dickens had compassion for others, especially the poor. He placed great importance on the care of children in the lower classes, and felt that the less fortunate, and especially children, should be provided for and educated.

However, Dickens was also a hard worker, and often pushed himself to the point of exhaustion. He had exceedingly high expectations of himself and others, and this led to friction and broken relationships with his wife and several of his children.

In June of 1865, Charles Dickens was on his way back to England from Paris when his train derailed at Staplehurst. After tending to the injured and dying until the authorities arrived, he went back to the upturned train, climbing in a window to retrieve his manuscript of *Our Mutual Friend*. While he seemed uninjured at the time, his health was never good after the crash, and five years to the day after the accident, he died of a stroke at his home.

When Dickens died in 1870, he was buried in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, in a tomb that reads: "He was a sympathizer to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England's greatest writers is lost to the world." Today, he is still one of the most popular and widely read authors in the English language, and not a single one of his books has ever gone out of print!

### **Dickens and The World of A Christmas Carol**

Despite his challenging childhood, Dickens was an outgoing, playful man who loved games and parties. It seems that the writing of *A Christmas Carol* affected him deeply, as he wrote to a friend that he "wept and laughed, and wept again, and excited himself in a most extraordinary manner in the composition; and thinking whereof he walked about the black streets of London fifteen and twenty miles and many a night when all the sober folks had gone to bed."

Dickens used the story to convey a powerful social message about the treatment of the poor. He had recently visited the Field Lane "Ragged School" – part of a group of charitable institutions that were supposed to provide free instruction in reading and math for the poor. However, Dickens was appalled at the filth, misery and ignorance of the attendees, and it saddened and angered him that Victorian society mostly overlooked or ignored the suffering of the lower classes. He decided that his Christmas tale would "...strike a sledgehammer blow...on behalf of the Poor Man's child."

Dickens wanted the book to be physically beautiful and accessible for the average person. He paid for much of the publishing costs out of his own pocket. He insisted the book be affordable and kept the price low so that more people would be able to access it. As a result, he didn't make as much money as he'd hoped from the first printing. However, the volume of sales once the book was published was incredible. The first printing of 6000 copies was made available on December 19, 1843, and was sold out by December 22.

Not only was the book continually reprinted throughout Dickens' lifetime, but he also adapted it for public readings, and toured throughout the world presenting it, until shortly before his death.

Driven by the success of *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens went on to write four more Christmas books and several more Christmas stories for magazines. None reached the popularity and success of *A Christmas Carol*. However, Charles Dickens became the "face" of Christmas in England for the rest of his life. He wrote to his daughter, Mamie, that he felt he "...had murdered a Christmas a number of years ago, and its ghost perpetually haunted me."

Far from killing off Christmas spirit, Dickens and *A Christmas Carol* did much to standardize and popularize the holiday as we know it today. Many traditions that had been carried out for centuries in rural Britain had fallen out of favour, or been lost completely, as people moved from the country to the cities to find work in factories. Others had been suppressed by organized religion and were never revived. *A Christmas Carol* helped to reintroduce many of these traditions in popular culture, such as Christmas parties and feasts, decorating homes and businesses, and the exchange of cards and gifts.

Most importantly, Dickens' story reinforced the idea of Christmas as a time of charity and human kindness, and encouraged the expectation that it was an opportunity for each individual to help right societal injustices.

Since *A Christmas Carol* was first published, it has been adapted, parodied, and reimagined in books, films, movies, and on TV. See how many you recognize...

[video clips of parodies]

Perhaps the reason *A Christmas Carol* has remained so popular is because of the lessons it imparts. As Bonnie J. Monte, director with the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey has noted, "*A Christmas Carol* will never lose its value and its importance – unless of course, mankind finds a way to erase Want and Ignorance and Greed."

Sadly, many of the issues Dickens worked so hard to remedy are still a problem today. Child labour and working conditions are still problematic in many parts of the world, and there are still many people living in poverty, even in developed countries. As you watch our play, consider if things have changed much in 200 years. What lessons can we in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learn from Dickens' story?

## **Our Production**

The Shaw Festival's production of *A Christmas Carol* began in a surprising place – Bergen, Norway! Our Artistic Director, Tim Carroll, directed a production in 2015 at Den Nationale Scene. When he arrived the following year at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, he

thought it was the perfect place to remount the show, as the town has a very Victorian feel to it (and even has its own Christmas shop, which is referenced in our play)!

The designer of the first production, Christine Lohre, also worked on our show. Many of the props from the play were shipped to Canada from Norway, and some of the costume designs remain the same (although reimagined for the Shaw actors who will be playing those parts).

Other areas of the production, such as sets and costumes, have been adapted to fit our show. For example, Christine has drawn an image of the main street of Niagara-on-the-Lake that has been turned into a giant advent calendar by the artists at our Scene Shop!

As you watch the show, look for ways in which sets and props are used in unexpected ways, and how the actors utilize the items around them to tell the story. How are all of the elements of our production combined to convey the story and themes? How does music and lighting help to set the atmosphere?

There are many different elements of theatre to watch for in our production – such as Story Theatre, Puppetry and Shadow Puppetry, Dance, Music, and more! Take a look at this clip for a sneak peek into our production!

*[video clip of 2017 Shaw Festival rehearsal]*

We look forward to seeing you soon at the Shaw Festival!