

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 Rachel O'Brien

Movement and puppetry by Alexandra Montagnese

The Story

Ebenezer Scrooge is a selfish, greedy, and unkind man of business. He only cares about making money, no matter the sacrifice. Scrooge does not care about poor people who are hurt by his business practices. Scrooge hates Christmas, and thinks it is an excuse for laziness and missing work. Whenever anyone wishes him a “Merry Christmas” he responds by saying “Bah Humbug”. He really is not a nice person at all. One evening, just before Christmas, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of Jacob Marley. Marley was his former business partner. When he was alive, 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 spirits will visit him. If Scrooge hears their message, he may avoid this horrible fate.

As Marley vanishes and Scrooge falls asleep, the ghostly visitations begin.

The first spirit is the Ghost of Christmas Past. They show Scrooge scenes from his past life as a child, and as a young man, beginning his career and being in love.

The second Spirit is the Ghost of Christmas Present. They show him the family he has shunned and how they celebrate and are inspired by the warmth and goodness of Christmas. Scrooge also sees into the happy, but poverty-stricken home of his employee Bob Cratchit, and learns about his youngest son Tiny Tim who is ill.

The third spirit is the Ghost of Christmas Future. This ghost does not speak. They show Scrooge images of a bleak future, 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 focusing solely on himself and making money, Scrooge vows to become a better person. He promises to help those who are in need, to improve the life of Bob Cratchit and his family, and to keep 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.

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.

Dickens eventually left the factory and got work in a law office, but his mastery of storytelling soon led him to become a popular writer. 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.

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.

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!

The World of *A Christmas Carol*

The story of *A Christmas Carol* is set in Victorian England (1837-1901) in the city of London. During this time, there was a great divide between rich and poor people, also called the upper, the middle, and the lower classes. The upper class were educated, wealthy, did not work, and had all the power. The middle class consisted of educated professionals, such as doctors and business owners. The lower classes were the workers, with little to no education and no chance to advance in society. Children of poor families were forced to work to help their families survive. Many families moved to the city of London with the promise of work in factories and a new life. However, the reality was the city was dirty, overcrowded, and work in the factories was hard and dangerous. Workhouses were established where poor people who had no job or home lived. Orphans and abandoned children, the physically and mentally sick, the disabled, the elderly and unmarried mothers were sent to the workhouse. The workhouses were well known for their terrible conditions, including forced child labour, long hours, malnutrition, beatings, and neglect.

Sadly, many of these issues 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 21st Century learn from Dickens' story?

DID YOU KNOW? During the Victorian era many Christmas 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. We have *A Christmas Carol* to thank for helping to reintroduce many of the old holiday traditions that continue today, 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 for each individual to help right societal injustices.

FUN FACT! Since *A Christmas Carol* was first published, it has been adapted, parodied, and reimagined in books, films, movies, and on TV.

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.

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