



A CHRISTMAS CAROL

2023
SEASON

SPECIAL EVENT

PRODUCTION NUMBER 250

Nov. 25 — THROUGH — Dec. 23

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◇ DIRECTOR'S NOTE ◇

*A note about this adaptation of
Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol
By Rodger Sorensen, Adapter and Director*

When invited to make a new adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, I approached the task knowing that the magic of Dickens' story is found in the dynamic interaction between the narrative descriptions and the dialogue of the characters. So, I decided to use a technique called "Chamber Theatre" to merge them together. You probably wonder, "What is Chamber Theatre?" Well, I'll tell you.

Story number one.

During the audition process for this production, a young girl asked some excellent questions. "Are the characters narrating their own actions or are they acting the narration? I think I'm confused." I explained the approach to adapting this story and how the relationship between the narrative and dramatic texts should be performed. She experimented with the technique, and replied, "This is a really fun style!"

Story number two.

In the summer of 1977, I attended a six-week Readers Theatre Workshop where I had the good fortune of studying under a man named Robert Breen, a professor at Northwestern University. He cast me in a 20-minute production of a short story he adapted and directed using a technique he had developed called "Chamber Theatre."

Theatrical productions, in both educational and professional settings, have used this technique. Two examples. In 1980, the Royal Shakespeare Company in England created and performed a chamber theatre adaptation of Charles Dickens' *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. It was critically acclaimed. In 1990, a chamber theatre adaptation of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was performed on Broadway. It won two Tony Awards.

Okay. Three cheers. But what is Chamber Theatre? Robert Breen defined it as "a method of adapting literary works to the stage using a maximal amount of the work's original text and often minimal and suggestive settings. In chamber theatre, narration is included in the performed text and the narrator might be played by multiple actors.

When writing books, authors use narration to invoke and describe the world in which the characters live. When reading books, readers (using their imagination) create that world in their minds.

This adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* tells the story through its remarkable characters while including and performing "a maximal amount of the work's original text," including much of the vivid narration. Below are some examples of how the character dialogue and the narrative lines are performed concurrently. Notice the merging of dialogue and third person narration as "performed text." After the Cratchit family's Christmas dinner, they all comment on their wonderful meal:

(Cratchit) *(To Mrs Cratchit)* Bob said he didn't believe there ever was such a goose cooked; **(Martha)** its tenderness and flavor, size and cheapness, were the themes of universal admiration. **(Belinda)** Eked out by apple-sauce and mashed potatoes, it was a sufficient dinner for the whole family. **(Mrs Cratchit)** Indeed, as Mrs Cratchit said with great delight, surveying one small atom of a crumb upon a dish, "They hadn't ate it all at last." **(All the Cratchits)** *(to the audience)* Yet everyone had had enough.

The Cratchits do not step out of character to speak the narrative lines. Rather, they deliver them in character as "performed text" directly to each other, and then finally to the audience.

Below is another example of how both dramatic and narrative lines can be delivered as "performed text." However, in this passage Scrooge speaks dramatic lines directly to Bob Cratchit, followed by Bob Cratchit speaking narrative lines directly to audience members. Bob Cratchit delivers it as his character, not as a third-person narrator.

Scrooge: Now, I'll tell you what, my friend. I am not going to stand this sort of thing any longer. And therefore, and therefore *(growling at Bob)* I am about to raise your salary! *(Scrooge freezes.)*
Cratchit: *(speaking to the audience and referencing Scrooge)* Bob trembled, and got a little nearer to the ruler. He had a momentary idea of knocking Scrooge down with it, holding him, and calling to the people in the court for help and a strait-waistcoat. *(Cratchit raises the ruler and approaches Scrooge.)*

Our hope is that this Chamber Theatre production of *A Christmas Carol* will bring joy and happiness to you and your family during this wonderful time of year. As Bob Cratchit invites, "A Merry Christmas to us all, my dears." And as Tiny Tim concludes, "God bless us everyone!"

RODGER SORENSEN

Adapter and Director, A Christmas Carol

◇ INTERESTING FACTS ◇

“Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?”

A young girl upon hearing of Charles Dickens’ death on June 9, 1870.

In a 1903 essay, writer F. G. Kitton called Charles Dickens “the man who invented Christmas.” That title gained renewed prominence with the success of the 2017 movie of the same name starring Dan Stevens of *Downton Abbey* fame. But did he?

Of course, Christmas was a long-standing holiday, established as the feast of the birth of Jesus by Pope Julius I to take place on December 25. Pope Gregory brought it to England in 601 by instructing St. Austin of Canterbury “not to stop such ancient Pagan festivities” such as Saturnalia and Yule but to “adapt them to the rites of the Church, only changing the reason of them from a heathen to a Christian impulse.”

For many centuries afterward, Christmas celebrations grew in England. Eventually, the English celebration of Christmas became a twelve-day festival from Christmas Eve to the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. Such was the excess of the time that King Henry III threw a Christmas feast, which included the slaughter of 600 oxen for one single meal.

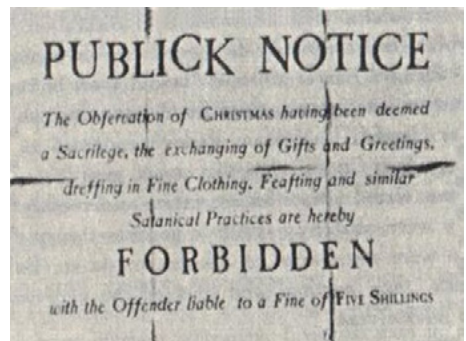
However, when the Puritan movement came to power in England during the English Civil Wars, Christmas changed completely. Oliver Cromwell attacked it as a pagan feast and said it was “a pretense for Drunkenness, and Rioting, and Wantonness.” A 1644 law made Christmas a day of fasting and repentance, followed by acts of Parliament in 1647 and 1652, which banned the celebration of the holiday altogether.

These bans were repealed with the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660, but the spirit of Christmas had been dampened. The advent of the Industrial

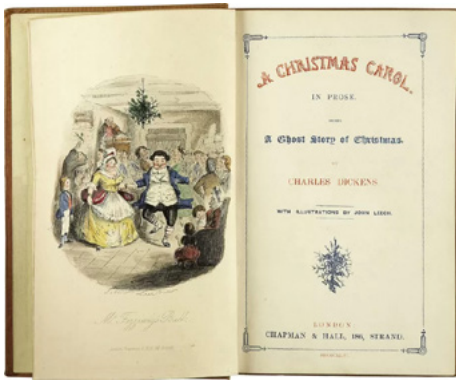
Revolution further diminished the holiday spirit as a great many workers spent the holiday at the factory with no recognition of the holiday.

All that began to change in the 1840s, and the landmark event of that change was the December 19, 1843 publication of *A Christmas Carol*. While Charles Dickens didn’t invent Christmas, he played a pivotal role in its revival and in shaping enduring Christmas traditions and images that are with us to this day, such as charity toward the poor and a focus on family celebrations. It’s hard to overestimate the popularity and celebrity of Charles Dickens at this time or the impact this book had on everyone who read it, heard Dickens read it, or saw one of the many pirated stage productions that sprung up quickly after.

For example, Dickens’ Christmas story takes place on snow-covered streets, and that vision of a white Christmas is still with us 180 years later. However, England seldom sees snow at



A flyer from Boston announcing a complete ban on Christmas and its “Satanical Practices” like feasting, dressing in fine clothing, or exchanging gifts or greetings. Anyone caught celebrating would be fined five shillings.



The title page of the first edition of *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens wasted a handsome printing, but the addition of color meant that even with immense sales he barely saw a profit from the book.

Christmas, and London sees it even less. An accident of climate brought us this snowy setting, as the first 8 Christmases of Dickens' life were snowy due to unusual weather patterns near the end of what is called "The Little Ice Age." These Christmases before his father was put in debtor's prison and young Dickens needed to support his family by working in a factory that made shoe blacking created core memories of an innocent and hopeful Christmastime that Dickens would return to again and again in his later years.

The effects of the Puritan condemnations of Christmas were still felt years later, as the phrase "Merry Christmas" had fallen out of use in favor of the more sober and restrained "Happy Christmas." The former phrase evoked images of merriment, including food, drink, games, and laughter, and it was exactly this behavior which caused the Puritan backlash to the holiday. Dickens, however, uses the phrase no less than 21 times in *A Christmas Carol*, and the immense popularity of the book put the phrase on people's lips again, particularly in America.

Those condemnations also had affected Christmas carols themselves, as folk traditions were curtailed and the carols began to slip from memory. While there was increasing interest in reclaiming this historic festive music in the early 1800s, caroling was far from a common practice when Dickens introduced a caroler singing "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" into his

story. By suggesting they were a standard part of Christmas that only a miser like Scrooge could take objection to, Dickens helped revive caroling.

Even the Christmas table was affected by Dickens' *Carol*! When a reformed Scrooge upgrades the Cratchit family meal from a goose to "a prize turkey". This was probably inspired by Dickens' gratitude to the printers of his books who sent him a turkey each Christmas. The goose was the traditional centerpiece of Christmas dinner in England, but the turkey's presence in *A Christmas Carol* (the bird is mentioned 9 times), changed the tastes of the country and almost bankrupted the goose industry in England. In one famous incident, a factory owner heard Dickens read *A Christmas Carol* aloud and immediately rushed out afterwards and immediately bought turkeys for all his employees.

The writer G.K. Chesterton suggested in his introduction to *A Christmas Carol* that "He saved Christmas not because it was historic, but because it was human" and that without Dickens' "Ghostly little book," a traditional Christmas would "have become merely details of the neglected past, a part of history or archaeology ... perhaps the very word carol would sound like the word *villanelle*."

MARK FOSSEN, MFA

HCTO Guest Dramaturg



1653 cover art for *The Vindication of Christmas* showing a Parliamentary soldier threatening Father Christmas, as a passing farmer reassures him "Old Christmas welcome: Do not fear."