

A CHRISTMAS CAROL:

The Ghost Story of Christmas

By Charles Dickens

Adapted by Stephen Keep Mills

Music and sound by Kinny Landrum

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PUBLISHED BY

ELDRIDGE PUBLISHING
hiStage.com

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STORY OF THE PLAY

On Christmas Eve, as carolers gather about a fire, a young boy who cannot sleep discovers a book on his desk. As he opens it, the portraits of his ancestors come alive to take him through the journey of its story. The book, of course, is *A Christmas Carol*, and in his travels the boy meets a man on another journey - Ebenezer Scrooge in the company of the Spirits. This is a different adaptation of Charles Dickens' Christmas classic. It is truly *The Ghost Story of Christmas* as ghosts from the boy's world and the world of the book interweave to tell us the story.

Playwright's Notes

A Christmas Carol has been adapted, pirated and analyzed in hundreds of different ways since Dickens wrote it in 1843. Some versions have emphasized the Cratchits as symbols of the displaced urban family amid the social breakdown brought on by the Industrial Revolution. Some versions have parodied the Calvinistic Utilitarianism of the times which sought to outlaw all earthly celebrations as heathen. Critics have chided Dickens for not making Bob Cratchit an equal partner in Scrooge's business at the story's end, thus leveling the imbalance between the lower and upper classes. Dickens, they said, had sold out his social conscience for the patrician pleasures of parlor games and punch.

All this seems strangely non-pertinent as we feel this tale unfold. This is a story about the value of life. It is shot through with ironic tension surrounding the theme of change - the monetary and external "change" of the market versus the internal "change" in our hearts. It is about spiritual - not social - poverty. It is about redemption from abandonment. It is about preserving the link between generations. It is about the death of our smaller, material self and the rebirth of that larger self - the child inside us. Tiny Tim's crippled body mirrors Scrooge's crippled soul. But Scrooge is not a case history. He is a symbol of the monster we can become when we forsake our place among the family of man for the addictive worship of the golden calf.

This is not a logical story with a linear plot. It is surreal. A myth. A metamorphosis. A dream compiled of simultaneous images from which we awaken renewed and encouraged in our belief that we, too, can reach for love. And that we, too, can sense within us all the possibilities - if given a second chance - for individual change.

Christmas Carol: A Ghost Story

-3-

DEDICATION

For the Players at Irvington.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

4 m, 4 w, 4 children (1 boy, 3 girls)

ACTOR 1: Character actor. 25-50. Loves to have the final word. Playful. Plays Ancestor #1, Charity Man, Dick Wilkins, Merchant #1, Old Joe.

ACTOR 2: Leading man. 25-35. Vital and virile. An honest practical joker. Plays Ancestor #3, Bob Cratchit, Scrooge as a young Man, a Lamplighter, Merchant #3.

ACTOR 3: Character lead. Should look in 60s. Must have sense of humor and full emotions for final scenes. Plays Ebenezer Scrooge.

ACTOR 4: Character actor. 40-50. Expansive, powerful and pure. Requires a good laugh. Plays Marley, Fred, Fezziwig, a Holiday Man, Merchant #2.

ACTRESS 1: Character actress. 25-50. No-nonsense, maternal and mischievous. Plays Ancestor #2, Charity Woman.

ACTRESS 2: Character actress. 20-30. Whimsical, strong and practical. Plays Spirit #1, Mrs. Cratchit, a Party Guest, Spirit #3.

ACTRESS 3: Character actress. 50s. Patient, kind but capable of hitting the big notes. Plays Spirit #2, Mrs. Fezziwig.

ACTRESS 4: Leading lady. 20-30. Good range. More strength than sweetness. Plays Belle, Fred's Wife, a Holiday Woman, Mrs. Dilber.

CHILD 1: (*Male*) 10 years old. Capable of wonder and adventure. Plays Boy, Tiny Tim, Scrooge as a Boy, a Goose Boy.

CHILD 2: (*Female*) 12 years old. Responsible and caring. Plays Belinda Cratchit and Ensemble Girl.

CHILD 3: (*Female*) 5-8 years old. Sweet, playful. Plays Fan.

CHILD 4: (*Female*) 5-8 years old. Sweet, playful. Plays Ensemble Girl.

(NOTE: List of CD music and SFX tracks at end of script.)

PRODUCTION NOTES

This adaptation is integrated with a production concept which includes four arched panels. Each is about 8' high by 3 1/2' wide with a triangle base. They are filled with scrim which, according to the way they are lit, allows for them to appear solid or transparent. These panels are "space shapers" and can be placed to suggest a street, a room, an office, a wall, or abstractly, a state of mind or a feeling about the scene. These panels are quite light and are manipulated by the Ancestors. In this way, the scenes can dissolve and re-form as spontaneously and suggestively as they do in the novel.

The use of the Ancestors to do the narration provides an active way to tell the story. The Ancestors are the inspired workhorses of the piece. Playing not to the audience but from a relationship among themselves, as well as the rapport they develop with the boy, these master raconteurs are constantly setting the scene with props, furniture pieces, and language. Their simultaneous actions of taking the boy through the journey and of establishing the scenes allows the Ancestors a naturalness of intent and movement which loosens the usually formal dimension of narration.

About the Ghosts. Marley is really the only ghost. That is, he was once a mortal and only now speaks from another world. He is frightening to Scrooge because he looks like a dead man and exemplifies death. Christmas Past, Present and Future, on the other hand, have always been from another world and, being incapable of physical death, are better classified as Spirits. Rather than try to actualize them according to their descriptions in the novel, try instead to keep consistent with the dream-like tone of the tale. It is recommended that the Spirits appear in identical costume which might combine elements of the purple robes of the ancient hooded Sibyls together with Victorian riding and religious habits. Each carries a long wooden staff and their make-up should blend out the normal human mask (eyebrows, for instance). It is important for them to be women, acting as positive spiritual guides to the lost Scrooge.

Since this piece requires only four men, four women and four children, the doubling of roles, first and foremost must fit the balance of each particular company of actors.

Christmas Carol: A Ghost Story

-5-

If, for instance, the actor who plays Ancestor #1 seems better suited to play Young Scrooge, so be it. Though the connection between Bob Cratchit and Young Scrooge is visually to be desired, as is the visual nightmare of the nostalgic Belle re-emerging in the guise of the grasping Mrs. Dilber. The connections between Fred, Fezziwig and Marley as Scrooge's past and present family should not be regarded as arbitrary.

Equally integral to this adaptation is the music which is really the force of the production, providing that sense of imminent danger and unexpected action which defines the genre of the ghost story. This adaptation is very much enhanced with the CD.

The style of the piece is, like the novel, kaleidoscopic. That is, scenes form, unravel and re-form into something else. The idea is not to try to trick the audience, but to allow these images to evolve into shape right in front of their eyes. Essential to the effect of the story is the visual delight in witnessing this transformation of one image into the next. Just as it is OK to see the Ancestors take apart and reshape a scene, it's also OK to see them entering from offstage and stepping into their picture frames at the beginning of the play. It is all right to see Marley getting into place behind the door an instant before he is revealed, because in the next instant, the image which we have just seen formed will take us further into the story. It is the growing condition of Marley which is far more frightening than simply a cattle-prod entrance.

A word about the Boy and The Old Man (Scrooge). This is an ongoing image throughout the play as well as both its opening and closing one. The story of the play is the evolving connection of the two, and the director must find several moments - brief ones - in the course of the action to heighten the progress of this evolution.

While this piece is a family story, it is not recommended for children under 6 years old.

ACT ONE

CUE #1: *Music. Prelude.*

(As the MUSIC begins, the LIGHTS come up to reveal FOG blowing across a lighted brazier or smudge-pot CS. From opposite sides of the stage, a BOY and an OLD MAN, derelict in appearance, enter. They face each other across the brazier. Cautiously and keeping their distance, they circle around the fire, exchanging places. When the Boy moves toward the Old Man, the Old Man suddenly leaves. As the Boy warms his hands alone at the brazier, a GROUP of men, women and children enter and join him. It is Christmas Eve. 1843. All sing "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" and pass a large book between them throughout the first verse.)

CUE #2: *SFX. A bell tolls between the first and second verses.*

(The scene changes: the FOG dissipates and the CROWD begins to disperse, still singing and altering the set as they go. The set thus far is comprised only of four arched panels, similar in shape to a church door or high windows. They are filled with scrim and can be seen through or lit to appear solid. How they are positioned will suggest the place of action and elements of furniture will amplify each location. For now, the panels transform into the boy's bedroom with a back wall and door. A bed and desk are brought on. Large picture frames, empty for the moment, hang on three of the panels. All that remain from the crowd are two PARENTS putting their SON to bed. As the parents leave, the Boy, who can't sleep, gets up to check if the coast is clear. As he turns back into his room, he notices a book he had not seen before on his desk. It is the same large book that had been passed among the carolers.)

CUE #3: *Music.*

Christmas Carol: A Ghost Story

-7-

(BOY crosses to open it. As he turns back the cover, three of his ANCESTORS fill the picture frames behind him, assuming their portrait poses. The Boy begins to read.)

CUE #4: *Music.*

ANCESTOR #1: Marley was dead.

CUE #5: *Music.*

ANCESTOR #2: To begin with.

CUE #6: *Music.*

ANCESTOR #3: There is no doubt whatever about that.

ANCESTOR #1: The register of his burial was signed by the undertaker.

ANCESTOR #3: Scrooge signed it.

ANCESTOR #1: Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.

ANCESTOR #2: Mind! I don't mean to say what there is particularly dead about a doornail.

ANCESTOR #3: I myself regard a coffin nail as the deadiest piece of ironmongery in the trade.

ANCESTOR #2: But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile.

ANCESTOR #1: You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marley was as dead as a doornail.

(BOY looks up from the book but not at the Ancestors who are on the wall behind him.)

BOY: Scrooge knew he was dead?

(As if the question were a signal, the ANCESTORS now loosen from their poses and address the boy directly. The BOY, still at his desk, stays focused on his book.)

ANCESTOR #1: Of course he did.

ANCESTOR #2: Scrooge and he were partners.

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