

An O. Henry Holiday Gifts of the Season

By
Linda Livingston

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An O. Henry Holiday -- Gifts of the Season

- 2 -

Dedication: For JTP

STORY OF THE PLAY

"The Gift of the Magi" is probably one of the most beloved stories for Christmas. It, along with two other tender stories by O. Henry, "The Last Leaf" and the lesser known "Christmas by Injunction," are dramatized here, set in the framework of O. Henry's life which in itself is a story.

In the early 1900s he was one of the most widely read authors in America. O. Henry, whose real name was William Sydney Porter, was known, however, to have spent some time in jail for allegedly embezzling from an employer, and it is believed that he started writing there in order to support his daughter. Based on these events, the play opens with him jailed on Christmas Eve. Each story he tells -- the first to his jailer, the second to his daughter, and the third as he is writing it -- comes alive with the actors taking over their character's lines. As he literally breathes life into them, they maintain the wit, charm and sweetness with which they were written.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

First presented at Santa Paula Theater Center, Santa Paula, CA, November 21, 2003. Directed by Linda Livingston, Set Design by Jeff G. Rack, and Lighting Design by Gary Richardson.

The cast was as follows:

Porter (aka) O. Henry...Ronald Rezac
Guard / Jim...Sean Fitzgerald
Cherokee / Caroler...Jereme Leslie
Baldy / Behrman...Doug Friedlander
CA Ed / Mr. Rogers / Caroler...Nelson Fox
Trinidad...Robert Sbotka
Judge / Doctor...Michael Barra
Woman 1 / Mdm. Sofronie...Kimberly Peters
Bobby's Mother / Laundress...Kristin Jensen Storey
Bobby...Tyler Peters
Town Girl / Caroler...Samantha Peters
Margaret / Caroler...Kendall Storey
Erma Spangler / Sue / Caroler...Zoe Pietrycha
Johnsy / Caroler...Sarah Vawter
Fanchon Spangler / Della...Cristina Menzie

An O. Henry Holiday -- Gifts of the Season

- 3 -

CAST OF CHARACTERS

*Casting is very fluid. Minimum: 7 m, 5 w.
In Act I, Scene 1, females can play miners.*

Scene 1: Christmas by Injunction

Porter aka O. Henry Guard
Cherokee Baldy
California Ed Mr. (or Mrs.) Rogers
Trinidad Judge
Young Bobby
Assayer's Wife / Section Boss Wife
Hotel Proprietress / Mrs. Wiley
Bobby's Mother / Laundress
Erma Spangler Fanchon Spangler
Non-speaking roles of Prospectors, Businessmen, the
Bartender and Dance Hall Girls.

Scene 2: The Last Leaf

O. Henry Young Margaret
Johnsy Sue
Doctor Behrman

Scene 3: The Gift of the Magi

O. Henry Jim
Della Madame Sofronie
Carolers-any number

Performance Time: 80-90 minutes.

An O. Henry Holiday -- Gifts of the Season

- 4 -

SETTINGS

ACT I

Scene 1: Christmas by Injunction

Christmas Eve, 1899. SR is Porter's small jail cell represented by a short span of bars inside of which is a rough cot and small table and stool. The Guard pulls up another stool on which to sit outside the bars. SL is a rustic Western bar and a wooden table and chairs. Later, a hotel bell should be placed on the bar to represent the Lucky Strike Hotel. Behind the bar is a scrim. When raised, it reveals a Christmas tree decorated in toys, ornaments, and candle lights. These should be either lights shaped like candles or small white lights. Finally, a large sleigh is rolled in, next to the apron below SL.

ACT II

Scene 1: The Last Leaf

New York City, late fall, 1906. O. Henry, as he is now known, is seated behind his desk at home. While there may be an electric light overhead, there is a kerosene lamp on the desk. Johnsy and Sue's apartment has a bed, a nightstand, and UC a table and two chairs. An imaginary window DS provides Johnsy's view of a brick wall with a vine growing on it with a few ivy leaves. Later a projected image off SL will show one leaf. Behrman's apartment is played in front of the apron DL.

Scene 2: The Gift of the Magi

New York City, winter, 1906. O. Henry's desk, and Stella and Jim's humble apartment which has a small loveseat, an old wooden table and chairs, a small side table to the left of the loveseat and a worn red throw rug. There is a hall tree by the door. At one side of the stage is a letter box and an electric doorbell (non-working). Madame Sofronie's is represented by a folding screen on which a sign is hung.

ACT I

Scene 1: Christmas by Injunction

(AT RISE: Christmas Eve, 1899. Ohio Penitentiary. SL is a rustic old Western bar with a wooden table and chairs. Behind it is a scrim. SR William Sydney Porter (alias O. Henry) sits in a cell, half-heartedly humming a seasonal tune. The SOUND of wind howling outside is followed by the clanging of cell doors slamming shut. As LIGHTS come up on SR, a young GUARD approaches Porter's cell.)

GUARD: Well, Mr. Porter, I'll be leaving for the day and I won't be here tomorrow. *(Almost apologetically.)* Uh... Merry Christmas. *(HE starts to leave.)*

PORTER: Warder! *(The GUARD turns.)* I don't suppose you could spare a few minutes' company first?

GUARD: *(Hesitantly.)* Well...I suppose I could stick around for a little while. I sure hate to see a fella all alone on Christmas Eve. *(HE pulls up a stool next to the bars of the cell.)* Not a whole lot of space in there, is there?

PORTER: You've got that right. Especially for someone used to havin' the whole world in front of him.

GUARD: You see a lot of places, Mr. Porter?

PORTER: Oh, I've had my share of adventures. I've lived back East...been all over the Southwest...spent some time in Mexico. *(Smiling.)* Not *this* kind of time. Even hopped an old freighter to Honduras. *(GUARD looks confused.)* That's in Central America.

GUARD: Whew! That's something! Me...I've never been outside Ohio. I'll wager you have some mighty interesting stories to tell.

PORTER: Yep. Got so many in fact, I've been writing 'em down.

GUARD: So I heard.

PORTER: Truth is, I've got one swirling around in my head right now...if you'd care to hear it?

GUARD: Sure, Mr. Porter. Go ahead.

Christmas by Injunction

(LIGHTS are dimmed on the two men as they rise DL on CHEROKEE, a young man dressed in miner's clothes of the gold rush era. He is all the way DS, perhaps on the apron, studying and cleaning a piece of gold he has mined.)

PORTER: Cherokee was the civic father of Yellowhammer. Yellowhammer was a new mining town constructed mainly of canvas and undressed pine. Cherokee was a prospector. One day while his burro was eating quartz and pine burrs, Cherokee turned up with his pick a nugget weighing thirty ounces. He staked his claim and then, being a man of breadth and hospitality, sent out invitations to his friends in three states to drop in and share his luck.

(During the following, actors, one at a time, emerge from different areas of the stage. They include other PROSPECTORS, a well-dressed BUSINESSMAN and a couple of DANCE HALL GIRLS. Each approaches and congratulates Cherokee wordlessly.)

PORTER: *(Cont'd.)* Not one of his invited guests sent regrets. They rolled in from Gila Country, from Salt River, from the Pecos, from Albuquerque and Phoenix and Santa Fe, and from the camps intervening. When a thousand citizens had arrived and taken up claims, they named the town Yellowhammer, appointed a vigilance committee, and presented Cherokee with a watch-chain made of nuggets. *(After CHEROKEE is handed the watch chain, all ACTORS ONSTAGE freeze.)* Three hours after the presentation ceremonies, Cherokee's claim played out. He had located a pocket instead of a vein. He abandoned it and staked others one by one. Luck had kissed her hand to him. Never afterward did he turn up enough dust in Yellowhammer to pay his bar bill. But his thousand invited guests were mostly prospering, and Cherokee smiled and congratulated them.

An O. Henry Holiday -- Gifts of the Season

- 7 -

PORTER: *(Cont'd.)* Yellowhammer was made up of men who took off their hats to a smiling loser; so they invited Cherokee to say what he wanted. *(ACTORS unfreeze.)*

CHEROKEE: Me? Oh, grubstakes will be about the thing. I reckon I'll prospect along up in the Mariposas. If I strike it up there I will most certainly let you all know about the facts. I never was any hand to hold out cards on my friends.

PORTER: In May Cherokee packed his burro and turned its thoughtful, mouse-colored forehead to the north. *(CHEROKEE starts to exit as OTHERS accompany him.)* Many citizens escorted him to the undefined limits of Yellowhammer and bestowed upon him shouts of commendation and farewells.

(PORTER pauses while the ACTORS say their goodbyes and well wishes.)

PORTER: *(Cont'd.)* Five pocket flasks without an air bubble between contents and cork were forced upon him; and he was bidden to consider Yellowhammer in perpetual commission for his bed, bacon and eggs and hot water for shaving in the event that luck did not see fit to warm her hands by his campfire in the Mariposas. The name of The Father of Yellowhammer was given him by the gold hunters in accordance with their popular system of nomenclature. It was not necessary for a citizen to exhibit his baptismal certificate in order to acquire a cognomen. A man's name was his personal property. For convenience in calling him up to the bar and in designating him among other blue-shirted bipeds, a temporary appellation, title or epithet was conferred upon him by the public. Personal peculiarities formed the source of the majority of such informal baptisms. Many were easily dubbed geographically from the regions from which they confessed to have hailed. Some announced themselves to be "Thompsons," and "Adamses," and the like, with a brazenness and loudness that cast a cloud upon their titles.

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