

TEACHING RESOURCES

MELBOURNE SEASON 2025
COMEDY THEATRE

AN OLD VIC
PRODUCTION

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

A VERSION BY
JACK THORNE

CONCEIVED AND DIRECTED BY
MATTHEW WARCHUS

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CHARACTERS

Ebenezer Scrooge

A mean-spirited man who now runs Scrooge & Marley alone since the death of his business partner Jacob Marley.

Little Fan

Ebenezer's sister who collects him from boarding school and takes him home.

Young Ebenezer

The younger self of Ebenezer, shown to him by the Ghost of Christmas Past.

Bob Cratchit

A hard-working but very poor family man, who works for Scrooge.

Mrs Cratchit

Wife to Bob and mother of Tiny Tim.

Tiny Tim

The son of Bob and Mrs Cratchit.

Mr Fezziwig

Scrooge's first employer. In this production he is an undertaker.

Belle

Scrooge's fiancé, and in this production, Fezziwig's daughter. Despite their engagement, Scrooge's obsession with money causes the relationship to break up.

Mrs Fezziwig

Wife of Mr Fezziwig.

Father

Ebenezer's father, who shows him very little paternal love. He calls Ebenezer home from boarding school in order to start his first apprenticeship.

Jacob Marley

Scrooge's late business partner, who has been dead for seven years at the beginning of the story. His ghost visits Scrooge on Christmas Eve to warn Scrooge of his need for change, and to explain the impending visits of the three spirits.

Fred

Scrooge's nephew, born to Ebenezer's late sister, Little Fan, who dies in childbirth.

Ghost of Christmas Past

The first of the three spirits to visit Scrooge.

Ghost of Christmas Present

The second of the three spirits to visit Scrooge.

Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come

The third and final spirit, in this production in the guise of Scrooge's sister, Little Fan.

Nicholas

Husband of Belle, as shown to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Past.

SYNOPSIS

Act One

It is Christmas Eve and Ebenezer Scrooge is in his counting house. Despite the excitement of Christmas Eve, Scrooge refuses to join in and instead slams the door on carol singers and people collecting for charity. Scrooge questions whether the poor houses and prisons are still in operation, as he thinks the poor should go there, rather than depending on other people's charity. Scrooge is visited by his nephew, Fred, who also encourages Scrooge to join in with the Christmas spirit but he refuses once more. After issuing lengthy instructions and errands, Scrooge finally allows his employee Bob Cratchit to go home for Christmas, but not before Scrooge has complained about Bob wishing to have the entire Christmas Day off. His parting words are a reminder not to be late back to work on Boxing Day.

The ghost of Jacob Marley, his business partner who has been dead for seven years, visits Scrooge. Marley's ghost tells Scrooge that unless he changes his ways, he too will live out his life unhappy and alone. Marley explains that Scrooge will be visited by three spirits, and encourages him to heed the warnings that they will give. Scrooge does not believe him and retires to bed.

The first spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Past, arrives at the stroke of one. She takes Scrooge back to his own past, which he recognises by the young boys playing in the street, and then the vision of himself as a young boy, alone and left at boarding school over Christmas. The boy plays with a set of toys inspired by Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves and the Tales of the Arabian Nights. In particular, he plays with a parrot, relying on his imagination to escape his loneliness. Little Fan, Ebenezer's beloved sister, arrives to take him home but once at home it is clear that he is a disappointment to his father. In order to assist with the family's financial debt, Ebenezer is to enter into employment immediately.

Scrooge finds an entirely different world in that of Mr Fezziwig, whose own attitude to life is jovial and highly charitable. Christmas with the Fezziwigs is loud, cheerful, and full of laughter, music and dancing. Before meeting him, Scrooge encounters Fezziwig's daughter, Belle, who coaches him on the way in which to reply to a conundrum. If faced with two families who have recently been bereaved, one by the death of an elderly relative, the other by the loss of a young child, who should he help first? Scrooge's initial answer is those with the most money but the Fezziwigs allow him to see that there is a more kind and benevolent approach: he should prioritise the family of the small child with whom they will never share a long life, compared to the family of the elderly relative.

Scrooge falls in love with Belle, but in his quest to gain financial riches, allows himself to be distracted and they grow apart. The audience sees the life that Scrooge could have been part of, potentially even taking over the family business later on.

Scrooge returns home to his family with gifts such as ribbon and fabric. His mother is very ill, and his father rejects the gifts insisting that money would have been better. Little Fan is delighted to see her brother and has made him a scarf which he promises to wear forever.

After seeing these visions of the past, Scrooge explains to the Ghost of Christmas Past that his family experience of debt had driven him to seek riches but does not seem to take responsibility for losing Belle who eventually married another man. The Ghost of Christmas Past leaves Scrooge, and he is suddenly back in his own bed.

The Ghost of Christmas Present arrives and immediately shows him a life of misery and poverty. As a debt collector, Scrooge is responsible for some of this misery but he insists that he is simply playing his own role in society. The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to the home of his lowly employee Bob Cratchit whose family, despite being extremely poor (as a result of the inadequate wage paid to him by Scrooge), live a life of happiness and contentment because of the love that family have for one other.

Upon arriving home, Bob Cratchit and his son Tiny Tim play a game of hide and seek with other children in the family until Mrs Cratchit enters with the Christmas goose. It is small and will not satisfy the hunger of the family but they remain happy and grateful for what they do have. Bob toasts Scrooge as his employer, wishing him well, although Mrs Cratchit is not as enthusiastic about those well wishes.

Scrooge is then taken to the home of his nephew Fred, whose mother was Little Fan. Fred is playing a parlour game with his guests, describing an unattractive being who roams London and which can be savage and cruel. He is talking about Scrooge, much to the amusement of his guests. Scrooge is scornful and angry with the ghost, but also hears Fred admit that despite his idiosyncrasies and lack of empathy he loves him, and misses him at Christmas.

The next vision shown by the Ghost of Christmas Present is that of Belle, with her husband Nicholas. Nicholas reminds her that Fezziwig owed a financial debt to Scrooge and died as a result of the strain. Again, Scrooge refuses to take responsibility for doing anything other than his job and is reluctant to admit how much pain the loss of Belle has really caused him.

Suddenly, Bob and Mrs Cratchit reappear with Tiny Tim who has fallen ill after waiting in the cold for his father to return home. Despite not having the necessary money, they call for a doctor but it is too late. Act One ends with Scrooge still resisting change despite the pain and unhappiness that he has been exposed to that night, and still insisting that he is a 'great man'.

Act Two

Shaken by his previous two visitors, Scrooge is then visited by a third spirit — in this production that of his late sister, Little Fan. She shows him his own funeral, and explains that the material riches that he leaves behind will only rot or be stolen by thieves. Little Fan shows him a future in which he has been unnecessarily cruel and petty, even sacking Bob Cratchit for poor time keeping following Tiny Tim's death. Despite this, Bob is seen mourning over Scrooge's coffin, mentioning only kind and positive thoughts about his former employer. Fred, too, speaks of his uncle fondly even though Scrooge has changed the locks to his home and offices and they have not spoken for several years. Scrooge admits that he was suspicious of Fred's attempts to move Scrooge into his home with him in order to look after him: he thinks it is simply an attempt to take all of his money. In order to protect Scrooge from even more pain, Little Fan refuses to show him the funeral of Tiny Tim but she reminds him of the possibility and rewards of love and kindness. Scrooge is able to see that there were so many possibilities for the person he was to become and Little Fan takes leave of him as he experiences his enlightenment.

When Scrooge awakes, once again in his own bed, he has undergone a moral transformation. He enthusiastically gives money to charity collectors who are amazed at his generosity and change in attitude. He makes a visit to Belle, who confirms that the man whom Scrooge has become is not the man with whom she fell in love. She is happy that Scrooge is part of her story, but is also content with the family she has raised and the good life that she has lived. She wishes him happiness.

Moved by the possibilities that have been opened up to him, Scrooge runs to his nephew's house and finally accepts the invitation to share Christmas with him. However, he asks that the Christmas feast become a moveable one because he wishes to share it with the Cratchit family who welcome him wholeheartedly.

Suddenly Scrooge finds himself alone, unsure whether what he has just experienced is real or even possible. The ghost of Jacob Marley reappears and reminds him that although the path to redemption is not always easy, Scrooge has the capacity to ensure he achieves it. The three spirits also reappear, telling Scrooge honestly that he did not deserve the happiness he has just experienced but that he can make amends. Scrooge ensures that he does.

THEMES

Scrooge's journey is one of enlightenment, addressing a host of new ideas and issues such as:

Light and enlightenment

The spirits who visit Scrooge are able to shed light on various aspects of his life, and use them to encourage him on his journey to enlightenment.

The journey of life

From the cradle to the grave.

Finding the good in life, despite its hardships

Scrooge has experienced the loss of several loved ones, which goes some way to explaining his refusal to engage with others. However, characters such as Belle allow him to see that beyond that loss also exists hope.

Christmas as a time for family

Scrooge is the only person in the story who seems to be spending Christmas alone, out of choice.

Social responsibility

At a time of year when the poor feel their poverty even more keenly, it is those people who have more who should share with those less fortunate than themselves.

Rich vs. Poor

From the unfair treatment experienced by the poor, to the ability to be happy without money, Scrooge is shown that his attitude to money and to the poor is unjust. Instead, it is his intervention which ensures that Tiny Tim is able to survive and thrive.

Generosity

Fezziwig's generous parties and Bob playing simple games with his family are examples of happiness found in places other than wealth.

The importance of forgiveness

Belle tells Scrooge that although he has caused her great pain, she sees him as an important part of her life. She does not resent or regret her relationship with him.

Man's capacity to change and reform

From the most miserly to the most generous of men.

TIMELINE

Dickens, Christmas and the theatre

1812

Charles John Huffam Dickens is born in Portsmouth.

1820s

Christmas traditions begin to be revived in England, a spirit of nostalgia and an attempt to protect the tradition from the modernisation brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the urbanisation that it caused. This continues throughout Queen Victoria's reign as the Royal Family inspires the celebration of Christmas in old and new ways.

1824

The young Dickens is employed in a blacking factory, and for three months his father and family live in Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. This experience remains with Dickens throughout his life, and its influence can be seen frequently in his novels and short stories.

1832

Dickens misses an audition at Covent Garden due to illness. He becomes a parliamentary reporter instead. His first short story is published a year later.

1834

The Poor Law Amendment Act makes it more difficult for the poorest members of society to gain help. Those in need are now forced to go to workhouses where conditions are so bad that many see them as a final resort and are reluctant to seek help.

1836

The 'Good Humoured Christmas Chapter' of the serialised *The Pickwick Papers* is published at the end of 1836, beginning the ongoing connection between Dickens and the presentation of Christmas.

1841

The decorated Christmas tree is introduced in Britain by Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria.

1843

Dickens is appalled to read a Parliamentary Report about the working conditions endured by women and children. He addresses an audience at Manchester's Athenaeum on 05 October, and the seed is sown for a story that highlights the plight of the poor.

A Christmas Carol is published in December — the first of many of his Christmas stories. It is immediately a huge success, selling 5,000 copies by Christmas Eve and being reprinted a number of times. It has never been out of print since its first publication.

1844

The Chimes is this year's Christmas story.

The 1844 Factories Act imposes a limit of nine hours per day for children between 9–13 years old, for a maximum of six days a week.

1845

The Cricket on the Hearth is published at Christmas.

1848

The Haunted Man is published at Christmas. This year, Dickens has also organised and performed in charity performances of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Everyman in His Humour*.

1850

Household Words begins publication, and continues as a weekly journal until 1859. It is in this journal that many of Dickens' Christmas stories and articles are first published.

1851

Dickens performs in front of Queen Victoria and other audiences at the Guild of Literature and Art.

1853

Dickens gives the first charity readings of *A Christmas Carol*.

1858

Dickens gives his first readings from which he will profit financially. The readings begin in London, and Dickens then tours to provincial venues. Readings continue in various tours between 1861 and 1863.

A Christmas Carol is always a popular inclusion. Dickens edited his performance version so that it could be 'read' in 90 minutes.

Between April and November, Dickens gives 104 readings, 87 of which are in the provinces.

1859

Dickens' weekly journal *All The Year Round* (replacing *Household Words*) is first published and continues to publish Christmas stories.

1863

Mrs Lirriper's *Lodgings* is published in the Christmas edition of *All The Year Round*. Some believe that the characterisation of Mrs Lirriper is based on Dickens' own mother, who passed away during this year.

1866

Mugby Junction is published as a Christmas story in *All The Year Round*.

1870

Following increasing ill health Dickens suffers a stroke, and dies on 09 June. Dickens is buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, London.

1934

The previously unpublished Dickens book *The Life of Our Lord*, which he wrote solely for the use of his own children, is published for the first time and includes a description of the Nativity.

1988

Patrick Stewart's one-man show of *A Christmas Carol* plays in London and, later, on Broadway.

1993

Charles Dickens' own great-great-grandson Gerald Charles Dickens performs a one man show, playing 26 characters in *A Christmas Carol*.

1994

Alan Menken and Lynn Ahrens write *A Christmas Carol — The Musical* which is performed annually in the USA until 2003 with high profile actors in the role of Scrooge.

2008

Bryony Lavery adapts the novella for Chichester Youth Theatre which they perform in 2008 and 2015. Birmingham Repertory Theatre also perform the adaptation in 2009 and 2013.

2011

National Theatre of Scotland perform *A Christmas Carol* which is adapted, directed and designed by Graham McLaren.

Simon Callow performs his one-man show of *A Christmas Carol* based on Dickens' own performance text. This show is revived in 2012, 2016 and 2017.

2014

An opera version, with libretto by Simon Callow, is performed by Houston Grand Opera, USA.

2015

Jim Broadbent performs the lead role in Phelim McDermott's London production.

2017

A new adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, written by Jack Thorne, is performed for the first time at The Old Vic.

2018

By popular demand, Jack Thorne's version of *A Christmas Carol*, returns to The Old Vic stage.

INTERVIEW

With Matthew Warchus, Director of *A Christmas Carol*, and Artistic Director of The Old Vic

***A Christmas Carol* is currently seeing even more exposure in schools because it's on the GCSE English Literature syllabus. As a director, however, what are the opportunities and challenges in directing such a well-known and well-loved story?**

When you're directing anything — especially famous plays, Shakespeare for example — the assumption you have to make is the story is being told for the first time. Fortunately, there will always be people in any audience who don't know the story and don't know what's going to happen. In order that the story is told in a fresh and honest way, you have to aim for those people and, also, you have to treat people who have seen the story or the play before, as though they are hearing it for the first time.

When you do that, when you treat the story not as if it's a famous story but as though it's a new story, you discover things as you're working on it, that some of the assumptions you'd made aren't necessarily true or that there are details in it that you'd overlooked previously. I think what helps that approach is that the actors are usually playing the part for the first time. There's a newness about their experience and what they can bring to it which helps the whole thing feel fresh.

Personally, when it comes to *A Christmas Carol*, I'd never seen it onstage before so I hadn't got anything in my head that I was trying to avoid copying. My brief to Jack Thorne when he was writing his adaptation was don't strain to be different or original, just write the story in the way you want to write it and we will try to make a production staging which feels different. What we've ended up with is a script that doesn't make a big effort to put distance between itself and the Dickens novella; it has got some new ideas and scenes in it, but by and large it's very close to the original. But we are staging it in a very unusual way and once I hit upon the idea to stage the production in this unusual way it took a lot of pressure off from needing to feel fresh in other respects. It's all about providing surprises. All stories need surprises to keep the audience interested.

Without spoiling the surprises, what has been the biggest challenge in directing the show?

The shape of the stage is very, very unusual.

Essentially, it's one long catwalk that runs from the back of the auditorium to the back of the stage. The audience seats have been moved to sit around that catwalk. It has a crosspiece as well, which is not used as much, but in effect the story plays out on a cross, or if you like a crossroads that reflects the crossroads in the central character's life. This means all the skills I've built up over 30 years of directing of how to use a stage are just of no use whatsoever, because there aren't any stages shaped like this. So I've been having to work out how to throw out the rulebook and make scenes work in a unique setting like this. That's a challenge for me.

The other thing is that I had an idea very early on that I wanted handbell ringing in the show so, for the actors, probably one of the biggest challenges is trying to learn all the handbell music Chris Nightingale and I threw at them, because they were starting from scratch. But the better they did the more we gave them to do.

Music is vitally important in this production. Can you expand on how you have used music in the production, and how it has helped you achieve mood/atmosphere/a sense of community?

When I was talking to Jack Thorne about writing an adaptation, we decided that we wanted live music and singing, and landed on the idea of Christmas carols as the music throughout the show so he wrote those into the script. We changed them a little bit in the course of rehearsals but they are at the heart of the script, the idea of carols being sung in and around the story is at the heart of this adaptation. Chris Nightingale has taken the carols and woven an entire score out of them. And we are using some traditional live instruments — penny whistle, accordion — to give the music a period authenticity. We tried to use carols which weren't anachronistic in 1843 when *A Christmas Carol* was written; we may have slightly fudged it but that was the idea.

When directing the play, what research and/or sources have you found particularly useful?

There's a good book called *Victorian London — The Life of a City 1840-1870* but the thing is, because it's a very simple production played on an empty stage, we don't really create the world in any detail.

90% of the story happens in the supernatural realm and the words in the script create the world in our imagination — we don't really show the world onstage that much. It didn't turn out to require any social realism or anything like that. However, I did ask Simon Baker (Sound Designer) to make me a selection of Victorian sounds — steam engines, horses' hooves, cats, dogs, church bells of London — and the soundscape of the show is built from these.

What was your approach before Day One of the rehearsal period? How did you prepare to direct this show in particular? Are there specific things you always do before you start work on a new production?

What I always do is I spend plenty of time with the model of the set and photographs of the model, which in this case was a model of the auditorium and the performance space within the auditorium as opposed to any scenery. I work through the key moments of the story and how we're going to present them — the moments of impact for the audience, visual and emotional impact — and how we might tackle those moments using actors in a space, using lighting sometimes, using music and sound. I have lots of conversations with the designer, composer and lighting designer about ways of creating story and impact. Interestingly, in terms of the script, Jack Thorne asked me if he should write anything to do with the design into the script. I said what I'd normally say to a writer which is no, write whatever's in your mind's eye and as a result the script had a lot in it which in no way related to the production we're doing. An example is the script had a lot of descriptions of magical appearances and disappearances of ghosts which is not something I was ever going to be able to achieve in this production because of the audience surrounding the stage: it's a much more simple and stripped down production. So a good deal of my preparation time was taken up reading the script and re-imagining the staging descriptions in the script which were impossible in our production, re-imagining them for our production, so if you like writing a modified script in my head with stage directions which apply to our version.

What I try to do in preparation is to first get to know the story very well and then create emptiness in my head, not an easy thing to do as an Artistic Director, but try to create a period of sustained emptiness for a few days so it's just you and the story — the story in its script form and the story in the dream-like form that's in your head — and you try and create enough emptiness so, slowly, ideas, moments, details, impressions start to just arrive and that's where you get a vision for a production. And you do a little bit of that beforehand and then you try and carry on that approach into a rehearsal

room when you're surrounded by actors and you make space in your mind, in your imagination, for a production to start to turn up. That way you open the door to more surprises. And also you get to 'hear' the 'inner voice' of the story. You sense the core concerns of the story. Without getting an insight to all this stuff any 'vision'/production risks being a contrivance with no real heart.

Interview by **Liza Picard**

DIRECTING A CHRISTMAS CAROL

By Jamie Manton, Associate Director of *A Christmas Carol* 2018

Working on *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, in a version by Jack Thorne, has been a truly wonderful journey. With such a well-renowned and celebrated story, how can one bring something new to it and all the while be faithful to Dickens' words? In our production, Matthew has achieved this by identifying the core themes and building a production around those.

A Christmas Carol is ultimately about a blind man's journey to enlightenment and therefore this has made 'light' a key theme of the piece. Matthew and his designer Rob Howell have incorporated a sky that is flooded with Victorian lanterns.

Each ghost carries a lantern of differing sizes to light the path for Scrooge and every narrator also carries a lantern with them in order to light the subject in their narration. The other core theme that has been a big influence on the production is 'life; from cradle to grave' and this is depicted in the pram-like structures brought on by each of the ghosts. The third core theme is Scrooge's separation from life. He is trapped in his own dark world and the journey he takes is towards being set free. Identifying and building a production around these core themes has allowed us to discover a new world in which to play and ultimately avoid cliché. Matthew and Rob wanted to create a production that allowed the audience to conjure up the world of the piece in their heads, instead of illustrating it literally through design. We are therefore in the world of the round, with four door frames (Scrooge's 'cage') and four entrances, enabling us to use light and sound to transport us from situation to situation and location to location, all helping to inspire the audience's imagination of what this is.

Working with the themes in the rehearsal room

One rehearsal session involved a three hour workshop on tackling our various Narrator sections, of which there are many in the piece. Who is the Narrator? How does this character fit into our production? There was no such character in Dickens' novel, but this was Jack Thorne and Matthew's way of transferring Dickens' genius faithfully into his new version.

Matthew's decision was to explore the realms of Greek Chorus, making the role of Narrator an ensemble role — all in top hats, cloaks and in possession of Victorian lanterns. These are our ghosts of Victorian London, the nameless folk who would walk the misty streets, witnessing the goings-on of that world. They may even be dead people. The top hats and cloaks were a great discovery as they quickly enable one of the actors to transition from their character into the nameless Narrator.

With regards to the parts of the Narrator, we began by exploring group speaking for every section, however, this quickly became predictable and repetitive. So we decided that this worked best for the opening narration where we were setting up the solemn and bold world of Scrooge. As the narrators were introducing us to this world, Matthew then asked the narrators to extract Scrooge's money boxes from the set, manipulating and building Scrooge's desk, giving us the springboard into the beginning of the narrative.

There was one real difficulty that arose with the process of this opening narration. As the production is performed in the round, our cast are always facing different directions in order to carry across the story to each bank of audience. How is it possible to then keep in time with one another? We always had to have four people speaking towards the four areas of the auditorium. To achieve this, we had to sit down and carry out studied line readings, discovering the words to emphasise, the rhythm in which sentences should flow, how to end a line with great energy in order for the next team to continue the energy on with their line that followed, diction, and the main rule of all: to never run words into the next, keeping every word specific to itself for complete clarity.

Other issues that we then had were the focus of attention on what was being discussed. If storytelling, should one always be directing their speech to the audience? We discovered that this wasn't the case. The opening narration, yes, but for others we learned that if all of the narrators were looking at our subject, Scrooge, with their lanterns also directed in his direction that the audience would also fully focus on Scrooge and then be

tuned into the words of the narrators.

As narration can often fall into the realms of spoon-feeding a story, we learnt that it was best to achieve storytelling through simplicity with carefully chosen variations between each one. For example, after the interval and in the lead up to the Ghost of Christmas Future, all of the narrators emerge draped in veils, setting up the approaching coffin. Then, on Christmas day morning when Scrooge runs out into the streets, we decided to place the cast in different areas of the auditorium, bringing the world of the play directly to the audience — creating surround sound, experience and colour.

A subsequent session became a rehearsal about how to make the worlds of the three ghosts different to one another. We had already decided not to follow the literal presentation of the ghosts in Dickens' novel. Matthew had wanted the three ghosts to all be women and all descending in age, again capturing the theme of 'life' — the process by which man ages. The Ghost of Christmas Past is a lady who has the knowledge of life and experience, presenting the stories that build the foundations of one's person. The Ghost of Christmas Present is a blind lady, opening Scrooge's eyes to what he is currently missing/avoiding. Then, the Ghost of Christmas Future in Jack's version became Scrooge's sister, Little Fan, a lady who had life taken from her too soon, someone who can encourage Scrooge to take hold of appreciating the gift and love of life. Each Ghost had to have a specific mission and purpose and Matthew's choice of core themes helped to inspire his creative decisions of the roles played by the three ghosts.



QUICK QUESTIONS

With Jack Thorne, Playwright of *A Christmas Carol*

Given that there have been stage adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* ever since Dickens wrote the story in 1843, what were the challenges/opportunities in writing this particular adaptation?

To some degree you want to do what no one has done before — so it's probably resisting that impulse a bit. Not trying to show off, doing due diligence by the great writer and his great story.

How is adapting a novel(la) different to writing an original script?

Your responsibility — first and foremost — is to do justice to what you're adapting. You have to ask the question all the time — is this true to the original? Now, when a novel has had a number of goes around the park it's not as important as when you're the sole chance a play or film has of existing in another medium but it still matters.

You've made a few changes though, in particular the ghosts. A lot of people find their function quite confusing in the novella in terms of what they represent. What was your thought process in terms of their role in the adaptation?

Well, one of Matthew's central ideas was to make them all women, and then the other thing he said — before my second rewrite I think is that the first — the Past — should be pushing a tiny pram, the next — the Present — an oversized pram and the Third a coffin. Cradle to the grave. I thought that was interesting and tried to play into those ideas and those challenges. But I also returned to the novella and looked for clues, and it felt like the biggest challenge was presented by the present — the other two were trying to draw things out of him in different ways. So the past became a spectre of sadness, the present became adversarial and angry, and the third — well, I wanted the last one to be loving. The challenge to be one of love. I always thought Scrooge would be shown a grave and go — who cares? I can be worm food. His misery is all consuming, I think he'd regard a miserable death as expected. The problem for him would be to be shown the possibilities of love he missed. So I used Little Fan — a sister he loved — to poke and provoke him.

The other problematic issue for some people is how quickly Scrooge seems to change. The speed of it can make it seem unconvincing.

I didn't really believe his conversion either. I loved it, and loved the bold gesture of it, but onstage I wasn't sure how to make it believable. So I did two things, the first is to radically revise the Third ghost and what she meant, the other is to leave that conversion on shaky ground. At the end of the novella, Scrooge seems reformed and complete — I wanted to leave the audience reminded that the only way to live a good life is to be good within it — Scrooge needs to keep doing the work, working on himself, and that way he'll find the happiness he now desperately wants. He's seen the possibilities of growth and now he needs to earn those possibilities.

Dickens wrote a lot of Christmas stories and is often credited with 'creating' the Christmas that we celebrate now. Did you do much research when you were writing the script, or did you prefer to simply go on what his original story gave you?

I originally framed the story around Dickens and his sister Fanny — him telling it to her — so yes I did a lot of research on where he was at psychologically and physically.

In this adaptation, you've chosen to remove the moment where Scrooge sees Ignorance and Want. What was the reasoning behind that?

It was a Matthew note — it didn't fit into this telling of the story — and he was absolutely right.

Who is your favourite character in the story and why?

Little Fan. I think she's ace.

***A Christmas Carol* is one of Dickens' most well-loved and best known stories. Was it daunting adapting his words? Did you work with Matthew on the adaptation or was it presented 'fully formed'?**

I very much worked with Matthew — too daunting to do it any other way.

What do you hope the audience will take away from this particular adaptation of the story?

I wanted to humanise Scrooge. I want us to realise what of him we have inside ourselves.

MUSIC AND SOUND IN A CHRISTMAS CAROL

During the Victorian era, the middle classes were concerned that the traditional medieval carols were dying out and were at risk of being lost forever. As well as resurrecting traditional carols, new ones were written during this period, many of which have been included in some way in the score for this production of *A Christmas Carol*. The carol singers at the beginning of the story use their songs to create a sense of community. Christopher Nightingale's score for the production does the same — the handbells played by the ensemble gently summon the audience's attention and encourage us to indulge in a sense of nostalgia. Christmas carols seem to have that power more than any other type of music, and with that nostalgia comes a willingness to accept the social message of the play. Conversely, the solo singing and the striking use of the Coventry Carol also elicits sympathy for the young Scrooge later in the play.

The inclusion of carols was integral in Jack Thorne's adaptation, such is the importance of music to the story. The original novella is divided into staves, each one showing a stage of Scrooge's journey to redemption. Motifs from those carols occur in the underscoring, sometimes transposed into a minor key, or stripped back to a lone voice, keyboard or violin to highlight Scrooge's isolation. At other times, the sound of familiar carols provide comfort to the audience, contrasting to the amplified shattering of a lantern as Scrooge attempts to resist the Ghost of Christmas Present. Scrooge's final monologue in Act One is made even more dramatic: the intensity of the score threatens to overwhelm both us and him, just as the truth Scrooge is exposed to threatens to smother him and his sense of self.

Carols are not the only music in the show. Ceilidh music accompanies Fezziwig's festive party and is used to particular effect when it suddenly stops and Scrooge is left alone, with only the howling of the wind or the screeching of ravens at his own funeral. There is a warmth in the timbre of the clarinet, accordion, recorder and penny whistle which contrast keenly with the sound effects of the slamming of doors and the sounds of bolts and locks that Scrooge uses to lock out the world around him. The rapidly ticking clocks also remind Scrooge that his time on earth, and therefore his

opportunity for redemption, is decreasing by the second.

The use of choral singing also elevates the role of the ensemble in the creation of this Christmas story.

On stage and entirely visible to the audience, the ensemble voices invoke an excitement and optimism as they sing familiar songs; many members of the audience will be tempted to join in. In strong contrast when they are concealed off stage, this unseen source of sound creates another element of Scrooge's haunting; a ghostly presence which develops into the crescendo of the finale, complete with cathedral organ, as he achieves his enlightenment.

In his introduction to the production, Matthew Warchus tells us, 'the nature of gathering together to share an experience... makes us better for it'. Music in this production is the foundation of the story, helps us track the emotion, mood and atmosphere and guides Scrooge towards the light of his new life. It is, indeed, the music that brings him those tidings of comfort. And joy.

Christmas music used in the score for this production includes:

- God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen
- It Came Upon the Midnight Clear
- Il est né, le divin Enfant
- I Saw Three Ships
- Wassail Wassail! All Over the Town
- O Holy Night
- In the Bleak Midwinter
- Ding Dong Merrily on High
- Coventry Carol
- See, amid the Winter's Snow
- Joy to the World
- Silent Night

PERFORMING THE CAROL

Even if they have not read Charles Dickens' 1843 novella themselves, very few people will not recognise Scrooge's exclamation of 'Bah! Humbug!' or be able to loosely tell the story of *A Christmas Carol*. It has been passed down through the generations through oral retelling, as well as popular theatre productions and movie adaptations. When the story first hit the stands in 1843, people clamoured for their own copies of the illustrated, gold edged editions of Dickens' most famous tale. Five productions of the story were performed in theatres that Christmas and its popularity has not waned since. In 2017, both The Old Vic and the Royal Shakespeare Company premiered new adaptations of the novella, and Gad's Hills School — the school that is now based in Charles Dickens' former home in Kent — also shared a production of the story.

A Christmas Carol tapped into several Victorian preoccupations. Ghosts and the supernatural were a popular topic in stories, despite the scientific and industrial revolutions that were happening at the same time. The differences between rich and poor were also becoming increasingly apparent. As more workers migrated to the cities, poverty and disease were widespread and people dreaded being forced into the workhouses from which they were unlikely to re-emerge.

Dickens used *A Christmas Carol* to express his concerns about society and therefore created the version of Christmas that many of us still share today. By placing the focus on the importance of family, Victorians were able to reinforce their own beliefs and reassure themselves that the social, industrial and scientific changes going on around them would not threaten their own sense of wellbeing. *A Christmas Carol* was instrumental in providing that comfort, and made the festive season more child-focussed — inspired by the new monarch's emerging family traditions — when previously it had been a more adult festival.

Dickens himself gave readings of *A Christmas Carol* throughout his lifetime, initially for charity and then for his own commercial gain. He read from a lectern, but used the book in front of him as a prop, rather than a prompt for he knew the words by

heart and they are naturally theatrical. They appeal to the senses and evoke a vision of Christmas with such ease that Dickens' audiences were drawn in immediately, and shouted for more. Dickens' great-great-grandson, Gerald, also gave performances of a one man show based on the tale, assuming all 26 characters himself.

But why is the story still so relevant now? Fewer of us believe in ghosts and spirits, and our vision of Christmas is as confident as it has ever been. The key is the way in which Scrooge is finally able to see through the façade of gifts, banquets and money. Christmas is about the opportunities to appreciate family and to make amends to those we may have hurt or with whom we have lost touch. At a time when charity, poverty, food banks and child welfare remain upmost in our minds, it is no surprise that we look to *A Christmas Carol* for hope. The differences between each production, however, are how that hope is created.

In Phelim McDermott's 2015 production, Patrick Barlow's adaptation created a play within a play. The Cratchit family were represented with puppets, and a pop-up Victorian theatre (as part of the design by Tom Pye) was the dominant element of the set. The ensemble of five actors were supported by two puppeteers and the production therefore required multi-roling of up to seven characters each. In this performance style, the pace must be rapid and even slightly chaotic, making it slightly more akin to a pantomime piece than an intellectual literary retelling.

Pye's set design also exploited the idea of two-dimensional props and cardboard cut-out scenery, including a faux proscenium arch and theatre curtain. Consequently, the production was more than a little tongue in cheek. However, it could still make important points about modern day society, but in a way that ditched sentimentality in favour of irony and what Dominic Cavendish described as, 'more lark-filled playhouse than begrimed workhouse'. As Lyn Gardner points out, by using photographs of the poor of the 19th century gathered together on Kennington Common, and presenting the bankers and politicians of London using puppet heads, the



audience had no choice but to make uncomfortable comparisons between Dickens' time and our own period of austerity.

The tone of the production was markedly more jovial than the darkness that is often suggested by Dickens' original text. Whilst light is often cast by the spirits, Scrooge himself is described as having a 'cold within him [which] froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue...' In this production, Jim Broadbent's portrayal of Scrooge was as a man much more indifferent to those around him rather than deliberately cruel.

Dickens himself wrote plays, sometimes working alongside fellow author Wilkie Collins. He performed in plays which he himself produced and directed, and family theatricals were an important element of Christmas for the family he raised. His theatricality and sense of character is apparent in all of his novels, however, and his daughter recalled seeing him acting out his characters and their dialogue before committing them to paper. It is therefore unsurprising that many playwrights prefer to retain as much of Dickens' own words as possible — words that he himself performed to paying audiences 104 times in 1858 alone.

The ensemble in this Old Vic production is a key element to its success. The set demands that the ensemble faces a number of different directions. In order to emphasise what Rhys Ifans once described as 'the everyman-ness of Scrooge' the audience needs to feel that the chorus are indeed addressing every man. With the ensemble also multi-roling as major characters in the story, the audience is reminded that all of us have the capacity to be an important part of someone's story at vital moments.

This production takes light, and enlightenment, as its key themes, as shown in the design which is dominated by the Victorian lanterns above the

stage. At key moments they flicker, burn brighter or even plunge us into complete darkness to ensure that the audience experiences Scrooge's journey as viscerally as possible.

The staging and design of the production means that Scrooge is often left alone in the very centre of the stage. He is quite literally returned to various crossroads at which he has made poor choices, but now has an opportunity to redeem himself, and those for whom he is morally responsible. At the end of the show, he is instead surrounded by people, and by love. Just as Dickens hoped for his audiences in 1843, our modern audience will hopefully leave the theatre more open to looking out for the people around them, strangers though they may be.

Both this production and McDermott's break the fourth wall in some way. In The Old Vic version, the use of the auditorium is a key element of ensuring that the audience don't lose the key messages of the play. Sometimes dialogue is played across the space, whilst at other points a haunting lone singer in the circle creates a sombre mood and atmosphere as Scrooge fights his inner battles. There is an element of Scrooge in all of us, and by using the auditorium in this way, we are complicit in his journey. By the time the bells ring out at the close of the show, no man is left behind in his support for Scrooge and his new found charity, generosity and honesty. Most importantly, the audience has a sense of being one, as opposed to the strangers with whom they sat down at the beginning of the performance.

As Fred himself says, *'Christmas is the only time you know, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave.'*



PRACTICAL EXERCISES FOR THE DRAMA STUDIO & ENGLISH CLASSROOM

1. CHORUS WORK

Choral work is very important in this production of *A Christmas Carol*. Effective choral devices rely on timing, synchronicity and focus. The audience also needs help knowing who to listen to, and who to watch, particularly if the narration takes place alongside a lot of action.

Using the following text from the novella, experiment with sharing the narration, using choral devices such as:

- Unison speech
- One person speaking with others echoing, repeating or whispering certain key words that you have identified as important
- Variation in pace, pitch, volume and tone. Think carefully about how you might create mood and atmosphere for this opening section of the text
- Moving towards the end of a phrase so that the energy is maintained when one speaker finishes and another begins

Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it; and Scrooge's name was good upon 'Change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marley was as dead as a door-nail...

Scrooge never painted out Old Marley's name. There it stood, years afterwards, above the warehouse door: Scrooge and Marley. The firm was known as Scrooge and Marley. Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge and sometimes Marley, but he answers to both names. It was all the same to him.

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice. A frosty rime was on his head, and on his eyebrows, and his wiry chin. He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas.

Once you have rehearsed, one or two members of the ensemble should step out and watch from an objective point of view. In particular, are you overusing a particular device? In *The Old Vic* production, one of the challenges with sharing the narration between the different members of the ensemble was ensuring that it didn't become repetitive or predictable. What changes can you make to sustain your audience's attention?

2. PASSING THE FOCUS

The ability to pass an audience's attention and focus is extremely important, particularly if there is a lot of action on stage, and/or you are sharing narration between various different performers. In *A Christmas Carol* there are a number of moments where the actors have to signpost very clearly where the audience should focus their attention.

In groups of five, stand shoulder to shoulder in a straight line. Number yourselves in order from one end of the line, 1,2,3,4 and 5.

Person 1 should imagine they have just been given a present (which should be mimed). They should look at the audience, and the remaining four people in the line should look at Person 1. However, they should do so in a dynamic way — thinking about levels, height, stepping forward, stepping back, standing on tiptoe etc. So, although it is a fairly static image, it has a sense of depth and energy to it.

Person 1 should then hand the imaginary present to Person 2, who looks at the audience. The present should be a little bigger and more exciting than it was for Person 1, and as the rest of the ensemble (Person 1,3 4 & 5) should respond accordingly. Person 2 should then pass to Person 3 — each time this 'present' is handed on, the reactions should be bigger and the way in which the line is formed should also change.

When Person 5 has received the present, they should hand it back to Person 4, who amplifies the reaction to the increasingly exciting present even further. Person 4 should hand it 3, 3 to 2 and then 2 to 1, who should show the most extreme reaction of all.

The purpose of this exercise is to encourage the ensemble to 'pass the focus' and also create a strong sense of energy and dynamic in the tableaux. Experimenting with different heights and groupings ensures that the ensemble work does not become too repetitive or predictable. In terms of mime, it should be clear to the audience what each gift is, whether it's a teaspoon, a watch, or even a puppy. Everyone in the ensemble should have consistent and believable reactions to what they can 'see'.

Now return back to the text in task one and apply this idea of passing focus. How does this affect and improve the way in which the text is received by the audience?

2b. PASSING THE FOCUS THROUGHOUT THE PERFORMANCE SPACE

Scrooge's journey through London requires the ensemble to present a sense of his movement, despite a minimal set and limited space. By using their eyes and faces, as well as simple gesture such as pointing, they create a sense of the speed and distance of his trip across London.

Stand in a group of eight to ten, in a tight circle, facing various different directions. Using the text below, work together to create a choral performance which encourages us to imagine the different sights, smells and sounds as well as the sense that Scrooge is travelling. Try not to move from the spot but you can turn in different directions, vary levels, point, look in particular directions etc.

And Scrooge ran out into Christmas Day morning and he was a very different Scrooge than the one who left his door the morning before.

He went to church, and walked about the streets, and watched the people hurrying to and fro, and patted children on the head, and questioned beggars, and looked down into the kitchens of houses, and up to the windows, and found that everything could yield him pleasure. He had never dreamed that any walk — that anything — could give him so much happiness. In the afternoon he turned his steps towards his nephew's house.

3: USING MINIMAL SET & COSTUME

In this production, the use of minimal set allows the actors to conjure up London around us, and to move quickly from one setting to the next, just as the spirits transport Scrooge across great distances. It is up to

the ensemble to encourage the audience to use their imagination, rather than simply being too literal in the use of set.

Make a list of the different locations in the story, and note carefully which ones are only seen once by an audience and which ones recur throughout the story, such as Scrooge's bed chamber.

Once you have made your list, choose one location that you think is particularly important to create in detail for your audience. However, rather than creating a naturalistic set, you must only use the following items:

- Different sized boxes, hampers or trunks
- Two chairs, of different heights (this might include a stool)
- Hand held luggage, such as suitcases
- Paper
- Small items of costume such as a variety of hats
- One table (preferably large enough to seat six people)

After staging your first choice of location, choose a second, contrasting one and do the same exercise, only using the same items. You do not have to use all of them in either scene.

Finally, create an interesting transition between those two scenes. For example, how might you create an interesting transition between a London street filled with carol singers to the small and cramped living conditions experienced by the Cratchit family?

4: USING DESCRIPTIONS FROM THE NOVEL FOR CHARACTERISATION

A Christmas Carol provides detailed descriptions of characters to allow the reader to imagine them vividly. Dickens often made his characters very theatrical and larger than life, and gave them names that also hinted at the character. For example, 'Scrooge' is a combination of 'screech' or 'scrape' and 'gouge', suggesting his cruel and harsh nature.

The novel does not, however, give an actor much of a sense of how to create physicality in order to communicate the character to a theatre audience, rather than a reader.

Look at the descriptions below and, working with a partner, create a tableau (freeze frame) or each character. Once you are happy with the tableau, experiment with gait (how the character moves), and how they might sit when they think they are alone. How might they look when they think of the person or thing they love most in the world? Now consider how they might respond to seeing their past or future selves. What might that change about the way in which they move and speak? Devise a short (silent) scene in which this happens.

Scrooge: 'He was a tight fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self contained, and solitary as an oyster'

Bob Cratchit: 'The clerk, with the long ends of his white comforter dangling below his waist (for he boasted no great coat), went down a slide on Cornhill, at the end of a lane of boys, twenty times, in honour of it being Christmas Eve, and then ran home to Camden Town as hard as he could pelt, to play at blindman's bluff'

Belle: 'A fair young girl in a mourning-dress: in whose eyes there were tears which sparkled in the light'

Little Fan: 'A little girl, much younger than the boy, came darting in, and putting her arms about his neck,

and often kissing him, addressed him as her 'dear, dear brother'...Always a delicate creature, whom a breath might have withered, but she had a large heart!

Mr Fezziwig: 'An old gentleman in a Welsh wig, sitting behind such a high desk, that if he had been two inches taller he must have knocked his head against the ceiling...He rubbed his hands; adjusted his capacious waistcoat; laughed all over himself, from his shoes to his organ of benevolence; and called out in a comfortable, oily, rich, fat, jovial voice'

4B: STAGING THE GHOSTS

In The Old Vic's production of *A Christmas Carol*, the three ghosts are presented as women of different ages, rather than remaining faithful to the detailed descriptions given by Dickens in the novella. They use a pram, which increases in size, to represent the idea of the journey from the cradle to the grave. The depiction of Jacob Marley remains faithful to the novella.

However you choose to create the ghosts, it is important not to fall into the trap of cliché or stereotype to communicate the sense of the ghosts being other-worldly. If they are too comic, the impact of the visions they show to Scrooge is lost and we need to encourage our audience to willingly suspend their disbelief during the exchanges between them and Scrooge.

Look at the dialogue below between Scrooge and Marley. Consider how the status between the two characters shifts, and the physical reaction Scrooge has to seeing the ghost of someone who has been dead for seven years. Experiment with the use of space (moving closer or further away) to suggest fear or intimidation, and the fact that Scrooge now sleeps in Marley's former chambers.

Marley Ebenezer.

Marley Approaches **Scrooge**. Dragging chains behind him.

Marley (Cont'd) Ebenezer.

Scrooge turns around and sees **Marley**. He decides to make no bones about it.

Scrooge Hush now. What do you want with me?

Marley Much.

Scrooge Who are you?

Marley Ask me who I was.

Scrooge Who were you then? You're particular, for a shade.

Marley In life, I was your partner. Jacob Marley.

Scrooge nods and thinks.

Marley (Cont'd) You don't believe in me.

Scrooge I don't.

Marley Why do you doubt your senses?

Scrooge Because a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are.

Marley I am here Mr Scrooge and I have waited seven long years to talk to you.

Walking the world, on the wings of the wind, no rest, no peace, the incessant torture of remorse.

Scrooge laughs.

Scrooge You are not Jacob Marley, he'd have no need of remorse. Go now. I have work to do.

Marley I am here tonight to warn you that you have yet a chance and hope of escaping my fate. A chance and hope of my procuring, Ebenezer.

Scrooge You were a good friend to me in life Jacob, I don't doubt you'd repeat it in death, but this...

Marley You will be haunted, by three spirits.

Scrooge I would rather not be.

Marley Expect the first when the bell tolls one.

5: SOUND TRACKING

Choose a key moment from the story which you think could be enhanced by the use of live and/or recorded sound. Create a soundtrack for that scene or section which might:

- Create a specific mood or atmosphere
- Encourage the audience to have a specific emotional reaction, including sympathy towards particular characters
- Suggests period and setting
- Create or contrast with a sense of festive Christmas cheer

To achieve these intentions, you might like to consider:

- Live or recorded carols, sung by soloists and/or choirs
- Instrumental versions of popular Christmas carols
- Sound effects such as dragging chains, ticking clocks and doors being slammed



6: CREATING COMEDY

Throughout Scrooge's journey, it would be very easy to play the story as a sad and depressing one, with very little comic relief. However, that relief is required by the audience in order to sustain their engagement with the story and make them more receptive to the moral messages it contains.

Look at the following extract from Jack Thorne's adaptation. How can you perform this in a way that ensures you:

- Retain the appropriate characterisation of the three ghosts?
- Create humour and comic relief for the audience?
- Ensure that you don't lose the moral strand of the story in exchange for laugh?

After you have rehearsed for 20 minutes, perform for another group and evaluate whether or not you have achieved the playwright's aim for this moment, which occurs towards the end of the play.

Marley *Appears back amongst them, walking heavily towards them.* **Scrooge** Thank you. Thank you.

He hugs the three ghosts in turn.

Scrooge Jacob.

Scrooge (Cont'd) Thank you. Thank you. Brenda.

Marley Ebenezer.

And then he turns to **Marley**. And he doesn't hug him. **Scrooge** If I could ease your path...

Scrooge I will — I will change it.

Marley You can't. You can only ease your own.

Marley Then get started.

The two look at each other.

*He looks at the **Ghosts**.*

Scrooge Little Fan. I cannot thank you.

Scrooge Thank you.

Little Fan You don't need to.

Marley Earn this.

Scrooge And you — *He looks at the **Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present**.*

Scrooge I will.

Scrooge (Cont'd) I don't even have a name for you.

Scrooge *thinks and then smiles, he looks around.*

Ghost of Christmas Past You don't need one.

Scrooge I will.

Ghost of Christmas Present I always wanted to be called Brenda.

(beat)

It seems a kind name.

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