

# ADP ALBERTA BAIR



T H E A T E R

## A Christmas Carol

### EDUCATION GUIDE



**Wednesday, December 21**  
**12:30pm**

Recommended for Grades 4+  
Tickets: \$6.00 per person

**ABT Student Matinee series sponsored by**

# SAM & JUDY MCDONALD

Alberta Bair Theater for the Performing Arts  
2801 Third Avenue North • Billings, Montana 59101  
406-294-5206 or 406-256-8915  
[www.albertabairtheater.org](http://www.albertabairtheater.org)

## A CHRISTMAS CAROL STUDY GUIDE FOR PERSEVERANCE PRODUCTION NATIONAL TOUR

Christmas has such a large influence in our culture, it's hard to imagine that at one time, it was rarely celebrated at all. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Puritans, in Europe and America, discouraged the celebration of Christmas. For the next two hundred years, Christmas was a largely ignored holiday. This would all change when Charles Dickens wrote A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

Charles Dickens was already a huge success before he wrote this book. His first big success was THE PICKWICK PAPERS, written as a series of stories and published in a newspaper. It's been said that Dickens, being paid by the word, found ways to keep his story running long. Almost all of his tales ran as serials in a newspaper or magazine, including others you may know, such as THE ADVENTURES OF OLIVER TWIST, A TALE OF TWO CITIES and GREAT EXPECTATIONS, all of which predate A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL, one of his few works that appeared first as a book, was first published on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1843, in London, England. While it sold slowly at first, it has not been out of print since its first introduction.

A CHRISTMAS CAROL was partially written out of Dickens sense of despair over the working conditions he witnessed among the children of Great Britain. Very young children, working long hours, received almost no education. Dickens, having worked hard for changes among his affluent friends, felt that progress was too slow. He sought a powerful way to change people's minds. He knew that a story could do a lot to sway opinion in a way that simply stating facts could not.

As many authors do, Dickens drew from his own life for the plot and characters in the story. Ebenezer Scrooge is thought to be based upon Dickens own father, John. Charles and John had a troubled relationship, and there was much hardship in Charles' life as he was growing up. In 1824, John was sent to prison for 12 years, and young Charles was forced to sell his books and leave school, taking work in a factory making shoe polish. Having lived a privileged life up to then, this confused and saddened Charles and would have a great impact on his life.

It was also in 1824 that Washington Irving would publish The SKETCH BOOK OF GEOFFERY CRAYON, one of the first books to feature the Christmas holiday. This may have been of some inspiration for Dickens when he would later write a precursor to A CHRISTMAS CAROL in an episode of the PICKWICK PAPERS. In that episode, Gabriel Grub, a lonely and mean-spirited sexton, undergoes a Christmas conversion after being visited by goblins — not ghosts— who show him the past and future. Douglas Jerrold's books, especially HOW MR. CHOKEPEAR KEEPS A MERRY CHRISTMAS, may have also had an influence.

Dickens lays out his tale in five "staves", or verses, in keeping with the idea of the title as a Christmas "Carol". Stave One begins with the reappearance of long-dead Jacob Marley, Scrooge's partner in business, who has come to warn Scrooge that his lifetime of selfishness comes with a heavy price: an eternity bound in the chains of suffering and sorrow. Scrooge utters his famous retort, "Bah! Humbug!" in this first stave. He chooses not to believe Marley, who warns Ebenezer that he will be visited by three other spirits on this night.

Stave Two recounts the visiting of The Ghost of Christmas Past, who takes Ebenezer to Christmas scenes of his boyhood and reminds him that he was once a much kinder person. These scenes reveal Ebenezer's lonely childhood, his relationship with his beloved sister Fan and a Christmas party hosted by his first

employer Mr. Fezziwig, who treated Ebenezer like a son. They also portray Ebenezer's neglected fiancée Belle, who ends their relationship after she realizes that Ebenezer will never love her as much as he loves money. The Ghost of Christmas Past leaves Scrooge a broken man, but she has awakened something deep within him.

Stave Three introduces the Ghost of Christmas Present. This jolly soul takes Ebenezer to scenes of happier people preparing to celebrate Christmas, including Ebenezer's nephew Fred, who speaks of his uncle with warmth and pity. They visit the home of Scrooge's clerk, Bob Cratchit, and meet tiny Tim, who is full of holiday spirit despite his serious illness. The spirit shows Ebenezer two hideous children, named Ignorance and Want, and warns that Tim may not be present at future Christmases if his illness continues to go untreated. Ebenezer, becoming concerned, asks if their fate might be changed. The Spirit replies with Ebenezer's own words from the first stave, "Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?"

Stave Four introduces the silent Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Together they watch several dark scenes about the death of a man no one loved, and Ebenezer's laundress goes through the belongings of a "wretched man" who has just died. Before too long, Ebenezer comes to realize that this deceased man hated so much by these people, may be him. The Spirit then reveals that young Tiny Tim has also died. These scenes leave Ebenezer sobbing at the foot of his own gravestone, vowing to change his ways if only he is given a chance.

Stave Five shows Ebenezer Scrooge awakening with joy in his heart. Relieved to have not missed the holiday, he spends the day with his very surprised nephew Fred, and sends a prize turkey to his employee, Bob Cratchit. The next day, he gives Bob a raise in pay, and becomes "like a second father" to Tim. The final summation of Ebenezer's redemption says: "Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh, and little heeded them; for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as have the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed: and that was quite enough for him...it was always said of him that he knew how to keep Christmas well if any man alive possessed the knowledge."

A CHRISTMAS CAROL received much critical acclaim upon its publication. The London literary magazine, *Athenaeum*, declared it: "A tale to make the reader laugh and cry – to open his hands, and open his heart to charity even toward the uncharitable ... a dainty dish to set before a King. William Makepeace Thackeray wrote in *Frasier's* magazine in February, 1844, "There is not a reader in England, but that little creature will be a bond of union between the author and him; and he will say of Charles Dickens, as the woman just now, 'GOD BLESS HIM!' What a feeling this is for a writer to inspire, and what a reward to reap!"

It took a little longer for Americans to embrace the book. But, by the end of the Civil War, copies of the book were in wide circulation.

The story has been adapted into countless plays, musicals, radio plays, and films. It seems very likely that the story of Ebenezer Scrooge will stay a deeply rooted part of our culture for a long time to come.

#### TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

1. What does "redemption" mean? How is Ebenezer Scrooge redeemed?

2. Why do you think that Charles Dickens thought that a story about the conditions of the poor would be more effective than simply telling everyone about the facts?
3. Can you think of other examples where a story changed people's thinking about a certain subject?
4. Compare this story to THE JUNGLE by Upton Sinclair or the play WAITING FOR LEFTY by Clifford Odets. How do the authors' approaches to advocating for change differ?
5. Discuss the themes of "light vs dark" and "cold vs warmth" in A CHRISTMAS CAROL.
6. What is the "true meaning of Christmas"?
7. Why do you think the Ghost of Jacob Marley appears to Ebenezer Scrooge? Does Marley's eternal soul have anything to gain?

## NOTES

For a detailed discussion of A CHRISTMAS CAROL and Dickens' life and other works, read The Dickens Project at <http://dickens.ucsc.edu/resources/chronology.html>.

A reproduction of the book can be found at <https://archive.org/details/christmascarolin20dick>

## WORKS CITED

*Dickens, Charles; Kelly, Richard Michael (ed.) (2003), A Christmas Carol, Broadview Literary Texts, New York: Broadview Press*

*Callow, Simon (2009). Dickens' Christmas: A Victorian Celebration. frances lincoln ltd. ISBN 978-0-7112-3031-6. Retrieved August, 16, 2016.*