

A CHRISTMAS CAROL:

As Told by Charles Dickens

Adapted for the stage by James A. Van Leishout

Characters

Charles Dickens	Belinda, Cratchit's second daughter
Ebenezer Scrooge, a grasping, covetous old man	Peter, Cratchit's oldest son
Bob Cratchit, Scrooge's clerk	Boy and girl, Cratchit's young children
Fred, Scrooges' Nephew	Martha, Cratchit's oldest daughter
Ghost of Jacob Marley, a spectre of Scrooge's former partner in business	Tiny Tim, a cripple, young son of Bob Cratchit
Ghost of Christmas Past, a phantom	Niece, Fred's wife.
Young Ebenezer	Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, an apparition
Dick Wilkins, a fellow apprentice	Old Joe, a marine-store dealer and receiver of stolen goods
Mr. Fezziwig, a kind-hearted, jovial old merchant	Mrs. Dilber, Laundress
Mrs. Fezziwig	Charwoman
Belle, an old sweetheart of Scrooge's	Undertaker
Ghost of Christmas Present, a spirit of a kind, generous and hearty nature	Caroline, wife of one of Scrooge's debtors
Mrs. Cratchit, wife to Bob Cratchit	Husband, debtor to Scrooge

Casting:

There are 14 male roles, 9 female roles, plus narrators, misc. ghosts, party guests, carolers, and merchants. There are also two teen girls and two teen boys, plus four children (at least one must be a boy). This script is envisioned for a small cast of 8 - 10 adults (three women) and 3 - 5 children, with a group of carolers, possibly from the cast. With the following doubling schedule the show can be done with as few as 6 men, 3 women, 2 teens (one boy, one girl) and 2 children (one must play a boy).

Cast Doubling

Dickens	Mrs. Fezziwig — Mrs. Cratchit — Charwoman
Scrooge	Belle — Niece — Wife
Bob Cratchit — Dick — Undertaker	Martha — Ghost/Past — Laundress
Fred — Y. Ebenezer — Old Joe	Belinda — Girl (Fred's maid)
1st Gentleman — Fezziwig — Ghost/Present — Husband	Peter — Boy (street urchin/messenger)
2nd Gentleman — Marley — Ghost/Future	Tiny Tim — boy Ebenezer
	Bob's young child

Stave 1: Marley's Ghost

Dickens

(Enters and stands at a lectern, on which there is a book)

Good evening Ladies and Gentlemen, and those of a childlike spirit among you. My name is Charles Dickens. I have been asked to read to you a tale I have written, entitled 'A Christmas Carol.' It is filled with many characters including ghosts and bleak characters indeed. But do not fear, it is, as the title suggests a song of praise, a hymn to the season. It is broken into five staves. A stave, that is a musical allusion to a set of lines in a song much as a stanza might be in a poem. I have endeavored with this ghostly little tale to raise the Ghost of an Idea which shall not put my listeners out of humor with themselves, each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their house pleasantly, and no one wish to allay it. And now to begin. (opens book) 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.

Narrator (Scrooge)

(entering) Scrooge signed it: Scrooge's name was good upon anything he chose to put his hand to.

(Dickens' description of Scrooge: "He was a tight-fisted hand ... 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, shriveled 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.")

Dickens

Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.

Narrator (boy)

I never understood what was particularly dead about a doornail. Now if it had been a coffin nail...

(Dickens shoos him off)

Dickens

(Interrupting) Suffice it to say. Marley was as dead. Scrooge knew he was dead?

Narrator (Scrooge)

Of course he did.

Dickens

How could it be otherwise?

Narrator (Scrooge)

Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend and sole mourner. And even Scrooge was not so dreadfully cut up by the sad event, but that he was an excellent man of business on the very day of the funeral, and solemnized it with an undoubted bargain.

Dickens

Marley's funeral brings me back to the point I started from. There is no doubt that Marley was dead. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story we are going to relate. (they exit)

Narrator

(enters with sign) 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.

Narrator

(two actors enter with table which they set in front of sign)

Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge,

Narrator

...and sometimes Marley,

Narrator (Scrooge)

But he answered to both names: it was all the same to him.

Dickens

Oh ! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, was Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!

Narrator (Scrooge)

(Putting on Scrooge's coat)

External heat and cold had little influence on him. No warmth could warm, no cold could chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty.

Narrator

(puts chair behind table "Scrooge's desk")

Foul weather didn't know where to have him. The heaviest rain and snow and hail and sleet could boast of the advantage over him in only one respect, they often "came down" handsomely, and Scrooge never did.

Narrator (Scrooge)

Nobody ever stopped him in the street to say, with gladsome looks...

Dickens

My dear Scrooge, how are you? When will you come to see me?

Narrator (Scrooge)

Bah!

(Narrator enters, places lectern opposite Scrooge's desk, hangs podium tapestry off front. Drapes Cratchit's scarf on corner. Action takes place with lines.)

Narrator

No beggars implored him to bestow a trifle, no children asked him what it was o'clock, no man or woman ever once in all his life inquired the way to such and such a place, of Scrooge.

Dickens

Even the blindmen's dogs appeared to know him; and when they saw him coming on, would tug their owners into doorways and up courts; and then would wag their tails as though they said...

(Narrator reenters with stove tapestry, coal bucket and poker, places them next to podium. Dickens helps.)

Narrator

No eye at all is better than an evil eye, dark master! (Growl)

Narrator (Scrooge)

But what did Scrooge care! It was the very thing he liked. To edge his way along the crowded paths of life, warning all human sympathy to keep its distance, was what the knowing ones call "nuts" to Scrooge.

(Scrooge sits at desk)

Dickens

Once upon a time __ of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve __ old Scrooge sat busy in his counting house. It was cold, bleak biting, foggy weather; and the city clocks had only just gone three, but it was quite dark already.

(Bob Cratchit enters with stool and candle, sits behind podium. Dickens' description: Bob Cratchit has "at least three feet of comforter exclusive of the fringe, hanging down before him; and his threadbare clothes darned up and brushed, to look seasonable.")

Scrooge

The door of Scrooge's counting house was open, that he might keep his eye upon his clerk, Bob Cratchit, who, in a dismal little cell beyond, a sort of tank, was copying letters.

Cratchit

(attempts to heat hands over candle, fails puts on scarf)

Scrooge had a very small fire, but the clerk's fire was so very much smaller that it looked like one coal. But he couldn't replenish it, for Scrooge kept the coal box in his own room; and so surely as the clerk came in with the shovel the master predicted that it would be necessary for them to part.

Fred

(enters, cheerfully) A merry Christmas, uncle! God save you!

(Dickens' description: Scrooges' Nephew. "...all in a glow; his face was ruddy and handsome; his eyes sparkle.")

Scrooge

Bah! Humbug!

Fred

Christmas a humbug, uncle! You don't mean that, I am sure.

Scrooge

I do, said Scrooge. Merry Christmas! What right have you to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough.

Fred

(gaily) Come, then. What right have you to be dismal? What reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough.

Scrooge

Bah! Humbug.

Fred

Don't be cross.

Scrooge

(Indignantly) What else can I be, when I live in such a world of fools as this? Merry Christmas! Out upon merry Christmas! What's Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in 'em through a round dozen of months presented dead against you? If I could work my will, every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips, should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart.

Fred

Uncle!

Scrooge

Nephew! Keep Christmas in your own way, and let me keep it in mine.

Fred

Keep it! But you don't keep it.

Scrooge

Let me leave it alone, then. Much good may it do you! Much good it has ever done you!

Fred

There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say. Christmas among the best. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round as a good time:

Scrooge

Bah!

Fred

...a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, 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, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

Scrooge

Humbug!

Fred

And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!

Character Descriptions

In the beginning of his book, Dickens lists the characters, just as if it were going to be a play. The following are Dickens' descriptions of the characters found in the book.

Scrooge: "He was a tight_fisted hand ...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, shriveled 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."

Cratchit: Bob Cratchit has "at least three feet of comforter exclusive of the fringe, hanging down before him; and his threadbare clothes darned up and brushed, to look seasonable."

Fred: Scrooges' Nephew. "...all in a glow; his face was ruddy and handsome; his eyes sparkle."

Gentlemen: "Portly gentlemen, pleasant to behold."

Marley Ghost: "Marley in his pigtail, usual waistcoat, tights and boots; the tassels on the latter bristling, like his pigtail, and his coat skirts, and the hair upon his head. The chain he drew was clasped about his middle. It was long, and wound about him like a tail; and it was made of cash_boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel."

Ghost of Past: "a strange figure, ___ like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child's proportions. Its hair, which hung about its neck and its back, was white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin. It held a branch of fresh holly in its hand; and, in singular contradiction of that wintry, had its dress trimmed with summer flowers. ...from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light. "

Child: Ebenezer as child, lonely.

Ebenezer: As young man, full of life

Dickz: Young man

Fezziwig: "Old gentleman in a Welsh wig...adjusted his capacious waistcoat; laughed all over himself, from his shows to his organ of benevolence; and called out in a comfortable, oily, rich, fat, jovial voice."

Mrs. Fezziwig: "She was worthy to be his partner in every sense of the term."

Belle: "A fair young girl in a mourning_dress: in whose eyes there were tears, which sparkled in the light"

Ghost/Present: "Clothed in one simple green robe, or mantle, bordered with white fur. This garment hung so loosely on the figure, that its capacious breast was bare, as if disdaining to be warded or concealed by any artifice. Its feet, observable beneath the ample folds of the garment, were also bare; and on its head it wore no other covering than a holly wreath, set here and there with shining icicles. Its dark brown curls were long and free; free as its genial face, its sparkling eye, its open hand, its cheery voice, its unconstrained demeanor, and its joyful air. Girded round its middle was an antique scabbard; but no sword was in it, and the ancient sheath was eaten up with rust."

Mrs. Cratchit: "Dressed out but poorly in a twice_turned gown, but brave in ribbons, which are cheap and make a goodly show."

Belinda: Cratchit's second daughter, "also brave in ribbons"

Peter: Cratchit's oldest son, "gallantly attired in monstrous shirt conferred upon him by his father in honour of the day."

Children: Boy and girl, Cratchit's youngest children

Martha: Cratchit's oldest daughter

Tiny Tim: "As good as gold and better. Somehow he gets thoughtful sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard."

Niece: Fred's wife. "She was very pretty: exceedingly pretty. With a dimpled, surprised-looking, capital face; a ripe little mouth, that seemed made to be kissed ___ as no doubt it was; all kinds of good little dots about her chin, that melted into one another when she laughed; and the sunniest pair of eyes you ever saw in any little creature's head."

Ghost Yet to Come: "shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand."

Merchants: Haughty, well fed, rich

Old Joe: "A gray-haired rascal, nearly seventy years of age"

Laundress: Carrying bundle, poor working class

Charwoman: Cleaning woman, carrying bundle, poor working class

Undertaker: "A man in faded black"

Husband: Middle class

Wife: Middle class

Staging

In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, the Prologue says to the audience "Let us on your imaginary forces work." That is how I envisioned this play as one that works in the imagination. During his lifetime, Dickens abridged the work for his frequent readings of *A Christmas Carol*. This imaginative approach allows for quick changes in time and space. As Shakespeare's Prologue says, "jumping o'er times, / Turning th' accomplishment of many years / Into an hourglass."

Set:

The set should be a simple backdrop of London. Perhaps a series of tapestries or wall hangings with visible rope swags and tassels, dead hung, flown in, or attached to poles and set in flag stands. Each tapestry would be of single period buildings, placed to create the skyline of Victorian London. The narrators change scenes by placing tapestries or simple set pieces to suggest the individual scene. For example, the fire in Scrooge's counting house could be a triptych (fireplace screen) of a small stove with coal bucket; the gifts and food describe by the Ghost of Christmas Present are tapestries; a Christmas tree for Fezziwig's is a pole onto which a tapestry tree is hoisted. Simple, imaginative. Real seat pieces may be needed at time (stools, chairs, table), but should be simple and have multiple uses. For example: Scrooge's desk in the first scene is the Cratchit's dining table, then with drapery placed at each corner becomes Scrooge's bed.

Costuming

With exception of Scrooge, all the actors double in additional roles. The actors wear a basic costume (narrators), over which specific character costumes are worn.

Some costume descriptions are included in Dickens' character descriptions above. Costume changes may occur on stage as part of a scene change. Costumes for recurring characters, e.g. the Cratchits, Fred, should have a distinctive look that helps the audience identify the characters, that character's uniform per se.

Scrooge: The book indicates that Scrooge is indifferent to his clothes. They are worn, but serviceable. A great coat is called for, as is a dressing gown and night shirt.

The basics of the Ghosts should be available from early in the rehearsal process, so that the actors can master the puppet aspects of those costumes.

Marley: The actor should be on stilts (dry wall stilts), so that it appears he floats in air. Chains laden with the keys, padlocks, etc. are attached to poles controlled by other actors.

Ghost of Christmas Past: This ghost is a child-like puppet created as a hat for a woman in dark Victorian dress. The puppet's arms are worked with rods. Ideally there should be an internal light source and the ghost should have a crown of lights. The ghost should have a shimmering quality. Its dress is of china silk or other material that will flow as the actress moves across the stage.

Ghost of Christmas Present: This ghost should be larger than life, moved perhaps on an electric cart, so that there is a floating quality. The inside the lower portion of the robe there should be two child-sized dolls that are "ignorance and want."

Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: This ghost should be abnormally tall (8' - 9'). The height is achieved by the actor wearing a headdress that allows the ghost to move its head when the actor moves his/her head. The arms are long moved by rods. The headdress and the rod arms are covered in a black shroud.

The ghosts at the end of Stave 1 are constructs made of translucent off-white material, attached to black poles for the cast (narrators) to carry. Definition for the ghost can be achieved with line drawings, internally lit if possible.

Music:

The carolers, possibly a separate group, provide pre-show, during the show, intermission and post-show music. Music should be drawn from the carols available during the Victorian era in England, specifically prior to 1843 the date of publication of *A Christmas Carol*. A partial list of period carols follows.

Adeste Fideles (O Come All Ye Faithful)

The Twelve Days of Christmas

The First Noel

Angels We have Heard on High

The Holly and the Ivy

Bring a Torch, Jeanette Isabella

Wassail Song

Christmas is Coming

We Wish You a Merry Christmas

Coventry Carol

What Child is This

Deck the Halls

Gather Around the Christmas Tree

God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen

Good King Wenceslas

I Saw Three Ships

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel