THE PUBLIC THEATRE

Professional Theatre for Maine

Study Guide # 2 — 2013-14 Season

A Christmas carol

Adapted by Christopher Schario

A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki

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I - The Author

Charles Dickens, one of the greatest novelists in the English language, was born in 1812 into a middle-class family of precarious economic status. His father was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office at the time of Dickens' birth; by the time Charles was ten, however, his father was in debtor's prison, a victim of bad luck, mismanagement, and irresponsibility.

In order to help support the family during this time of crisis, young Dickens went to work in the packing department of a factory that manufactured blacking; a compound of charcoal, soot, sugar, oil, and fat used to polish boots. This was a period of dirty and draining labor which one critic has described as an experience of "heartrending monotony and ignominy." Throughout his life Dickens would remember the harshness of the working conditions imposed on himself and the other boys in that blacking factory, and would direct much of his energy as a writer and moralist toward the reform of such oppressive conditions. He would also always resent the humiliation and pain caused by his father's imprisonment, despising both the folly of his parent and the cruelty of the legal system that punished it so harshly.

Thus, Dickens' outlook on life was shaped by an intimate awareness of poverty, filth, social humiliation, legal oppression, adult irresponsibility, and industrial squalor. It was also shaped by a powerful sympathy for the victims of these forces.

Following the dire experiences of his childhood, Dickens moved on to more rewarding forms of employment, becoming a clerk in a law office, a newspaper reporter, and a recorder of Parliamentary debates. Eventually he began to publish sketches and stories, achieving his first great success as a novelist in 1837 with the publication of *The Pickwick Papers*, a collection of humorous stories and character studies. Over the next thirty years he created a vast outpouring of fiction, including *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *David Copperfield* (1849), *Bleak House* (1853), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and *Great Expectations* (1861).

A Christmas Carol was published relatively early in his career, appearing in 1843 when Dickens was 31. The tale is one of a series of short stories on a subject that had long preoccupied its author; the importance of celebrating Christmas. One of Dickens' earliest published works was a defense of this holiday against its enemies, both religious (the Puritans), and irreligious (the Utilitarians). The former objected to the pagan unseemliness of feasting and frolicking in celebration of the birth of Christ. The latter objected to the waste of time and money involved in having fun at all.

Dickens saw in Christmas a moral opportunity, a moment in time occurring each year when the grinding pursuit of wealth and the ruthless competition to succeed might be suspended in favor of kindness and generosity, especially toward the poor. He saw in it a time when the bonds of human solidarity might be renewed under the auspices of the Prince of Peace, and when the unfortunate in particular might be allowed a day of rejoicing at the birth of the poor child in the manger. "All his life," says G.K. Chesterton, “Dickens defended valiantly the pleasures of the poor. . . ." Dickens himself says of his Christmas stories that his "chief purpose was . . . to awaken some loving and forbearing thoughts, never out of season in a Christian land."

In the end Dickens triumphed, and indeed many historians credit his stories with helping to create the institution of Christmas as we now know it; a holiday of caroling, tree-trimming, family feasting, gift-giving, and universal goodwill. Before Dickens, Christmas in England and America was a day of religious significance without much secular celebration. (In fact in Massachusetts and other Puritan jurisdictions the public observance of Christmas was legally banned until quite recently.) After Dickens, Christmas became the emotional centerpiece not only of our religious calendars, but of that secular extravaganza known as "The Holidays."

Throughout his life and work, Dickens showed enormous interest in the theater, displaying, as one critic says, "affection for showmen and vagabonds, entertainers of all sorts." One of his greatest fictional creations is the traveling theater troupe of Mr. Vincent Crummles which appears in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and one of Dickens' greatest pleasures as an artist was reading his own works aloud from the stage before enormous and enthusiastic audiences. His readings were really one-man performances of his fiction, with Dickens taking on

a different voice for each character, and declaiming the passages of suspense and melodrama with high passion. In fact the last years of his life were given over almost entirely to such bravura performances, including a tour of readings throughout the United States. Many critics believe that the exhausting pace and emotional intensity of these readings hastened his premature death in 1870 at the age of 58.

These performances were successful largely because Dickens' fiction is itself so theatrical in nature. Many of his novels have been adapted to the stage and screen, including *Oliver Twist*, which became the musical *Oliver*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*, which was turned into a theatrical epic by the Royal Shakespeare Company. The novels *Great Expectations, David Copperfield,* and *A Tale of Two Cities* have been made into first-rate motion pictures.

No work of Dickens, however, has been as successful in the theater and on film during this century as *A Christmas Carol*. (During the Nineteenth Century, *Oliver Twist* was the most often dramatized of Dickens' stories.) As of 1984, there had been eleven movie versions of *A Christmas Carol*, including several made during the silent era. There had also been 357 documented adaptations of the story to the stage. In the decade since 1984, there have been many more. Within the past two years, the story has been staged in extravagant productions at Madison Square Garden, as well in major theaters on Broadway and in the West End in London. Farther from the metropolitan centers, annual productions of *A Christmas Carol* provide the centerpiece of the holiday season in many communities—including Lewiston/Auburn.

The Public Theatre's own version of *A Christmas Carol* was created by Christopher Schario, the theater's Artistic Director. First staged in December 1994, this adaptation was published by Dramatists' Play Service in 1996.

II - The Setting

The events of the story and play take place in two realms: the London of 1843 as experienced by Ebenezer Scrooge, and the domain of the spirits of Christmas past, present, and future. The former is a dreary world of under heated offices, and dark and dirty taverns and lodgings. The latter territory is entered through the imagination, and is traversed magically thanks to the power of the spirits to cross all boundaries of time and space. In the land of the spirits, Scrooge is enabled to visit the scenes of his own youth, to encounter allegorical figures such as Ignorance and Want, and to experience his own death. In returning from this realm of the spirit, Scrooge encounters the real world with a changed awareness, committed to transforming reality according to the principles of charity and goodwill taught him by the Ghosts.

III - The Plot

The story begins on Christmas Eve in the offices of Scrooge and Marley, a business partnership long ago dissolved by death. As Dickens tells us in the first words of the tale, "Marley was dead. . . . This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate." We soon learn that the surviving partner, and the main character in the story, Ebenezer Scrooge, is an implacable enemy of Christmas. Indeed, the first words Dickens puts in Scrooge's mouth are his response to his nephew, Fred's, holiday greetings. "A merry Christmas, Uncle! God save you," says Fred, to which Scrooge replies, immortally, "Bah! . . . Humbug!" In two words, Scrooge establishes himself as the archetype of cheerless, joyless, cold hearted inhumanity, an impression strengthened throughout the opening scene.

Fred is succeeded by two visitors to the office collecting charitable contributions "for the poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time." Here again, Scrooge's reply is revealing. "Are there no prisons," he asks, “no workhouses, no Poor Law and Treadmill to keep the destitute sheltered and to compel their employment?” (The Treadmill was a device invented by Sir William Cubitt in 1818 consisting of a large hollow cylinder with steps built into its circumference. A prisoner would tread on these, causing the cylinder to rotate, and to turn machinery which would perform useful tasks.) "I can't afford to make idle people merry," Scrooge says, "I help to support the establishments I have mentioned; they cost enough, and those

who are badly off must go there." When the charitable visitors protest that many would rather die than go to prisons or workhouses, Scrooge answers, "If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

In the final exchange of the opening scene, Scrooge grudgingly permits his clerk, Bob Cratchit, to take the next day—Christmas Day—as a paid holiday. For Scrooge the idea of paying a man not to work seems an irrational outrage, and Christmas represents nothing but an "excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December."

Returning to his dark house to spend the evening alone, Scrooge begins to notice certain peculiarities in his familiar surroundings. The knocker on his front door suddenly looks back at him as the face of Marley, his long-dead partner. Moments later, as he sits before his tiny fire, all the bells in the dark house begin to ring at once, a sound succeeded by the clanking of a chain, and the dreadful appearance of the ghost of Marley, horribly encumbered with "cash boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds and heavy purses wrought in steel." Marley carries as an eternal burden the symbols of his earthly obsession with getting and spending.

His appearance is to warn Scrooge that he too is forging just such a set of shackles for himself, but that he has a last chance to escape the same dreadful fate. Three spirits will visit Scrooge, Marley says, and through their intercession the still-living man of business will be given the opportunity to learn the lesson that "Mankind" should be his business, along with "charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence." As Marley's spirit departs, Scrooge hears the sound of souls in torment, all of them—like his dead partner—chained to their own sins, forever powerless to intervene in the world to save others from their fates.

The three ghosts come as predicted. The first spirit is the Ghost of Christmas Past . . . specifically Scrooge's past. This apparition leads the terrified miser through a series of scenes from his own life as a boy and a young man. He encounters his gentle sister, Fan, mother of his nephew, Fred. She was kind to him in the past as was her son that very morning. Then he is brought to Fezziwig's warehouse in London where he served as an apprentice. The soul of jollity, Fezziwig shuts up shop on Christmas Eve, and treats his employees to music and feasting in celebration of the holiday. Looking back on the kindly behavior of his old employer, Scrooge remembers that "he had the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome . . . the happiness he gives is as great as if it cost a fortune." With a pang of guilt he remembers his earlier grudging treatment of Bob Cratchit.

Finally, the Ghost of Christmas Past brings before Scrooge a scene from his young manhood that produces utter torment; the moment when Scrooge renounced the love of his fiancé, Belle, in favor of a solitary life given over entirely to the pursuit of money. With this horrible vision of his own past folly, Scrooge is brought into the presence of the second spirit, the Ghost of Christmas Present.

This spirit carries Scrooge through scenes of contemporary celebration, as people all over England mark the birth of Christ with kindness and revelry. As did the Ghost of Christmas Past, Christmas Present picks out scenes that will have a particularly strong impact on Scrooge. First, Scrooge is brought into the kitchen of the Cratchit family to witness the warmth and joy they achieve at Christmas despite their hardships. Bob's crippled young son, Tiny Tim, captures most perfectly the spirit of the time when he remarks selflessly after Christmas services, "I hope people saw me in the church, because I am a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember, upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk and blind men see."

Stricken by anxiety and remorse over his treatment of this family, Scrooge begs to know of the Ghost whether Tiny Tim will live. The Ghost's response recalls the words from the opening scene: "What then? If he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population." After which Cratchit and Tim, unaware of the unseen onlookers, offer a toast to Scrooge, blessing him as the founder of their feast.

With this ironic twist, the scene in Cratchit's kitchen ends, and the Ghost transports Scrooge across England and even through foreign lands, observing along the way how "in alms house, hospital, and jail, in misery's every refuge, the Spirit left his Blessing." Finally, Scrooge is brought before a terrible vision:

> *A boy and girl. Ragged, scowling, wolfish . . . Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked.*

SCROOGE: *Spirit, are they yours?*
CHRISTMAS PRESENT: *They are Man's. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, for on their brows is written doom, unless the writing be erased.*
SCROOGE: *Have they no refuge or resource?*
CHRISTMAS PRESENT: *Are there no prisons? Are there no workhouses?*

Again, Scrooge's earlier words are hurled back at him, humiliating him with his own heartlessness; and again Scrooge is shown his obligation to his fellow creatures, and his guilt in shirking it.

The last of the spirits is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. This speechless apparition takes Scrooge into the future, and shows him the circumstances surrounding the death of an unnamed man. We see the indifference of the world to this man's passing; his colleagues speculate on how cheap his funeral will be, while his charwoman steals the curtains from his death bed. At the same time, Scrooge learns that Tiny Tim has died, ill-nourishment undermining his already fragile health.

Scrooge begins to dread that the unmourned dead man is himself, and that the lost little boy will hang on his conscience through eternity. The spirit leads Scrooge to a graveyard, and there points out to him a fresh tombstone. Approaching the stone in fear, Scrooge reads on it his own name. This terrible vision of his life ending in emotional emptiness and moral bankruptcy wrings a plea and a promise from his newly awakened heart:

> *Good Spirit, assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me by an altered life! I will honor Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!*

After this terrible sight and this desperate plea, Scrooge awakens to find it is Christmas Day; that all the visions have consumed only a single night, and that the opportunity to transform his life lies open before him. It is in his power to change the horror revealed by Christmas Future through the exertion of his own will . . . reformed by the teachings of the Ghosts. He promptly sets about to apply their lessons. He buys a huge turkey as a present for the Cratchit family, he pledges a large donation to the same charities he had spurned the day before, and he visits his nephew's house to celebrate Christmas. And in the final scene of the story, Scrooge astonishes Bob Cratchit on the day after Christmas by giving him an enormous raise and by pledging to assist his family. As the narrator tells us:

> *Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all and infinitely more. And to Tiny Tim, who did not die, he was a second father. . . . And it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed that knowledge.*

IV - The Characters

Ebenezer Scrooge is by far the most important character in the story. The others exist only to provide contrasts with this central figure. And Dickens wastes no time in telling us exactly what sort of a person Scrooge is:

> *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 . . . secret and self contained, and solitary as an old oyster. The cold within him froze his own 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.*

Scrooge, in other words, is virtually inhuman—indeed sub-mammalian in nature, more like a mollusk than a man in his coldness and hardness. The development of the story is synonymous with the transformation of this chilly oyster into the warm-hearted figure who liberally dispenses blessings in the final scenes of the narrative.

In Scrooge, Dickens has created what critics call an archetype, a character who seems to sum up for all time some central possibility of human nature. As Don Quixote is the archetype of a foolish idealist, Hamlet of a vacillating intellectual, and Tartuffe of a religious hypocrite, so Scrooge is the archetype of spiritual miserliness, of the heart that begrudges the joy of others. Indeed, one mark of his archetypal status is the fact that his name has entered our language as a generic term of abuse. Even today, during the current political debates in Washington, some politicians accuse others of practicing the social policies of a Scrooge—and everyone knows what the charge means, even those who have never read Dickens' story.

The other human characters seem to exist primarily to exhibit qualities that Scrooge lacks. Fred is spontaneously joyful and friendly with no thought of money or gain; Cratchit is intimately connected with his family; Tiny Tim is all innocent benevolence, turned radiantly away from his own hardships toward a pure concern for others. And these characters remain consistent through the story. Each has an emotional or moral signature that does not change.

But one of the fundamental facts about the drama is that characters are interesting in proportion to the degree of change they undergo as a result of conflict and discovery. That principle is clearly illustrated in *A Christmas Carol*, and it accounts for the enduring and compelling interest that we feel in the transformation of Scrooge from an unfeeling monster into a morally reborn human being.

V - Themes

Each time it is read or performed, *A Christmas Carol* makes us think about the moral power of art. It explores this idea in two ways. First, we may regard the experience that Scrooge undergoes as itself a comment on the power of art to affect the soul. Dickens, that lover of theater, in effect makes the three Ghosts playwrights who create for Scrooge a dramatic epic in many scenes from the past, the present, and the future. This drama illustrates the deficiencies of Scrooge's life with respect to the spirit of Christmas. The power of the Ghosts enables Scrooge to become a spectator at the morality play of his own existence. The power of this play is such that it compels Scrooge to reform his life, and thus to save his own soul, and even, because of his newfound generosity, to contribute to the salvation of others.

Second, the morality play of Scrooge's life affects us as well as him. As we watch him watching the follies and immoralities of his past, the misery of the present he has helped to create, and the awful payback that lies in store for him in the future, we begin to develop some sympathy for this otherwise utterly repellent character. In other words, we begin to see in him, as he becomes increasingly human, something of ourselves. One of the miraculous elements of the story is the way it brings us to recognize the humanity buried in the heart of Scrooge, the way it converts us from antipathy towards this human oyster to warm sympathy for him. And in thus causing us to extend fellow-feeling toward Scrooge, the story makes us, like him, into participants in the Christmas spirit.

The story is also a powerful parable about human freedom. When Scrooge is shown the future he asks the Ghost, "Are these the shadows of the things that will be, or are they the shadows of the things that may be?" If the former, then Scrooge will have to face the horrible conclusion that he is now a prisoner of fate, powerless to change the forgone conclusion of his life. If the latter, then the individual choices he makes in the days and years ahead will shape the future; will create a new ending to the morality play of his life. In posing this question, Scrooge raises a philosophical issue that has been of central concern in Christian thinking, the conflict between free will and predestination. The latter doctrine was preached by John Calvin, and was embraced by many of his followers in England. The former was the official position embraced by the Church of England (and

also by the Catholic Church). Dickens here seems clearly to embrace the idea of free will.

Finally, we should notice that Dickens keeps returning to the relationship between Scrooge's obsession with business success and his moral deformity. Scrooge is above all a capitalist; as are Fezziwig and the charitable solicitors who visit his office. But, unlike these other businessmen, Scrooge has taken the principles of capitalism, bolstered by the ideas of Utilitarianism, to their absolute extreme, pursuing profit to the entire exclusion of any other human goals. He thus becomes a hideous illustration of the idea of "economic man"; that theoretical construct used to explain and justify the workings of the capitalist system. Economic man, according to the economic thinkers of Dickens' day, did nothing that was not ultimately motivated by material self-interest. Scrooge is the reduction ad absurdum of that concept. In Scrooge, Dickens suggests, we have the paradigm of pure capitalist acquisitiveness, and in creating such a frightful figure, Dickens also presents a criticism of the system. Thus, the story is also an exploration of the influence of social and economic structures and institutions on human morality. In the character of Scrooge, Dickens shows us how such systems can pervert the people who invent and operate them.

And as we consider the criticism of unrestrained capitalism in *A Christmas Carol*, we ought to remember that

VI - Questions for Discussion

1. Is Scrooge a realistic character or an unbelievable exaggeration? Why?

2. Why is Scrooge so hostile to his nephew, Fred? Why does Fred respond in such a friendly way?

3. What does Scrooge mean when he calls the ghost of Marley "an undigested bit of beef . . . [or] a fragment of an underdone potato?" What is the view of life that underlies this assertion?

4. Why does Scrooge break off his engagement to Belle?

5. What does Fezziwig's behavior teach Scrooge?

6. What purpose does Tiny Tim serve in the reformation of Scrooge?

7. What does it mean when the Ghost of Christmas Present calls Ignorance and Want the children of Man?

8. Why is Scrooge disturbed when he hears the Charwoman talk about the deathbed?

9. What would it mean if Scrooge learned that he could not change the future? Do you think the future can be changed, or that some force has already determined what will happen?

10. What is the most important thing Scrooge learns as a result of the visits of the Ghosts?

UPCOMING STUDENT MATINEES!

Tiger Be Still by Kim Rosenstock (Grade 10 and up) *contains adult language*
January 29, 2014 at 9:30 am
The Wickman women are having a bad day. Twenty-four-year-old Sherry has a Master's degree in Art Therapy—which means she's unemployed and living back at home. Her recently jilted sister is already there, glued to the couch, nursing her broken heart with endless replays of "Top Gun" and a bottle of scotch. Then there's Mom, too embarrassed by her recent weight gain to come downstairs, but willing to reach the living room by cell phone. If the idea of facing a new day has ever sent you back to bed, this quirky, endearing and uplifting Off-Broadway comedy, is a heart-felt and hilarious look at how we survive the tough moments in life and help each other get back in the game.

Good People by David Lindsay-Abaire (Grade 10 and up)
March 18 at 9:30 am
Welcome to South Boston, where this month's paycheck covers last month's bills and a night on the town means a few rounds of bingo. When "mouthy Southie" Margie loses her job at The Dollar Store, she turns to an old boyfriend from the neighborhood, now a successful doctor, for help. But is this self-made man secure enough to revisit his humble beginnings? This recent Broadway hit is a wickedly funny, powerful and insightful story of old friends, old flames and the question of whether you can ever leave the old neighborhood behind.

Moonlight & Magnolias by Ron Hutchinson (Grade 8 and up)
May 7 at 9:30 am
You'll go nuts for this fun, farcical, and somewhat true behind-the-scenes look at the creation of the screenplay of "Gone With the Wind". For five days, three of the most talented men in Hollywood lock themselves in a room with an unlimited supply of peanuts and bananas to create the greatest movie ever made. "Frankly, my dear, this is one funny play."

The Pirate, the Princess & the Pea by Crabgrass Puppet Theatre (Pre-K to Grade 5)
May 19 and May 20 at 9:30 and 11:30 am—May 21 @ 9:30 am
A pirates life isn't all "YO-HO-HO and a bottle of Grog". Join Crabgrass Puppet Theatre on a thrilling voyage chock full of sea monsters, sharks and side-splitting action!

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