Charles Dickens’
A Christmas Carol
adapted for the stage by Neil Bartlett

Know-the-Show
Audience Guide
compiled and arranged by
the Education Department of
The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey
In This Guide:

A Christmas Carol: A Brief Introduction .............................................. p2
Who’s Who in A Christmas Carol ........................................................ p4
Director's Notes ................................................................................. p5
The Life of Charles Dickens ................................................................. p6
Charles Dickens: A Selective Biography ................................................ p7
Dickensian Times ............................................................................... p8
About the Adaptor ............................................................................ p9
Commentary and Criticism ............................................................... p10
Terms and Phrases in A Christmas Carol ............................................ p11
Further Reading ................................................................................ p11
Holiday Traditions: Before and After Dickens ................................. p12
About The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey ................................. p13
A Christmas Carol: A Brief Introduction

It is possible that no other single piece of fiction has had the kind of sweeping cultural influence that can be attributed to Charles Dickens’ first “Christmas story.”

To some extent, A Christmas Carol was written for financial reasons. By 1843, when he began work on the short novel, Dickens and his wife had four children with a fifth on the way, a large mortgage payment, and were subjected to frequent requests for financial assistance from family members. His latest serial novel, Martin Chuzzlewit, had suffered a disappointing fall-off in monthly sales. In hopes of getting a quick influx of cash from a bestseller, Dickens abandoned his usual serial form of writing his novels and made his first attempt at writing a novel all at once.

As usual with Dickens, the novel’s form and content was principally dictated by a powerful social message he wished to convey. He had recently visited the Field Lane “Ragged School,” part of a chain of charitable establishments that had been set up to provide free instruction in reading and math for the poor. He was appalled at the filth, misery and ignorance of the men and boys he met there, and at the thought of how his society mostly overlooked the sufferings of its vast lower class. He resolved that the Christmas book which was taking shape in his head would “strike a sledgehammer blow... on behalf of the Poor Man’s child.” Indeed, its working title was The Sledgehammer.

Although he was simultaneously finishing Martin Chuzzlewit, as Dickens plunged into his tale of Scrooge’s fateful encounter with the Ghosts, he found himself increasingly engrossed in and moved by his “little Christmas book.” He later noted that, as he worked on A Christmas Carol, he “wept and laughed, and wept again... and thinking whereof, walked about the black streets of London fifteen or twenty miles many a night when all sober folks had gone to bed.”

Dickens was determined that the book would be physically beautiful — his own personal Christmas gift to the English public — and also affordable for the average family. When his publisher was unwilling to do so, he paid out of his own pocket for the first edition’s gold-stamped cover and hand-colored engravings. Ultimately this, combined with the fact that he held the price to five shillings (roughly $20 in today’s money), meant that Dickens made far less from the book than he had hoped.

Nevertheless, the sales of the book in sheer volume were (and continue to be) astounding. The first printing of 6,000 copies appeared in bookstores on December 19, 1843 and was sold out on December 22. Not only did the book continue to be printed and sold throughout Dickens’ lifetime, but he then adapted it for public readings which he gave throughout the world up to the year of his death. In later years, when he was...
no longer writing as prolifically, these readings became one of his principal sources of income.

Driven by the demand from his reading public, Dickens went on to write four more “Christmas books” and numerous Christmas stories in his magazines. None of these achieved the popularity or lasting acclaim of A Christmas Carol, but nonetheless Charles Dickens was indelibly associated with Christmas by almost everyone in England for the rest of his life. Many years later, in a letter to his daughter Mamie, he would grumble that he felt as if he “had murdered a Christmas a number of years ago, and its ghost perpetually haunted me.”

Far from being the murderer of the Christmas holiday, however, Dickens’ Carol may have almost literally saved it. By 1843, most of the Christmas traditions depicted and alluded to in the novel were dying out. Many of them had originated in England’s farm culture, and were being left behind as more and more people flocked to cities and factory work. Other traditions had been suppressed by the Puritans and were never really revived. Scrooge’s attitude that Christmas should be just another day of work was by no means universal, but it was far more common than today’s reader might suspect.

Carroll Transformations

Audiences around the world found themselves profoundly moved by Charles Dickens’ public readings of A Christmas Carol. In 1857, Dickens read the story in Chicago. One of the audience members, a factory owner named Fairbanks, was so affected by the reading that he decided to “break the custom we have hitherto observed of opening the works on Christmas Day.” Not only did he close the factory for Christmas Day, he gave a turkey to each of his employees.

Dickens was never comfortable with organized religion, and while he alludes to the religious nature of Christmas in the novel, the “sledgehammer blow” he strikes is on behalf of charity and human kindness rather than any specific religious belief. The association of the holiday with charitable giving and the opportunity to personally right society’s injustices is one of the novel’s most powerful legacies.

Dickens was also a gregarious, outgoing man who loved parties, games, and festivities of all kinds. Religious officials, particularly those in the Puritan tradition, had actually done much to strip Christmas of its festive qualities during the 17th and 18th centuries, but it was precisely this aspect of dancing, feasting and laughing with one’s neighbors that Dickens loved most about Christmas. There are few more powerful literary defenses of the humanizing value of a party than Dickens’ Carol.

Modern-day readers in England and the United States may take it for granted that nuclear families would gather for a special meal on Christmas, but this tradition is almost entirely attributable to A Christmas Carol, which essentially became a handbook for reworking the old rural Christmas traditions for a modern urban lifestyle. It sparked a “Christmas renaissance” that led directly to our contemporary traditions of exchanging gifts and Christmas cards, giving a Christmas bonus to employees, elaborately decorating the home and, most of all, roasting a “prize turkey.” It is even possible to argue that Dickens is the single individual most responsible for the fact that Christmas is celebrated today as a secular holiday by so many families outside the Christian tradition.
Who’s Who in A Christmas Carol

Ebenezer Scrooge – The cold and miserly owner of a London counting-house, a nineteenth century term for a creditor or accountant’s office. He is visited by three spirits of Christmas in hopes of reversing Scrooge’s greedy, cold-hearted approach to life and his fellow man.

Bob Cratchit – Scrooge’s clerk; a kind, mild, and very poor man with a large family. Though treated harshly by Scrooge, Cratchit remains a humble and dedicated employee.

Fred – Scrooge’s nephew, a genial man who loves Christmas. He invites Scrooge to his Christmas party each and every year, only to be refused.

The Portly Gentlemen – Two gentlemen who visit Scrooge at the beginning of the tale seeking charitable contributions for the poor and destitute of London.

Jacob Marley – In life, he was Ebenezer’s equally greedy partner. Marley died seven years before the narrative opens on Christmas Eve. He appears to Scrooge as a ghost condemned to wander the world bound in heavy chains. Marley offers his old partner a chance to escape a similar fate.

The Ghost of Christmas Past – The first spirit to visit Scrooge, who takes him on a tour of the Christmases in Scrooge’s own past, from early childhood and into his young adulthood.

Fan – Scrooge’s sister; Fred’s mother. Scrooge remembers that, as a child, Fan convinced her father to allow Ebenezer to return home one Christmas.

Mr. Fezziwig – The jovial merchant with whom Scrooge apprenticed as a young man. Fezziwig was renowned for his wonderful Christmas parties.

Belle – Scrooge’s beloved fiancé when he was a young man. Belle broke off their engagement when Scrooge became consumed with greed and wealth. She later married Dick Wilkins.

The Ghost of Christmas Present – The second spirit to visit Scrooge, his lifespan is restricted to Christmas Day. He escorts Scrooge on a tour of holiday celebrations in the current time.

Mrs. Cratchit – Bob’s wife; a kind and loving woman, though she has little love and patience for Ebenezer Scrooge.

The Cratchit Children:
  Peter Cratchit – Bob’s oldest son, who inherits his father’s stiff-collared shirt for Christmas.
  Martha Cratchit – Bob’s oldest daughter, who works in a milliner’s shop. (A milliner is a person who designs, produces, and sells hats.)
  Belinda Cratchit – Bob’s youngest daughter.
  Tiny Tim – Bob Cratchit’s young son, crippled from birth.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come – The third and final spirit to visit Scrooge. Silent throughout their visit, this spirit shows Scrooge images of future Christmases and the prospect of a lonely death.

Old Joe – a broker of stolen items.

Mrs. Dibber – Scrooge’s cleaning lady.
Director’s Notes

In 2007, when I first directed Neil Bartlett’s ingenious adaptation of this tale, I wrote the following:

“As we all know, Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol is the tale of one man’s overnight spiritual reawakening. Neil Bartlett’s adaptation of A Christmas Carol catapulted me into my own reawakening, albeit of a different sort, and it took all of four minutes. Over the years, I had become downright Scrooge-like in my dismissal of Dickens’ story as a potential offering for our stage. I had flatly refused to consider it for production. My strongest connection to it, as a kid, was the Mr. Magoo cartoon version, which admittedly, I loved (and still do!). After that however, frequent, unfortunate doses of bad renderings of A Christmas Carol, both on stage and film, formed in me a kind of “Bah, humbug!” response every time the piece was mentioned. The only version to escape my disdain was Patrick Stewart’s one-man, tour-de-force production. I loved it so much, I saw it twice in the early 1990’s. That was the only instance where I relented (and somewhat begrudgingly) in my dismissal of the piece.

Not only did I find that most of the Christmas Carols that I had seen denied the Dickensian style and spirit, but so very many of them, in their effort to please, I suppose, indulged in saccharine sentimentality and glitzy extravaganza. There’s no denying however, that it’s a tale of a nasty, mean, fairly amoral man who has sold his soul to the idol of greed. To ignore that not only diminishes Dickens, but it diminishes the ultimate miracle of Scrooge’s rediscovery of his humanity and his ability to be humanistic.

That humanistic view, so brilliantly depicted by Dickens, is part of what I was able to rediscover by virtue of Neil Bartlett’s wooing me back to the tale, both in its original form and in Mr. Bartlett’s exciting stage adaptation. What happens to Scrooge is a thing universal. Time, place, circumstances — all can change, but a man or woman finding their heart, soul, and fellow man again, before it is too late, is a tale for us all — no matter where or when or how we live.

Best of all, as a purveyor of the classics, Mr. Bartlett’s vision for the piece is to honor Dickens’ language and his vision, at the same time providing immense creative freedom for a director, designers and a cast. Not an easy feat. The piece is a director’s dream challenge. It is essentially a bare bones “outline” in many ways — part tone poem, part Greek chorus, part music hall, part madrigal, part dance, part unadulterated emotional truth, requiring massive invention, but of the purest kind. Other than the songs, every word issued is Dickens’ own. The use of a small ensemble to create this entire rich world is daunting, but massively satisfying once deciphered and discovered. It has been a delight. So, I humbly reverse my position on A Christmas Carol — for this year at least!”

Now, in 2011, I find myself back with Dickens’ story and embracing it once again, no less enchanted by the exciting directorial challenges it provides, but more painfully familiar with the social milieu from which it sprang — because of course, our social milieu has become so eerily similar. The events affecting the global economy since 2008 have created a decidedly Dickensian atmosphere in cities around the world and in our own back yard. Greed has “not left the building” but has reared its ugly head, as always, and unfortunately, as ferociously as it ever has. A Christmas Carol will never lose its value and its importance — unless of course, mankind finds a way to erase Want and Ignorance and Greed.

What a blessing it is to have this tale to keep us honest!

Happy Holidays!
Bonnie J. Monte
The Life of Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was born February 7, 1812, the second child of John and Elizabeth Dickens. (His beloved older sister, Fanny, would be immortalized in A Christmas Carol as Scrooge’s sister, Little Fan). John Dickens was a civil servant, who worked as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office at the time of Charles’ birth.

In 1817, John Dickens was assigned to the huge Navy shipyards in Chatham, Kent. During the family’s five years in Chatham, Charles started school, beginning his lifelong love affair with books. It was at this time that he also discovered the theatre, which he regularly attended with his uncle. Later he described this as the happiest period in his childhood, and moved back to the vicinity of Chatham as an adult.

By 1822, however, there were six Dickens children, and the family’s finances, always stretched thin by John Dickens’ inability to live within their means, took a further blow when he was transferred back to London. The family relocated to a four-room house in the seedy neighborhood of Camden Town. By 1824, their situation was so precarious that 12-year-old Charles was pulled out of school and sent to work full-time in a factory. Eleven days after Charles began work at the factory, John Dickens was imprisoned for non-payment of debts, and the rest of the family was placed with him in the Marshalsea Debtors’ Prison. Charles was left to fend for himself on his six shillings a week (barely enough for him to eat, let alone to help support his family).

For five long months, Charles Dickens worked long, tedious days in the rat-infested warehouse. This traumatic experience left deep emotional scars, and Dickens was so ashamed of his family’s situation that he talked about his experiences at the factory to only two people during his life. Nevertheless, it would have a profound impact on his writing as well as his subsequent fierce devotion to social welfare, especially when it involved children and education. In particular, his time in the factory ingrained in him a sense of loneliness and isolation with which he struggled throughout his life. As his fictional alter ego David Copperfield put it, “I had no advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no assistance, no support, of any kind, from anyone…”

By June of 1824, John Dickens was released from prison and Charles was able to return to school for a few more years. As a teenager, he again found work to support himself, first as a clerk in a law office, then as a newspaper reporter. He was eventually assigned to cover sessions of Parliament, and taught himself shorthand in order to take accurate transcripts of the speeches and debates, winning a reputation as London’s fastest political reporter.

During this time, Dickens began writing magazine stories, and then novels in the new serial form. Books were still fairly expensive items in Dickens’s time, but the introduction of serialization made them far more available to a wide middle and lower-middle class audience. Essentially, serial novels were purchased on an installment plan, one chapter at a time. Charles Dickens became a master of this form, skilfully building suspense and inserting tantalizing details in each chapter.
In 1836, shortly after publishing his first novel, *The Pickwick Papers*, Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of a newspaper editor. They would go on to have ten children together, and eventually to separate in 1858.

Between 1836 and 1865, Dickens worked extensively. He published several novels which met with extraordinary popular success, while also publishing and editing two magazines. He traveled to the United States, Canada, Italy and Switzerland, and to purchase a large house in Gad’s Hill, near his childhood home in Chatham. Nevertheless, maintaining this upper middle-class lifestyle with such a large family proved to be a continual challenge, and Dickens frequently worked to the point of exhaustion.

Charles Dickens was the first real “celebrity author,” and he used this status to vehemently criticize all kinds of social injustice in Victorian England, from the slum conditions in which many people lived to the maltreatment of child laborers, prisoners, and others. He is still one of the most popular and widely read English authors, and not one of his books has ever gone out of print.

In 1865, Dickens was involved in a terrible train derailment that killed 10 people and seriously injured 49 others. Dickens (whose train car had tipped but not overturned) went to the aid of the injured passengers until rescuers arrived, then clambered back into his own carriage to retrieve his half-finished manuscript for *Our Mutual Friend*. While he had seemed relatively unscathed at the time, his health was never good following the accident, and in June of 1870 he suffered a stroke and died at home. He was laid to rest in the Poets’ Corner of Westminster Abbey, in a tomb that reads: “He was a sympathizer to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England’s greatest writers is lost to the world.”

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Charles Dickens: A Selective Bibliography

*Sketches by Boz* (1836)
*The Pickwick Papers* (1837)
*The Adventures of Oliver Twist* (1838)
*The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1839)
*Barnaby Rudge* (1841)
*Master Humphrey’s Clock* (1841)
*A Christmas Carol* (1843)
*The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843)
*The Chimes* (1844)
*The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845)
*The Battle of Life* (1846)
*Dombey and Son* (1848)
*The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* (1848)
*David Copperfield* (1849)
*Bleak House* (1853)
*Hard Times: For These Times* (1854)
*Little Dorrit* (1857)
*A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)
*The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860)
*Great Expectations* (1861)
*Our Mutual Friend* (1865)
*The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) - incomplete
Dickensian Times: A Chronology

Like most authors, Charles Dickens’ work was heavily influenced by the time in which he lived and wrote. Living at the rise of one of the most impactful periods in the history of western culture, it is interesting to note the major achievements that were happening around Dickens as he penned his many masterworks.

1807: Robert Fulton invents the first successful steamboat. Slavery is abolished in England.

1812: Charles Dickens is born in Portsmouth, England.

1815: The Battle of Waterloo ends the Napoleonic Wars.

1824: Dickens’s father and family are imprisoned for debt, while 12-year-old Charles begins a full-time job at Warren’s Blacking Factory.

1825: Trade unions are legalized in England.

1827: The Dickens family is evicted from their new home for failing to make their mortgage payments. Charles leaves school for good and begins work as a clerk in a law office.

1830: The world’s first commercial railway, the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, begins operation.

1834: Dickens becomes a reporter for the Morning Chronicle and meets his future wife, Catherine Hogarth. Parliament enacts the Poor Law Amendment, making the conditions of England’s public assistance shelters deplorable.

1836: Dickens marries Catherine Hogarth, and publishes Sketches by Boz and his first serial novel, The Pickwick Papers.

1837: Dickens publishes Oliver Twist. Queen Victoria ascends the throne of England, sparking a new era in English history and culture. Samuel Morse invents the telegraph. The first ocean-going steamship is produced.

1838-39: Daguerreotype photographs and photographic paper are introduced.

1842: Dickens visits the United States for the first time.

1843: Martin Chuzzlewit and A Christmas Carol are published.

1849: Dickens publishes David Copperfield.

1854-56: The Crimean War takes place between England and Russia.

1858: Dickens separates from his wife and embarks on reading tours for additional income. The first trans-Atlantic telegraph cable is completed.

1859: Charles Darwin publishes On the Origin of Species, which lays out his theory of evolution.

1860: Dickens publishes Great Expectations.

1865: Dickens is injured in the Staplehurst train crash, from which he never fully recovers.


1870: Dickens gives a dozen farewell readings in England, and is received by Queen Victoria. He suffers a stroke on June 9 and dies at home, leaving his final novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, unfinished.
About the Adaptor

Born in 1958, Neil Bartlett grew up in Chichester, West Sussex, England, which he has described as a “boring town in the south of England.” For this prolific writer and dramatic artist-to-be, a very good secondhand bookstore turned out to be the town’s saving grace. He developed an abiding interest in literature and theatre.

Bartlett completed his undergraduate studies at Oxford University, where he became interested in a dramatic style called hypertheatricality that has permeated much of his work. In essence, hypertheatricality eschews realism and acknowledges its make-believe nature in strong and sometimes outrageous ways. Rather than using technical effects that create the illusion of reality, Bartlett’s hypertheatricality tended to be more minimalist in its design aspects and to rely more on the actors and the imagination of the audience members. In this adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, Bartlett’s hypertheatrical style can be seen in the way the actors become everything from the Bells of London to Scrooge’s watch.

Shortly after graduating from university, Bartlett and a group of friends founded his first theatre company, the 1982 Theatre Company. He performed in or directed a number of performances in strange venues, such as street corners, staircases, or hospitals. He also worked as the administrator for a gay community theatre, a street clown, and a supporting act for the famous Goth band Bauhaus. During the 1980s Bartlett also wrote his first book, *Who Was That Man?*, about the life of Oscar Wilde, and went on to write critically acclaimed novels about gay life in England.

During the mid to late 1980s, he was a key director for England’s renowned Theatre de Complicité (now known simply as Complicité), and his production of More Bigger Snacks Now helped define the company’s ground-breaking reputation as well as his own reputation as an up-and-coming director. Complicité’s experimental, movement-based approach has had a profound influence on Bartlett’s subsequent work as a director.

In 1988, Bartlett formed another theatre company called Gloria, which created and toured close to twenty shows in a ten-year period. Gloria went to major theatres across England and the United States, including the Royal National Theatre and the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. Gloria’s signature musically-imbued theatre productions were adaptations of classics as well as new works with the high level of theatricality for which Bartlett had become known. He wrote or adapted thirteen plays and performed in six of the productions. In this period Bartlett was also highly productive in the activist scene, working with London’s first International AIDS Day and many other rallies, benefits and sociopolitical causes.

In what was considered a controversial move, Bartlett was appointed the artistic director for London’s run-down and failing Lyric Hammersmith Theatre in 1994. He drastically altered the pricing policy to attract new audiences, included young people and minorities, and his season selections were considered challenging and quite unusual. Over the ten years of Bartlett’s tenure, however, the Lyric Hammersmith became one of London’s most cutting-edge and critically-acclaimed theatres. It specialized in outrageous musicals, unique Christmas shows, experimental theatre, and work that consistently challenged both the audience and performers. Bartlett was also instrumental in adding strong educational components to the Lyric’s programming.

In 2000, Bartlett received an O.B.E. (Officer of the British Empire) for his remarkable work in restoring the Lyric Hammersmith to thriving artistic success. He left in 2004 to return to a life as a freelance director and writer, and now lives in Brighton with his partner James Gardiner.

He has developed a reputation as a wildly intelligent writer, translator, and adaptor as well as a talented performer, director, and teacher, and has been described as a “protean polymath of a creator.” His work is almost always perceived as “edgy” and often more than slightly controversial. Bartlett frequently takes on older plays or stories and brings them to the present age, giving a fresh approach and perspective on their themes. He has notably adapted three of Dickens novels for the stage, *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist* and more recently, *Great Expectations*. 
Commentary and Criticism

“Dickens is one of the masters of prose.”
George Gissing
*Charles Dickens: A Critical Study*

“Because *A Christmas Carol* has never lost the power of its original impact as the epitome of the spirit of Christmas festivities, Dickens’ connection with the season is nearly always associated with the trappings of the book.”
Ruth F. Glancy
“Dickens and Christmas: His Framed-Tale Themes”

“Was there ever a better charity sermon preached in the world than Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*? I believe it occasioned immense hospitality throughout England; was the means of lighting up hundreds of kind fires at Christmas time; caused a wonderful outpouring of Christmas good feeling, of Christmas punch-brewing; an awful slaughter of Christmas turkeys, and roasting and basting of Christmas beef.”
William Makepeace Thackeray
from an 1852 speech

Dickens on Childhood Poverty

“The careless maintenance from year to year, in this, the capital city of the world, of a vast hopeless nursery of ignorance, misery and vice...is horrible to contemplate.

I know the prisons of London well...I have visited the largest of them more times than I could count; and the children in them are enough to break the heart and hope of any man. These children pass and repass through the prisons all their lives; they are never taught; the first distinctions between right and wrong are, from their cradles, perfectly confounded and perverted in their minds; they come of untaught parents, and will give birth to another untaught generation; in exact proportion to their natural abilities, is the extent and scope of their depravity; and there is no escape or chance for them in any ordinary revolution of human affairs.

The frightful neglect by the State of those whom it punishes so constantly, and whom it might, as easily and less expensively, instruct and save; together with the sight I had seen there, in the heart of London; haunted me, and finally impelled me to an endeavour to bring these Institutions under the notice of the Government.”

*The Daily News*
March 13, 1852

“The story sings from end to end like a happy man going home....it is lyric and exclamatory, from the first exclamatory words of it. It is strictly a Christmas Carol.”
G.K. Chesterton
*Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*

“As for *A Christmas Carol*, the individual critic had quite best hold his peace... it is so spread over England by this time that no skeptic could review it down...I am not sure the allegory is a very complete one, and protest, with the classics, against the use of blank verse in prose; but here all objections stop. Who can listen to objections regarding such a book as this? It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman that reads it, a personal kindness.”
William Makepeace Thackeray
reviewing the book for *The Independent* in February 1844

“Dickens... wrote the story not just to be read, but to be read out loud, for an audience. His words don’t describe; they enact. When London freezes, the prose stamps and chatters; when Scrooge is in his counting house, the words are as cramped as his miserable clerks... When the story rises to its great emotional and moral climaxes, the prose tolls like a bell...”
Neil Bartlett
from his introduction to this adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*
Terms and Phrases Found in *A Christmas Carol*

**avarice** - greed

**baleful** - deadly, malicious

**beguile** - to deceive

**bob** - slang for a shilling (a coin worth 1/20 of a British pound)

**cant** - insincere or cliché sayings

**congeal** - to solidify or thicken

**corroboration** - confirmation

**Dandini and the Princess** - a reference to the composer Rossini’s version of the Cinderella story, which featured the faithful servant Dandini

**deft** - skillful

**dirge** - a funeral hymn or lament

**entreaty** - a plea

**execrable** - despicable, disgusting

**farthing** - a coin equal to 1/4 of the British penny

**gratis** - free

**gruel** - thin, watery oatmeal or porridge

**ha’penny** - a half-penny coin

**infernal** - of or relating to hell

**intercede** - to intervene

**latent** - dormant

**liberality** - generosity

**loiter** - to linger idly or aimlessly

**morose** - sullen or gloomy

**munificent** - very generous

**odious** - hateful, repellent

**officious** - overly dutiful or obliging

**opulence** - richness

**peal** - a loud ringing (as of bells)

**(plum) pudding** - a traditional Christmas dish more like a soft fruitcake than American pudding

**poulterers** - a butcher shop specializing in poultry (chickens, turkeys, etc.)

**profundity** - depth

**replete** - full

**savory** - good-tasting

**scanty** - meager, insufficient

**scuttle** - a metal bucket with a conical top, used for storing coal

**Social Services** - in Dickens’ time, a phrase that referred mainly to workhouses and other means of essentially incarcerating the poor

**sordid** - filthy, foul

**tacit** - understood, implicit

**terrestrial** - of or relating to the earth

**venerate** - to honor or revere

**workhouses** - a publicly-funded place where people who were unable to support themselves could live and work. The 1834 Poor Law Amendment controversially aimed to make English workhouses as harsh and degrading as possible so that only the truly destitute would choose to live there. Dickens and others criticized the squalor and sometimes abusive treatment that resulted from this law

Scrooge is visited by the Ghost of Christmas Present in a colorized version of John Leech’s illustration from the first edition of *A Christmas Carol*, 1843.

Further Reading


*A Little Book About A Christmas Carol* by Linda Rosewood Hooper; University of California Santa Cruz, 1993.


ON THE WEB:

THE DICKENS PROJECT: dickens.ucsc.edu

THE VICTORIAN WEB: www.victorianweb.org
Holiday Traditions: Before and After Dickens

When we think of Christmas, there are many iconic images that will come to mind for those who have grown up in the Anglo-American culture. Santa Claus, presents, wreaths, poinsettias, and Christmas trees are just a few of the dominant symbols each holiday season. Most of this Christmas paraphernalia originated only within the last 150 years, however. In fact, the celebration of Christmas in England and the United States was revolutionized by Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*. His “little Christmas book” had a huge impact on popular culture, and solidified many of our traditions for the holiday.

When Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, English Christmas traditions had been in decline for centuries. Stores and factories remained open on December 25th, and many people were forced to work on Christmas Day.

Christmas was first promoted as a major holiday in Western Europe by Pope Gregory in 601 CE. The pope urged Christian missionaries to adapt the many local, pagan traditions of a winter festival around the solstice into a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Throughout Europe, many cultures had a tradition of celebrating the slow return of the sun after the winter solstice. Pope Gregory and his successors hoped that by integrating local customs into the church rituals, the English and others would be more likely to accept the Christian religion.

The very date of Christmas, December 25, seems to have originated from one of these pagan traditions. Mithraism was an early Iranian religion focused around the sun god Mithras. In Mithraic tradition, Mithras was born to a virgin in a cave on an early Iranian religion focused around the sun god Mithras. Mithraism originated from one of these pagan traditions. Mithraism had a large following in the Roman army, he reasoned that it would be an easy transition for them to worship Jesus’ virgin birth on the same day on which they were already used to celebrating such an event.

For several centuries after Pope Gregory’s proclamation, almost everyone in England lived an isolated, rural lifestyle which made it easy to preserve and pass on traditional celebrations. These usually involved the entire village community centered around the local lord’s manor house. Feasting, traditional games and music, and the burning of a Yule log over the twelve-day Christmas period made up the bulk of the medieval English Christmas. By Shakespeare’s time, wealthy people would sponsor elaborate Christmas revels that included sumptuous feasts, live music and theatrical entertainment.

All of this changed when the Puritans took control of the English government in 1642. The Puritans were concerned that many aspects of traditional Christmas festivities originated from pagan celebrations, right down to the date. The Puritan dictator Oliver Cromwell, who also notoriously banned theatre in England, said that celebrating Christmas in the traditional way was “an extreme

Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig in a colorized version of John Leech’s illustration from the first edition of A Christmas Carol, 1843.

forgetfulness of Christ.” In 1652, Parliament actually banned Christmas, declaring: “No observance shall be had of the five and twentieth day of December, commonly called Christmas Day; nor any solemnity used or exercised in churches upon that day in respect thereof.” Because so many early settlers in America were Puritans, this distaste for Christmas celebrations made itself felt in this country as well.

By the time the Puritans were driven from power, both England and the United States were entering the throes of vast economic and social changes. Brought about by industrialization and the radical change from rural to urban societies, both countries saw many ethnic and religious communities dispersed, and saw that fewer and fewer people practiced (or even remembered) the old traditions.

The revival of Christmas in England, and then America, was due in part to the popularity of Queen Victoria and her husband Prince Albert, role models for many people in the 19th century. Albert, who was German, brought many Germanic Christmas traditions, including the placement of a decorated Christmas tree in the home, to Buckingham Palace, and English and American families were eager to imitate the royal family.

A *Christmas Carol* may have done the most to inspire the holiday’s renewed popularity, however. Dickens’ little book depicted humble family celebrations that almost anyone could aspire to, even in an urban setting. Although Christmas was a normal workday for most people at the time, by portraying this as a miserly practice, Dickens literally shamed untold thousands of business owners into making it a day off.

Dickens also did a great deal to separate Christmas from its religious context, so that families from all Christian denominations (and even some from other religious traditions) felt free to celebrate the holiday in the traditional way once again. While *A Christmas Carol* briefly alludes to Jesus Christ, Dickens was never comfortable with organized religion, and he took pains to ensure that his story was not explicitly religious. Rather, he used it to promote what he held to be universal values of kindness and charity. *A Christmas Carol* helped create a new secular tradition that merged feasting and fun with social charity, and which continues to inspire both Christians and non-Christians to this day.
About The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

The acclaimed Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of the leading Shakespeare theatres in the nation. Serving approximately 100,000 adults and young people annually, it is New Jersey’s only professional theatre company dedicated to Shakespeare’s canon and other classic masterworks. With its distinguished productions and education programs, the company strives to illuminate the universal and lasting relevance of the classics for contemporary audiences. The longest-running Shakespeare theatre on the East Coast and the seventh largest in the nation, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey marks its 49th season in 2011.

The company’s 2011 Main Stage season features six productions presented in its 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre and runs June through December. In the summer, an Outdoor Stage production is also presented at the Greek Theatre, an open-air amphitheatre nestled in a hillside on the campus of the College of Saint Elizabeth in nearby Morristown.

In addition to being a celebrated producer of classic plays and operating Shakespeare LIVE! (one of the largest educational Shakespeare touring programs in the New York/New Jersey region), The Shakespeare Theatre is also deeply committed to nurturing new talent for the American stage. By providing an outstanding training ground for students of the theatre, and cultivating audiences for the future by providing extensive outreach opportunities for students across New Jersey and beyond, The Shakespeare Theatre is a leader in arts education. For additional information, visit our web site at www.ShakespeareNJ.org.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of 25 professional theatres in the state of New Jersey. The company’s dedication to the classics and commitment to excellence sets critical standards for the field. Nationwide, the Theatre has emerged as one of the most exciting “new” theatres under the leadership of Artistic Director, Bonnie J. Monte since 1990. It is one of only a handful of Shakespeare Theatres on the east coast, and in recent years has drawn larger and larger audiences and unprecedented critical acclaim. The opening of the intimate, 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in 1998, provided the Theatre with a state-of-the-art venue with excellent sightlines, and increased access for patrons and artists with disabilities.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is a member of ArtPride, The Shakespeare Theatre Association, Theatre Communications Group, and is a founding member of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey’s programs are made possible, in part, by funding from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as funds from the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional major support is received from The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the F.M. Kirby Foundation, The Edward T. Cone Foundation, The Shubert Foundation, and Drew University, as well as contributions from numerous corporations, foundations, government agencies and individuals.

The Shakespeare Theatre is an independent, professional theatre company located on the Drew University campus.