A Christmas Carol

DECEMBER 7 - 23

written by Charles Dickens
adapted by Barbara Field
directed by Sean Daniels

PLAY GUIDE

Fifth Third Bank
ABOUT THE
A CHRISTMAS CAROL PLAY GUIDE

This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts and to encourage essential questions that lead to enduring understandings of the play’s meaning and relevance. Inside you will find:

• Contextual and historical information including a list of characters, plot synopsis and information about the playwright.

• Evocative, thought provoking articles on topics surrounding the play, which are meant to incite conversation and analysis.

• Bridgework activities connecting themes and ideas from the play to your curriculum.

• Oral discussion and writing prompts encouraging your students to draw connections between the play and their own lives. These prompts can easily be adapted to fit most writing objectives.

We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way that best fits the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide, or you may download it from our website: ActorsTheatre.org/education_guides.htm. We hope this material, combined with our pre-show workshop, will give you the tools to make your time at Actors Theatre a valuable learning experience.

A Christmas Carol student matinees and study guides address specific EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES:

• Students will identify or describe the use of elements of drama in dramatic works.

• Students will identify or explain how drama/theatre fulfills a variety of purposes.

• Students will identify a variety of creative dramatics.

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**SYNOPSIS**

 Ebenezer Scrooge is a mean, old businessman who thinks that Christmas is a frivolous holiday, just an excuse for people not to work. Despite his vast fortune, Scrooge hoards money, refusing to give to charity because he believes that the poor are just lazy and deserve no such help. He doesn’t even pay his hardworking and loyal clerk, Bob Cratchit, a fair wage that would allow him to get his sick son, Tiny Tim, proper medical attention! Despite Scrooge’s heartlessness, his nephew and only living relative, Fred, still wants to spend Christmas with his uncle, but the miser rejects him. On Christmas Eve, he is visited by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, who is now paying dearly for how he lived his life—the same way Scrooge is living his life now! Marley tells him that three ghosts—the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come—will visit him that night. These phantoms will show old Scrooge how he became so hard-hearted, what he’s lost out on because of it, and what will happen if he keeps going down this path.

- Tara Duffy

**CAST OF CHARACTERS**

**EBENEZER SCROOGE** — A wealthy but miserly businessman who has no sympathy for the poor nor any Christmas cheer. He is transformed when visited by three ghosts on Christmas Eve.

**TINY TIM**—Bob Cratchit’s youngest son, who is very sick but remains merry and grateful during the holiday.

**BOB CRATCHIT**— Scrooge’s overworked and underpaid clerk who is struggling to support his wife and six children but remains loyal to his cruel boss.

**JACOB MARLEY**— Scrooge’s business partner who died seven years ago. His ghost walks the earth in chains as a punishment for the cruel and greedy way he lived.

**GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST**— This spirit shows Scrooge the events in his past that have made him into the man he is today.

**GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PRESENT**— This spirit shows Scrooge what he has ignored or cut himself off from in the present.

**GHOST OF CHRISTMAS YET TO COME**— This spirit shows Scrooge the likely consequences of his choices.

**FAN**— Scrooge’s kind-hearted sister who cared about her brother but died young.

**FRED**— Scrooge’s nephew and only living relative. Like his mother, Fan, he is a cheerful person, and wants to spend Christmas with his uncle.

**FEZZIWIG**— The owner of the warehouse business where Scrooge was an apprentice as a young man, this jolly man threw lively Christmas parties years ago and was a kind employer to Scrooge.

**BELLE**— Young Scrooge’s fiancée who is alienated by his obsession with money.

**SETTING**

**PLACE** London, from the slums to middle-class homes to wealthy mansions.

**TIME** The Victorian era.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: CHARLES DICKENS

Read more about how the British novelist derived much of the inspiration for the setting and characters of A Christmas Carol from his own life.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was no stranger to the kind of poverty that is graphically depicted in A Christmas Carol. Born in Portsmouth—a city on England’s south coast—in 1812, Dickens enjoyed a comfortable childhood typical of an English middle-class family of the era. John Dickens, his father, worked as a clerk for the Navy Pay Office, allowing Charles to go to private school for a few years. He spent much of his free time reading novels like Robinson Crusoe and Tom Jones, which taught him to carefully observe the people and events surrounding him. So when his father, unable to pay all the family’s bills, ended up in debtor’s prison, the seriousness of the event was not lost on the twelve year old Charles. His father wouldn’t be released from the jail until the debt was paid, so as the oldest son, Charles began working ten-hour days at a shoe polish factory, pasting labels to containers. Dickens described the factory as “a crazy, tumble-down old house… literally overrun with rats.” The stories he later wrote sought to enlighten readers about the conditions in which the poor had to live and work.

By a stroke of luck, John Dickens received an inheritance and paid his debt to get out of prison. Charles returned to school but it wasn’t long before the family’s shaky finances forced him back to work, this time as a junior clerk at a law firm. In his spare time he learned a type of shorthand used by journalists, and left the law offices in order to become a freelance reporter. His time as a journalist further exposed Dickens to the disparity between the classes, an issue that would frequently appear in his novels.

Dickens eventually became the editor of a literary magazine and published many of his novels in monthly installments. He would later compile all the sections and publish a book. This format—known as serialization—is like modern television storytelling, where every week the audience finds out a little more about the larger story.

Dickens was one of the most popular writers of the 19th century, both in his native England and abroad. His other famous works include Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, A Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectations. He visited America twice—the first time was in 1842, just before the publication of A Christmas Carol. In the travelogue he published, American Notes for General Circulation, he criticized the sanitary conditions in American cities, proving that urban blight seen in his novels was not just confined to London.

During his second visit to America in November 1867 Dickens became ill, possibly suffering from a stroke. He returned home to give farewell readings from his most beloved stories for the next two years, as his health continued to worsen. Dickens died in 1870 at age 58.

-Tara Duffy
Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* during the Industrial Revolution, a period marked by the rapid development of industry that took place in England in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

New machines, power sources, and methods of production led to the creation of urban industrial centers and a whole new way of life. New machines such as the spinning jenny and power loom produced cloth in a fraction of the time it took to make it by hand. The Industrial Revolution also led to a shift in the methods of production. Instead of highly skilled craftsmen working on a product from start to finish, factories started dividing the work up into smaller tasks that would be completed by many people on an assembly line. In the past, one person might have taken weeks to make a shirt—spinning the cotton into thread, weaving it on a loom, cutting it, and then sewing it by hand. Think about how much work that would be! With the help of assembly lines and new machines, however, a large team of unskilled laborers could make dozens or even hundreds of shirts in one day. This lowered the cost of everyday items and meant that people could use their time for other things, like education or leisure.

These new developments encouraged urbanization. By 1850, more than half of the population lived in cities and worked in industry. Britain was becoming the richest country in the world, though with this great wealth came a widening in the gap between the social classes. The rich became richer, while the working classes were left behind. Children as young as five were commonly put to work to help support their families, often in very dangerous factory jobs. At the time that Dickens was writing *A Christmas Carol*, though new laws were just beginning to protect workers, conditions were still very inhumane.

*A Christmas Carol* also draws on some of Dickens’ own life experiences. We see the same desperate circumstances that Dickens saw in the shoe polish factory when Scrooge visits the slums with the ghost of Christmas Future, or when he sees the Cratchit family with the Ghost of Christmas Present. Like Charles Dickens, the young Ebenezer Scrooge also found himself suddenly forced to work to survive. The constant fear of poverty drives Scrooge to earn more and more money, even if it means losing love, friendship, and compassion along the way. Dickens saw generosity as a way to combat the isolation and cruelty that was a part of life in industrial London, and it is learning this lesson that helps Scrooge to have a merry Christmas after all.

- Julie McCormick
HOW CAROL CHANGED CHRISTMAS

People started celebrating Christmas as we know it right around the time that Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*.

1,600 years ago, in the time of the Roman Empire, many civilizations celebrated *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* (or, the “Birth of the Unconquered Sun”) at the end of December, by feasting and listening to music. In the Middle Ages, people kept this tradition by having large dinners, caroling, and watching nativity plays. Puritans turned Christmas into a solemn religious occasion when they ruled Britain in the 17th Century, but it became the festive, cheery holiday it once was by the time Dickens had been born.

The Industrial Revolution also had a big impact on Christmas. It led to the emergence of an urban middle class and made family life more important. Now that people had more money and leisure time, they could spend it on gifts for family and friends. The meaning of Christmas was starting to change, to become not only a time of fun, but also a time of love and generosity towards others. *A Christmas Carol* gives us a perfect example of this new holiday spirit through Scrooge's transformation from miserly humbug to generous friend. People immediately loved the *Carol* story and started retelling it and acting it out, passing on this new idea of Christmas from one generation to the next. So in many ways, Charles Dickens is responsible for Christmas as we know it!

-Julie McCormick

OTHER CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS THAT STARTED AT THIS TIME:

- Prince Albert, Queen Victoria’s husband, brought the Christmas tree tradition to England with him from Germany.

- Though people had been singing carols for hundreds of years, some of our most favorite, like “Good King Wenceslas,” were written at this time.
Music plays a vital role in holiday traditions and Actors Theatre’s production of Fifth Third Bank’s *A Christmas Carol*. David Keeton, the Music Director, answered our questions about what exactly his job entails, its challenges, and the significance of music in the play.

What does a Music Director do?

Keeton is in charge of all aspects of the music in the production which includes about 15 different songs. “First, I work with the director to find where in the production music should be,” Keeton explains. Once the musical moments are identified, then it’s time to decide how that music will sound. While many of the songs you will hear in the play are Christmas classics, Keeton has made all the arrangements for the instruments in the show. Some scenes need underscoring, soft background music underneath the dialogue, while other scenes have the ensemble singing, sometimes even *a cappella* (without any instrumental accompaniment)! In fact, all the musicians and singers in the show are members of the acting ensemble. However, Keeton stresses that this show is not like a musical because “we are not singing the story itself,” but rather “we are stopping the action and singing a song, so it’s more presentational.”

Overcoming Obstacles and Staying In Sync

Keeton says his biggest challenge in the show is “training all of the singers to sing together without a conductor while they are performing onstage.” Unlike a choir, the ensemble onstage is not grouped by the vocal parts of soprano, alto, tenor or baritone. Rather, they have to stay together while still acting in character. Also, singing together can be hard because the sound bounces off of surfaces. If you are 50 feet away from somebody there is a slight delay between when that person starts singing and when you hear it. Also, if there is a set piece between you and that person, you aren’t actually hearing the first sound—you are hearing an echo off the audience. So Keeton acts as a choir director at rehearsals weeks before the show to make sure everyone is strong in their parts.

Keeton also works with the sound designer to help overcome these obstacles. Keeton assigns microphones to a few singers and then “pipes that into monitors that are within the set.” That way, ensemble members can “cue off of those voices,” even if the person is far away. “It helps everyone stay in sync without using a conductor,” Keeton says.

The Music’s Role

Keeton admits he has seen plenty of productions of *A Christmas Carol* at other theatres that do not have one song in them. “Still, I think [music] adds something special,” he says. He emphasizes that even though these carols don’t tell the story, they still serve a very important purpose by enhancing the emotional journey. Keeton believes the most important part of his job is to help tell the story by matching the music to the emotional moment. Music plays a big role not only in *A Christmas Carol* but in the holiday season in general. These carols have been sung for generations, so they bring up happy memories. Keeton says his own introduction to music was through his mother singing in the church choir around Christmas. More than happy nostalgia, music can help express the emotions of joy and hope that many people experience during this time of year, ideas that are central to Scrooge’s transformation in *A Christmas Carol*.

- Tara Duffy
Scrooge’s journey relates more to our modern world than you might think.

Though *A Christmas Carol* was written in 1843, the story has nevertheless resonated with every generation since its publication. Everyone knows this story—it’s something we share, that unites us, that we can talk about. What will *A Christmas Carol* mean to us in 2010?

We actually have a surprising amount in common with Dickens’ original 1840s audience: we are in the midst of the worst recession in 50 years where unemployment rates, pay cuts, personal debt and homelessness are higher than ever. Like the 19th century London in *A Christmas Carol*, 21st century America faces stark class stratifications—the rich are getting even richer, and the poor are getting much, much poorer. In 2008, 13.2% of the American population lived below the poverty line. The poverty line, or poverty threshold, refers to the minimum income that according to the Federal government a household can receive and maintain an adequate standard of living; the poverty threshold for a family of four in 2008 was $22,025. Women and children suffer the most—the average woman only earns 77% of what the average man earns doing the same job, and an alarming number of children face poverty every day. One-fifth or 20% of children in the U.S. live below the poverty line.

We see Ebenezer Scrooge every day on the news, in the faces of corrupt corporate officials and dishonest politicians. Yet despite the increasingly desperate situation in contemporary America, class continues to be a taboo subject. Talking about *A Christmas Carol* becomes a way to start these conversations; it’s a tool with which to evaluate our own experiences and understand the world around us. What would we do in the places of these characters? Would we hoard our money like Scrooge or Marley? Would we be cheerful in the face of despair like Tiny Tim, or the Cratchits? Dickens’ story makes us ask ourselves what our values are and what is most important to us.

Every generation needs to redefine the meaning of Christmas for itself. In recent years, the holiday has become a major economic event. Putting up extravagant decorations and exchanging costly gifts has become the norm for the season, but with the current recession, these things become more difficult to do. Now that giving expensive gifts or taking vacations somewhere warm are less available options, families have been coming up with more creative ways to celebrate the holidays like giving thoughtful, homemade presents, volunteering or making donations to charity.

- Julie McCormick
WHY DICKENS’ CHARACTER HAS THRIVED THROUGH THE YEARS

Even though Ebenezer Scrooge was first introduced all the way back in 1843, the old guy is still as popular as ever more than 160 years later. His surname has entered our daily vocabulary to describe anyone who is cynical about the holiday season, who hesitates to part with even a penny, or who is just a generally unpleasant person. Scrooge is even an entry in the Merriam-Webster dictionary!

Scrooge’s notoriety explains his many appearances and reinventions throughout the decades, in the numerous *A Christmas Carol* adaptations. Many famous actors have tackled the role of Scrooge as the traditional Victorian miser, like Michael Caine in *A Muppet Christmas Carol*, Jim Carrey in the recent computer-animated movie, Kelsey Grammer in a musical version, and Patrick Stewart in a TV movie of the classic tale. Others have re-imagined Scrooge in modern-day contexts, like Bill Murray playing a greedy television executive in *Scrooged* or Vanessa Williams as the demanding singer, Ebony Scrooge, in *A Diva’s Christmas Carol*.

While Dickens may have lived in and written about London circa the Industrial Revolution, the sentiment of putting business and wealth before people’s well-being still prevails today. It seems like Scrooge, with his insatiable appetite for far more money than he needs and complete disregard about the people his business will hurt, would fit in perfectly on Wall Street or the executive board of BP. Dickens wrote not only to entertain readers but to advocate for social reform by showing the hardships of the poor, issues that resonate today as much as they did more than a century and a half ago.

But don’t worry—it’s not all depressing! We usually think of Scrooge at the beginning of the story, the hostile old man, and not what he’s like after his visit from his deceased business partner and the three ghosts. The reason Scrooge has survived and thrived through the ages is not just because he is a grumpy geezer, but he is a grumpy geezer that changes. With the character of Scrooge, Dickens contends that all humans, deep, deep down, are caring creatures. All they need is a major wake-up call to realize it!

- Tara Duffy
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**PRE-SHOW**

1. Have you ever reached out to someone who was intentionally cutting themselves off from a group of friends or family members? Did you feel like that person’s behavior was justified? What were some ways you tried to get them to rejoin the group?

2. Seeing A Christmas Carol has become a holiday tradition for many people. What are some holiday traditions in your family? Do you think any of those traditions are seen or are related to events and actions in A Christmas Carol?

3. Can you pinpoint any defining moments in your past that have made you who you are today? What transformed in you in those moments? Do those moments seem different in retrospect? Can you gain any insight by reflecting on these moments?

**POST-SHOW**

1. A Christmas Carol is such a beloved holiday classic that many people know the plot before seeing the production at Actors Theatre of Louisville. What did you remember of the story before you went? Did seeing the play remind you of aspects of the story that you had forgotten or never really thought about very much?

2. Dickens wrote about the troubles in Victorian era England. If the author were alive today, what social issues do you think he would write about?

**BRIDGECWORK**

**AT YOUR DESK**

1. Create a character collage based on Scrooge. Take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle, labeling the left side “Before” and the right side “After.” Then go through magazines and newspapers and cut out images that you think either show Scrooge’s personality before his ghostly visits, or his attitude after the transformative experience. Paste the pictures on the appropriate side and share with the class why you think each image belongs on the side where you put it.

2. In A Christmas Carol, Scrooge eventually learns the importance of charity. Think about a cause that is important to you and write a short, persuasive letter to Scrooge, urging him to donate some money and/or time. Be sure to include some statistics to help convey your message, and describe how his donation would improve the situation. Share your letter with the class.

**ON YOUR FEET**

1. Tell the story of A Christmas Carol using only tableaus. A tableau is a frozen stage picture that actors create with the positioning and gestures in order to tell a story without movement or sound. In small groups, pick five of the most important moments in the play and create a tableau for each moment. Then present them to the class.

2. The ghosts “rewind” back to Scrooge’s past to show him how he became such a mean guy, and then they “fast-forward” to show him where it’s all headed—just like a TV remote. In this improv game, have one person hold an object representing the remote while a small group improvises a scene based on the life of a character with one defining feature (clueless, arrogant, energetic, etc.). The person with the remote can shout out “Rewind” or “Fast Forward” and the improvisers have to create a new scene earlier or later in the life of the character.
CROSS-CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

LITERATURE
The appearance of a ghost is a popular device in novels and plays to propel the action forward. Research other instances in literature when ghosts move the plot ahead. Create a timeline that features other stories with ghosts. Do all these ghosts look alike? Do they appear in a similar manner? Do all the phantasms have a positive impact on the main character?

HISTORY
_A Christmas Carol_ helped to define Christmas as we know it today. Research what events and changes were going on in Victorian England that contributed to this new sense of the holiday. Create a poster with the images and information you find.

MUSIC
The production of _A Christmas Carol_ at Actors Theatre features many holiday songs that emphasize the emotional moments in the play. But the lyrics don’t necessarily tell the plot, so it’s more like a movie soundtrack than a musical. Think about a period in your life when you went through a big change. Write down five emotions you experienced during this time. Then think of five songs you like that express these emotions. Be sure to consider things like the tempo or the genre of music. Create a poster where you briefly explain your experience, the five emotions you felt during that journey, and the accompanying songs.

PERSONAL
In _A Christmas Carol_, Scrooge’s encounters with the three spirits change his opinions about how he should treat fellow human beings. Write about someone who has changed your mind about how you should treat other people. What did this person do or say to change your point of view? How did your thinking and/or behavior change as a result of this experience?

LITERARY
Although Charles Dickens wrote fictional novels, he based many of the circumstances on the struggles of the poor that he witnessed in London. Write a short story or poem in which the characters are affected by a social issue that is important to you.

TRANSACTIVE
Write a review of the performance of _A Christmas Carol_ that you saw at Actors Theatre of Louisville. Describe what it was like to watch the play, but be sure to write more than just the plot of the play. Think about how the play tells the story. Make the experience come alive for the reader by using lots of sensory details when writing about several of the play’s elements, like the costumes, lights, props, music, how the actors said their lines, and how the director realized the vision of the play. Let the audience decide for themselves if the play is worth seeing.
IF YOU LIKED A CHRISTMAS CAROL...

BOOKS

*A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens
*Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens
*Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens

FILM

*It's A Wonderful Life* (1946) dir. Frank Capra
*The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992) dir. Brian Henson

PLAYS

*A Christmas Story* by Philip Grecian, based on the motion picture
*A Christmas Story* ©1983 Turner Entertainment Co., distributed by Warner Bros., written by Jean Shepherd, Leigh Brown and Bob Clark and on the book *In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash* by Jean Shepherd—at *Actors Theatre* this season!

WORKS CITED


