Synopsis

On Christmas Eve, the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley, who died seven years earlier. Marley warns Scrooge that he will be visited by three spirits who will try to help him change his ways so he will be saved from the endless wanderings Marley now endures.

The Ghost of Christmas Past recalls scenes from Scrooge’s earlier life in order to illuminate how he pushed his loved ones away and deliberately ignored those who needed him. The Ghost of Christmas Present reveals what Scrooge is missing in the warm family life of his nephew Fred and his loyal clerk Bob Cratchit (whose family includes the crippled Tiny Tim). Christmas Present also reveals Ignorance and Want, two miserable creatures representing the children hurt by both Scrooge and society’s neglect. Finally, the Ghost of Christmas Future sheds light on the ominous shape of things to come if Scrooge does not change his ways. Marley haunts Scrooge throughout his ghostly visits, encouraging his friend to listen to the Spirits’ messages.

As Scrooge slowly realizes his wrong-doings and promises to live differently in future, Marley is freed from his own bondage. Scrooge is delighted to find himself back in his chambers and unharmed and goes about transforming his life as he has promised.

Study Guide compiled by Talya Kingston. Selected materials have also been reproduced with permission from the Hartford Stage Study Guide.

Who can be insensible to the outpouring of good feeling, and the honest interchange of affectionate attachment, which abounds at this season of the year?

— Charles Dickens
Charles John Huffman Dickens was born on February 7, 1812 near Portsmouth, England, the second of John and Elizabeth Dickens’ eight children. His father was employed as a clerk for the Naval Pay Office, a position that required the family to move frequently. Despite his job security, John Dickens found it difficult to support his growing family of ten, which was habitually on the edge of financial ruin as John Dickens’ careless spending left them constantly in the clutches of creditors, a crime in Victorian England.

Charles Dickens was an intelligent and naturally inquisitive boy who discovered a love for books during his years at the Chatham school. His delight in education was cut short at the age of ten when his father was transferred to London and Charles was sent to work at the Warren Blacking Company, putting labels on bottles of shoe polish for six shillings a week to help support his family. Two days after Charles’ twelfth birthday, his father’s financial floundering caught up with him, and John Dickens and the remaining family members were thrown into debtor’s prison. Abandoned, neglected and ill-treated by factory overseers, Charles Dickens worked twelve to sixteen hour days, then trekked three miles to his squalid lodgings in Camden Town, the same address that he gives the Cratchit family in A Christmas Carol.

This dark experience cast a shadow over the clever, sensitive boy and became a defining experience in his life. He would later write that he wondered “how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age”. Through his life and work, Charles Dickens would be a constant champion of children, the poor and a well-regulated legal system.

An unexpected inheritance allowed John Dickens to pay off his debt, and Charles was reunited with his family and continued his education at the Wellington House Academy until his father could no longer afford the tuition. Charles then began a series of odd jobs, including work as an office boy in a law firm and a stint as a country reporter for The Morning Chronicle in 1835, where he covered Parliamentary debates.

Dickens’ first fictional works, the satirical Sketches by Boz (1833-35), were presented in serial form and were followed by The Pickwick Papers (1836-37) which made the twenty-four year old Charles Dickens a famous author. With his novel Oliver Twist (1839), Dickens sealed his popularity and announced some of the continuing themes of his work: an indictment of a society that mistreated the poor, a condemnation of the wrongs inflicted on children by adults, and a denunciation of corruption and decay in politics and government.

In 1858, Charles Dickens separated from Catherine, his wife of twenty years and the mother of his ten children. At this personally trying time, Dickens’ restless and depressed spirit found release in the theater. Over a period of twelve years, he toured the British Isles and America (including Boston, Providence and Hartford) with his one-man grand tour — a series of dramatic readings of his most outstanding characters and poignant dramatic prose pieces. He received rave reviews on both sides of the Atlantic.

Dickens would write a total of fifteen major novels and countless short stories and articles before his death on June 9, 1870. He wished to be buried, without fanfare, in a small cemetery in Rochester, but the Nation would not allow it. When he was laid to rest in Poet’s Corner, Westminster Abbey, flowers from thousands of mourners overflowed the open grave.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What themes or characters from A Christmas Carol do you think may be inspired by events or people in Charles Dickens’ own life?
In 1843, in a little more than a month, Dickens penned one of the most beloved and enduring holiday stories of all time, inventing the genre of the Christmas book in the process. He also managed to deliver his little book to the publishers in time to be ready for last-minute Christmas shoppers. Published on gilt-edged green paper and bound in red cotton covers with a wreath of holly and ivy stamped in gold on the front, *A Christmas Carol*, with illustrations by John Leech, was intended to be both a treasured gift and a family heirloom that would be read again and again for years to come. And indeed it has been.

From its first day in the bookshops, *A Christmas Carol* was a wondrous success. All 6,000 copies of its first edition sold out within a month of its release, and the first foreign-language edition appeared in France early in 1844. (It has since been translated into nearly every language). In fact, it was such an immediate success that within weeks of its release *A Christmas Carol* had been adapted for the stage, and by February no fewer than eight different productions were running in London theaters. Audiences of Dickens’s day loved the story. As we still do today. We love to hear it read aloud, to see it acted out, to marvel at its magic, and to celebrate its exuberance and abundance.

The success of *A Christmas Carol* was greater than even an optimist like Dickens could have dreamed. Not only was his story an overwhelming triumph, but writing it had put its author in the mood to celebrate Christmas with giddy abandon. “When [A Christmas Carol] was done,” Dickens wrote to a friend with characteristic hyperbole, “I broke out like a Madman… Such dinings, such dancing, such conjurings, such blind-man's buffings, such theatre-goings, such kissings-out of old years and kissings-in of new ones never took place in these parts before.” From the start he had hoped to write a story that would cut across the social spectrum and renew the power and possibilities of generosity, imagination, and the goodwill of the community to reclaim the spirit of Christmas for itself.

What marks Dickens’s story as original is a nostalgic yearning for a childhood blessed by the warmth of a country hearth and home, for the sights and sounds and smells and tastes of a traditional rural Christmas, replete with all the customs and practices and games and songs and spirit associated with it.

Kissing under the mistletoe was a nearly forgotten custom in Dickens’s day. It was he who is said to have revived a practice that dates back to the ancient Celts and their Druid holy men. But Dickens was not interested simply in rescuing quaint customs and old-style victuals for the dusty archives of forgotten folklore. He understood that Christmas is a special time of remembering. It is a portal to a half-remembered past, both personal and communal, and all its special games and songs and foods, particular to each household and each community, bind families together and link them in memory to their own past.

To deny the pleasures of this world to oneself or others, Dickens insisted, was to deny the beneficence of creation. To value industrialization above human industry and treat one’s fellows as cogs in the commercial machine was to impoverish the spirit and the body of the community that were the lifeblood of progress. To pursue profit at all costs was to deny one’s basic humanity and jeopardized not only one’s place in society, but the survival of society...
itself. In place of such short-sighted views, Dickens proposed his “Carol philosophy”: “cheerful views, sharp anatomization of humbug, jolly good temper… and a vein of glowing, hearty, generous, mirthful, beaming reference in everything to Home, and Fireside.” In place of business, mechanization, and utilitarianism, Dickens celebrated imagination, family and fellow feeling. In place of self-denial and renunciation, Dickens celebrated abundance, hospitality, and the pleasures of life.

Each age has retold Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* to address its own needs, and the amiable story has proven accommodatingly malleable. Dickens’s contemporaries rediscovered the traditional Christmas in the heart of the modern urban city. Later Victorians, terrified by the new science of Darwin and Spencer, read Dickens’s tale as a retelling of the original Christmas story with Scrooge as a misguided wise man searching for the poor man’s child who would restore a sense of order and proportion to the world.

During the wars and depressions of the 20th century, *A Christmas Carol* offered comfort and a sense of the familiar values of hearth and home. The first film version of *A Christmas Carol* appeared in 1908, and half a dozen silent film versions of *A Christmas Carol* were made in the first decades of the century. In the 1940s, CBS radio asked President Roosevelt to read the story for national broadcast (and, in 1957, Eleanor Roosevelt recorded her own reading). Arguably the best screen adaptation is the 1951 British film starring Alastair Sim; Richard Williams’s animated short film based on the original John Leech drawings won an Academy Award in 1972. By the end of the 20th century, holiday versions of *A Christmas Carol* (musical and nonmusical) graced stages across the country, while the motifs of Dickens’s story echoed in nearly every form of popular entertainment. And now, at the start of a new century, this perennial tale offers a new sense of hope in the power of imagination and community to reclaim its lost members, even those as intractable as Ebenezer Scrooge.

Through all these tellings and retellings, *A Christmas Carol* has taken its place as a modern myth in the consciousness of the industrial age. Scrooge, Marley, Bob, Cratchit, and Tiny Tim have grown larger than Dickens’s story, taking on a life of their own that is greater than the sum of all the versions and adaptations, all the parodies and piracies, all the Christmas cards and advertisements that have kept this tale and its unforgettable characters alive or tried to appropriate them for some other use. And even as the story of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* has grown larger than itself, the spirit of generosity and magic at its heart has continued to shine through.

“A have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me.” – Charles Dickens, December 1843

*DISCUSSION QUESTION*

Do you remember when you first heard the story of *A Christmas Carol*? How about when you first heard the character of Scrooge referred to? This Christmas season keep a count of all the times that you see *A Christmas Carol*, its characters and/or themes referred to on Christmas cards, on the television, in movies, in songs, in shop window displays etc. How has this story affected our perception of this season?
Question: What attracted you to Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*?

Answer: I was attracted to *A Christmas Carol* because of the wide commercial draw of an event that is so recognizable and accessible, paired with my own aesthetic, which is not naturalistic in form. I’m constantly interested in material that is interesting to a broad audience of people of different age, gender and ethnicity and presenting them with work that is truly theatrical.

Q: What most interested you about the story of *A Christmas Carol*?

A: First and foremost, I was attracted to the character of Marley. In the original novel, he is the first thing we hear about, then he disappears from the story, and that left me wanting to know more about Marley. So my way in to the story was the question of what happened to Marley.

Q: There are so many existing stage adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*. Why did you feel the need to write a new one for this production?

A: In the five or six stage adaptations that I read, none of them focused on Marley specifically and I couldn’t get that out of my head. But also, all of the adaptations that I read were written and created for specific theaters, and I was uncertain about their suitability for our own Rand Theater. What kind of performance opportunities could I give the students when most of these adaptations that had about forty characters with mostly small roles? I thought it would be exciting to create an adaptation that was truly for our space as well as for the students that we serve.

Q: How did you come up with the idea of incorporating puppetry into your production?

A: Well, it actually stemmed from Marley again, because I had this visual picture of him having these chains that were literally attached to his body and that were controlled by other members of the cast. That image was a very early image that I had and it had a very strong puppet element. Then I was thinking about what was really theatrical on stage and what makes these spirits not human and unique, and that led me to the thought of how exciting it would be to use puppetry. Also, this whole production was written with the [UMass] theater department in mind, and having Miguel [Romero – Professor of Scenic Design and master puppeteer] here it was difficult to get off the subject of puppetry in my mind, and how exciting it would be for me to integrate his puppetry work into this production.

Q: What other images were you drawn to when creating *A Christmas Carol*?

A: The work of Julia Margaret Cameron, a Victorian photographer, was my first external visual resource. She was a resource less in regard to production design than in regard to text creation. While writing the characters I would keep coming back and looking at things through the eyes of these very theatrical representations of people at the time Dickens was writing. My focus was very much on the person rather than the icon, I was trying to figure out how I get my brain inside the person, rather than...
just saying what does Scrooge represent? So I would keep looking at a face depicted in this particular Julia Margaret Cameron photo that in my mind I cast as Scrooge, and try and see things through his eyes.

Q: Were you consciously trying to move away from the archetypes traditionally depicted in *A Christmas Carol*?

A: Yes, I was less concerned with the archetype of Scrooge than I was of the man – who he is as a person. Because there is something undeniable about Scrooge that we can all connect to and have connected to, and see in ourselves. I wanted to figure out who the man was that was supporting that archetype in an attempt to make him as approachable as possible. I wanted to actually care about the man’s journey, not necessarily the epic nature of *A Christmas Carol* as a whole, and us just leaving the theater with a good feeling. I wanted to connect to a man – two men in this case – and then those men’s journeys expanding to include us all. But first I wanted to care about Scrooge and I wanted to care about Marley as people, not just as symbols.

Q: How is the story of Scrooge’s redemption affected by seeing him as a man rather than an archetype?

A: The two iconic images for me in the production as well as the text were firstly when Marley pushes Scrooge out of his chamber window and pretty much pushes him into the lap of the Ghost of Christmas Past, and then the image at the end of the Ghost of Christmas Future, when the body, (which is in essence himself), drags Scrooge into his own grave. What’s nice about these two images is that, when Marley pushes Scrooge out of the window Scrooge is holding onto the balcony but cannot save himself, cannot pull himself back into his home, he falls. Whereas in that final image he is in that same situation, where he’s holding on for dear life, and again there is no-one there to help him, but he is able to pull himself back up and save himself.

I liked that in this story Scrooge has to do the work for himself. The spirit world and his community and everyone in this story does an enormous amount to get him to this point where he has to make a choice. And so I was very interested in imagery that showed him having to choose, him having to make effort. I didn’t want Scrooge to just sit around and just watch all this stuff happen around him and have some sort of forced epiphany. I wanted to make sure that he physically had to do something to choose to live.

**POST SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

How did the fact that seven chorus members played all the roles except Scrooge and Marley affect the telling of the story?

What part does light play in the production? Which parts of the production were particularly well lit and warm and which were more cold and dimly lit? Were there any characters who had a particular relationship to light?

What, in your opinion, is the moral that audience members should take away from *A Christmas Carol*?
Spirits play a large part in the world of *A Christmas Carol*. The depiction of spirits that you will see on our production are in part a result of Maryann Lombardi’s writing and direction, but also a collaboration between the costume designer, Sarah Nelson; the puppet designer, Miguel Romero; and the actors. Here are the descriptions of the three spirits as they appear in Charles Dickens’s original novel. Imagine that you were the costume/puppet designer, and draw your designs for each of these characters. Remember to also think about their function in the story of Scrooge’s redemption.

**The Spirit of Christmas Past**

“It was a strange figure – like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child’s proportions. It’s hair, which hung about its neck and down its back, was white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin. The arms were very long and muscular; the hands the same, as if its hold were of uncommon strength. Its legs and feet, most delicately formed, were, like those upper members, bare. It wore a tunic of purest white; and round its waist was bound a lustrous belt, the sheen of which was beautiful. It held a branch of fresh green holly in its hand, and, in singular contradiction with the wintry emblem, had its dress trimmed with summer flowers. But the strangest thing about it was that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light, by which all this was visible; and which was doubtless the occasion of its using, in its duller moments, a great extinguisher for a cap, which it now held under its arm.”

**The Ghost of Christmas Present**

“There sat a jolly Giant, glorious to see; who bore a glowing torch, in shape not unlike Plenty’s horn, and held it high up… It was clothed in one simple deep green robe, or mantle, bordered with white fur. This garment hung so loosely on the figure that its capacious breast was bare, as if disdaining to be warded or concealed by any artifice. Its feet, observable beneath the ample folds of the garment, were also bare; and on its head it wore no other covering than a holly wreath, set here and there with shining icicles. Its dark brown curls were long and free; free as its genial face, its sparkling eye, its open hand, its cheery voice, it unconstrained demeanour, and its joyful air. Girded around its middle was an ancient scabbard; but no sword was in it; and the ancient sheath was eaten up with rust.”

**The Ghost of Christmas Future**

“The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently approached… It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing visible, save one outstretched hand. But for this it would be difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded. He felt that it was tall and stately when it came beside him, and that its mysterious presence filled him with a solemn dread. He knew no more, for the Spirit neither spoke nor moved.”

*Marley by Sarah Nelson*
Double Casting:
Charles Dickens was notorious for writing novels that featured hundreds of characters. In the UMass production of *A Christmas Carol*, Maryann Lombardi determined that apart from the actors playing Scrooge and Marley all the characters should come out of a chorus of seven actors. See if you can allocate the following roles to the seven chorus members, so that no-one has to play two characters in one scene. Try not to cross genders by, for example, asking a male chorus member to play Belle, and allow time for big costume changes:

- Mr. Cratchit, Gentleman one, Fanny, Young Scrooge, Mrs. Fezziwig, Ghost of Christmas Present, Charlotte, Tiny Tim, Martha Cratchit, Want, Ghost of Christmas Future, Servant, Undertaker’s Man, Wife, Story, film and stage:
  Read Charles Dickens’s original *A Christmas Carol* short novel and in addition to attending the University of Massachusetts production, choose one of the many *A Christmas Carol* movies to watch. This will give you an ideal opportunity to compare story telling in books, on film and for the stage. How do the different art forms bring out different aspects of the story of *A Christmas Carol*?

A Social Commentary:
Research the social conditions of the children and poor in Victorian London, (particularly look for the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834). How do you think Charles Dickens used *A Christmas Carol* to draw attention to the plight of the young and impoverished? Do you think the story still works as a social commentary for today’s audiences?

Recommended for Further Reading

Books:
- *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge* by Paul Davis (Yale University Press, 1990)

Web-sites:
- [www.online-literature.com/dickens/christmascarol](http://www.online-literature.com/dickens/christmascarol)
- [www.charlesdickenspage.com](http://www.charlesdickenspage.com)
- [www.victorianweb.org](http://www.victorianweb.org)