

Behind the curtain: A glimpse into the making of 'A Christmas Carol'

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Every year, the Clarence Brown Theatre brings a little bit of Charles Dickens to Knoxville's Christmas celebration.

The tradition of "A Christmas Carol" continues this year.

The show will run from Nov. 27 through Dec. 22 as part of the Schaad Mainstage Series. Even though performances will run for just a few weeks, the preparation has taken months of collaboration between directors, designers, actors and many other contributors.

"It is really a team effort," said Micah-Shane Brewer, an MFA student playing Bob Cratchit in the production. "It is all about community. I think part of the magic of theater is working with a group of people that you may not have worked with before or may not have ever come in contact with throughout your life, and you come together to work to bring something bigger than yourself alive."

Director and Dialect

The first step in the collaboration process begins when the director first meets with the designers to get a basic format for the production.

"I feel like my job is to present an idea, a kind of framework for the play that doesn't tell the designers how to solve the problem of the play, but gives them enough information for them to direct their design in a particular way," Casey Sams, director of this year's rendition of "A Christmas Carol," said.

After the designers have begun their work, Sams then begins to incorporate the actors.

"With the actors, it is really about helping them understand what the parameters of the world are that they are going to be living in," Sams said, "... so that they know what they can do and what they can't do, so that they are free to make the choices that will support the story that we are trying to tell."

Sams also works in collaboration with the music director, Rachel Schlafer-Parton, and the young performer director, Jess Milewicz, who directs any performer under the age of 18.

Milewicz said where Sams is responsible for making sure the entire production comes together, she is able to assist by providing extra direction for the children.

"My work is there to supplement and support Casey's work," Milewicz said. "... I kind of come in and sort of fill in the holes of specific character work or moments, specific moments."

Milewicz also assists Carol Mayo Jenkins, the dialect coach, in working with the actors on their ability to fill the space with their voice.

As dialect coach, Jenkins sets up 20-30 minute sessions during the rehearsal process with each actor to go over the main dialects found in the play: Standard RP, Cockney and a mixture of the two.

"There are two things that are important," Jenkins said. "One, that it is clearly English and not American, and two, that the delineations of class are clearly made ... the play has a lot to do with who has money and who doesn't."

Set/Props

After the initial design meeting, Sams first visits the scenic designer, because he creates the physical world that holds all of the other pieces.

For "A Christmas Carol," this means creating a set that can handle the many scene changes in the play while still maintaining the play's themes.

"I study the script, I think of something," said Chris Pickart, scenic designer, "and when I have some sort of unique idea, then I will start putting together the visual pieces that that idea is leading me towards."

Pickart said when designing a set, his goal is not to be noticed but to help the play be successful.

"Usually, I feel best if there is not a lot of hoopla about the set, but about the show, because that is really what we are trying to do," Pickart said. "We are all trying to contribute and make everybody have the best experience for this play."

Once the set has been designed, it is up to the prop shop to fill the set with everything from carpets and curtains to picture frames and furniture.

"What I start from is starting to read the script and talking with the director and the designers ... so everything is period specific," Christy Fogarty, prop shop supervisor and prop master, said. "Then I take that information and figure out what we have in stock."

If they do not have something in stock, the prop shop can choose to purchase a new prop, redesign an existing one through painting or reupholstering or build, sew or craft one.

For "A Christmas Carol" alone, there are more than 230 props. While many of these are left over from last year, many more are brand new and unique to this production.

Costumes

Once the physical world of the play is established, the next step is to focus on the appearances of the actors, Sams said.

"They are really directly addressing the look and shape and feel of each of the characters that live within that world," Sams said.

After the costume designer, Bill Black, has created the designs, it is up to the costume shop to bring his ideas to life.

"As soon as we have casting for the show, we start to look at what we have, what we used last year, what we can use again, and what we might need to rebuild and reimagine or switch around," said Melissa Caldwell-Weddig, costume design coordinator.

The Clarence Brown Theatre has a large supply of stock costumes, and many of the pieces in "A Christmas Carol" have been used for years, while others are new and specific to this production.

For costumes that just need tailoring, alterations can take as little as a few hours, but for new costumes that are being built, the process can take two or three weeks.

Lighting/Sound/Projections

When costume designs are finished and work has begun, it is time to establish the mood and atmosphere of the production.

"Then, I usually go to the lighting designer because they are the one who is creating the shading and sort of creating the overall mood and quality," Sams said, "defining where and how the space moves and where my eye goes and what the tone of it is."

Lighting designer Catherine Girardi said once she gets the set design, she begins working on the lighting plot.

"The lighting plot is basically a ground plan of where we are putting all the lights, what they are doing, how they are going to be plugged in, what kind of color they are going to get, all that sort of thing," Girardi said.

Throughout the process, Girardi said she collaborates with the other designers to help achieve the necessary effects.

"With sound and projections, during the technical rehearsal process, we work very closely together," Girardi said, "because a lot of the times you want the lighting and the sound and the projections to sort of meld together."

The projections and sound are the last piece in the design elements of the production.

"Oftentimes, the sound designer is who I end up coming to last in the process, but that often ends up being the most immediate relationship," Sams said. "Oftentimes the sound and the lights are what stitch the whole production together."

For "A Christmas Carol," the sound designer and the projections designer are the same person.

"I am in charge of the aural environment of the show," sound and projections designer Joe Payne said.

Payne said part of his job as sound designer is coordinating the sound of the actors, musicians, environment, sound effects and transition, as well as amplifying the live musicians and the ghosts' voices.

"There are hundreds and hundreds of sound effects," Pickart said, "all kinds of magical little whooshes and bells chiming."

Stage Management/Crew

Once all of the designs have been finalized, it is up to the stage management team to make sure the production actually runs.

Deya Freidman, stage manager for "A Christmas Carol," said her job entails "communicating and coordinating of the personnel, the schedules, the spaces and the materials necessary for every rehearsal and every performance."

Part of this includes making sure the rehearsal or performance area has all of the necessary requirements, sending out the daily call to all cast and crew, making sure the rehearsals operate on schedule and keeping up with all documentation needed.

During rehearsals, Friedman keeps track of progress and documentation of what has or still needs to be covered. Once the performances begin, the stage manager will take up a position in the booth for the next part of the job.

"I will call all the cues of every performance," Friedman said. "Nothing will happen unless I say go."

To do this, Friedman will be communicating with a backstage crew of 26 people who are in charge of all executing all the technical elements of the production.

"They are what brings the magic to it, what makes it come together technically, so when you see Jacob Marley appear out of the trap floor, it took four crew members to make that appearance happen," Friedman said. "They may not realize as individuals what effect they are having, when all they are doing is pushing a crash bar that opens a door or pushing a button on a fogger or dropping dry ice into a fogger. Without them, the machine does not function."

Cast

While all the designs are important, it is the cast who ultimately makes use of them. They utilize the director's instruction, live on the set, handle the props, wear the costumes, see because of the lights and are affected by the sound.

Auditions for this year's show were held Aug. 24 while results were posted on Aug. 27. The cast picked up their scripts on Oct. 15. Many of the cast members for "A Christmas Carol" will be playing multiple roles, called tracks, which makes learning the lines quickly that much more important.

"Once I got the script, I just started reading and reading and reading them over and over," Juliet Sutphin, a senior in theater and elementary education, said. Sutphin is playing Fan, Sophia and a narrator in the production.

For new cast members like Sutphin, being in the cast is exciting. For others, it's like coming back to an old friend.

"It's my third time in a row doing it," said David Kortemeier, who will be playing Ebenezer Scrooge. "I'm so grateful to have that honor. It's a rare gift for actors professionally to be able to return to a production year after year."

Before rehearsals began, actors researched information to help their role. Brewer said the important things are "knowing about the time period, knowing about the relationships with the other characters and just going back to the original work."

Sutphin, who has not seen her brother for over a year, said she can relate to Fan's desire to bring her brother, Scrooge, home for Christmas.

"Fan is kind of my wishful thinking of what it would be like if I could go get my brother right now and bring him home for Christmas," Sutphin said.

On Oct. 22, the cast began their six-night-a-week rehearsal schedule of working with the director on lines, musical numbers, blocking (an actor's placement on the stage) and run-throughs.

"What I enjoy about Casey (Sams) is that she is open to possibilities," Brewer said. "She is open to ... thinking about it in a fresh way versus sticking to what was done last year."

For undergraduate performers, the amount of rehearsal time required can make keeping up with classes difficult. Sutphin said it is necessary to use every possible break to catch up on work.

"My planner and I have a great relationship," Sutphin said. "If that weren't the case, then I could very easily see my grades dropping, just because you have no time."

However, Sutphin said having the opportunity to be in the production has boosted her confidence as an actress.

"I've learned a lot that I probably wouldn't have learned had I not done this show," Sutphin said.

Audience

According to Brewer, when the rehearsals are over and it is time to put the production before the audience, all of the hard work is finally realized.

"It is important to always remember that we are doing this for the audience," Brewer said. "They are the final piece of the puzzle."

This year's show promises to excite and please those in attendance.

"You will leave singing Christmas carols," Sutphin said, "and you will feel like you are in a snow globe of Christmas wonder."

Tickets are available now in the Clarence Brown Theatre box office and can be purchased online as well.