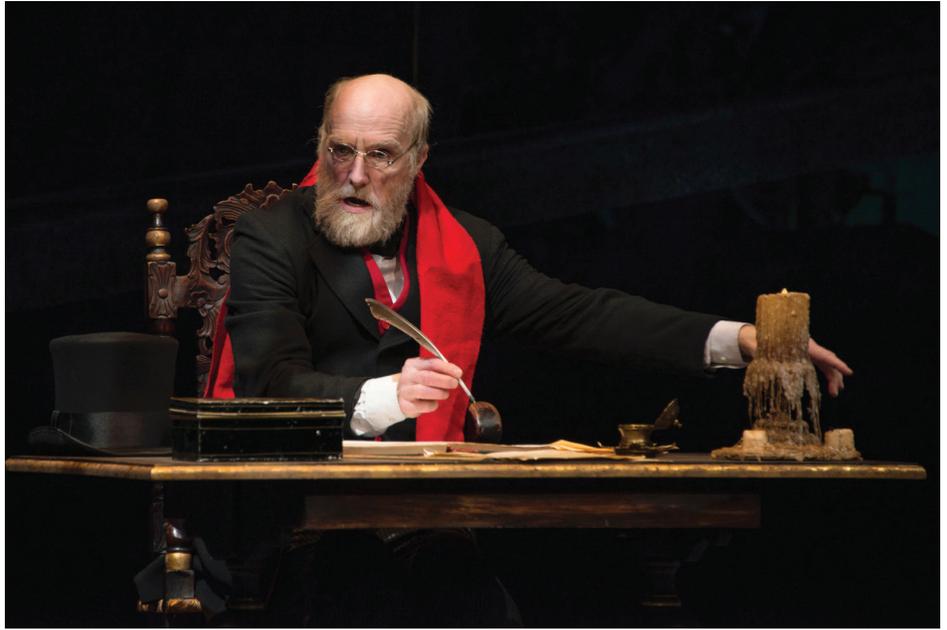


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Review: Warm Traditions Continue in CBT's 'A Christmas Carol'

ALAN SHERROD
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Traditions are indeed powerful and compelling things in human civilization—and seem to exist for both good and ill, often happily defying logic. Our holiday traditions are perfect examples of both the very peculiar and the very satisfying, embracing happy memories like food and drink, music and sounds, colors and textures, as well as accepted, but often misunderstood symbols and images. When these sensations are woven into participatory or community events, their attraction becomes virtually irresistible. Yet, they are all part of the experience of tradition that builds over years through repetition and the desire to paint the past with an idyllic brush.



Jed Diamond as Ebenezer Scrooge; photo by Brynn Yeager

Even discussing holiday traditions has become a tradition. Arguments break out over cranberry sauce, real versus artificial Christmas trees, the original winter solstice celebrations versus adopted religious ones, and, importantly, which cinematic version of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is best—or worst. And whether any dramatization can ever rival Dickens' novella.

Those eager to get in on that argument, and simultaneously embrace a Knoxville tradition, should strongly consider the Clarence Brown Theatre's production of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Although CBT has been offering up the work annually for several decades, the current incarnation, which opened for this holiday season on Friday evening, was new to CBT last season, featuring an adaptation by Edward Morgan and Joseph Manreddy and a new physical production.

That production, directed by Kathleen F. Conlin, is equal parts theatrical spectacle, accomplished storytelling, and solidly entertaining portrayals, tied together with ensemble-performed traditional carols. With time being all important to the narrative of Ebenezer Scrooge's present and past, Kevin Depinet's gloriously inventive set—dark, detailed, and sweeping—is dominated by a huge Victorian-style clock, its hands moving forward and backward to illustrate particular points in the timeline. Moving in and out through that timeline are the cast and ensemble actors in numbers choreographed by Casey Sams, and scene changes that burst with energy and clamor.

It seems that the production itself is creating its own traditions as well. In addition to director Conlin's creative staff, much of the cast has returned from last season. Heading that cast is faculty actor Jed Diamond as Ebenezer Scrooge, a role that I can only assume is both wildly desired by actors of a high caliber, and wildly feared. Not only was Diamond able to embrace the physical and dramatic Scrooge, he also understood where on the character arc from curmudgeon to caring human being that the adaptors have placed the moments of realization.



CBT's 'A Christmas Carol' (Set: Kevin Depinet)

The remainder of the cast covered double and triple roles. The ever-versatile David Brian Alley [read my 2015 review of Alley's one-character Santaland Diaries in the Knoxville Mercury] took on a perfectly straightforward Jacob Marley, then later returned as the picturesque Old Joe, the "dealer in estate goods." Peter Kevoian made good-natured joyousness a thing in his two roles, that of Fezziwig and the spirit of Christmas Present. Carlène Pochette was a sweetly demonstrative Spirit of Christmas Past.

The role of Scrooge's nephew, Fred, seems to have a more important presence in this adaptation, something that Brian Gligor embraced with fervor. The versatile Charlotte Munson infused the role of Fred's wife, Catherine, with the empathy and grace it demands.

The large cast, many faces familiar to CBT audiences, also included Collin Andrews as an excellent Bob Cratchit with Emily Kicklighter giving Mrs. Cratchit serious depth of character. Connor Hess was the young adult Ebenezer Scrooge who must reveal the beginning transformation of the character's greed and lovelessness. Lauren Pennline took on Belle, Scrooge's lost love. Laura Beth Wells was marvelous in the two roles of Scrooge's housekeeper and Mrs. Fezziwig.

Every production of *A Christmas Carol* walks a fine line of keeping the audience visually entertained while maintaining focus on the characters and the narrative. That's where the CBT production finds much success. Depinet's set and Bill Black's costumes received depth from John Horner's lighting treatment and from atmospheric projections by Joe Payne. On the aural side was notable work by musical director Melony Dodson and Sound Designer Mike Ponder.

CBT's *A Christmas Carol* is definitely one tradition that's worth trying on for size.

A Christmas Carol continues at Clarence Brown Theatre through December 17.