

# ‘A Christmas Carol’: Beloved holiday classic returns to the Clarence Brown

# THE DAILY TIMES

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Nov 22, 2017

This is not Jed Diamond’s first Scrooge rodeo.

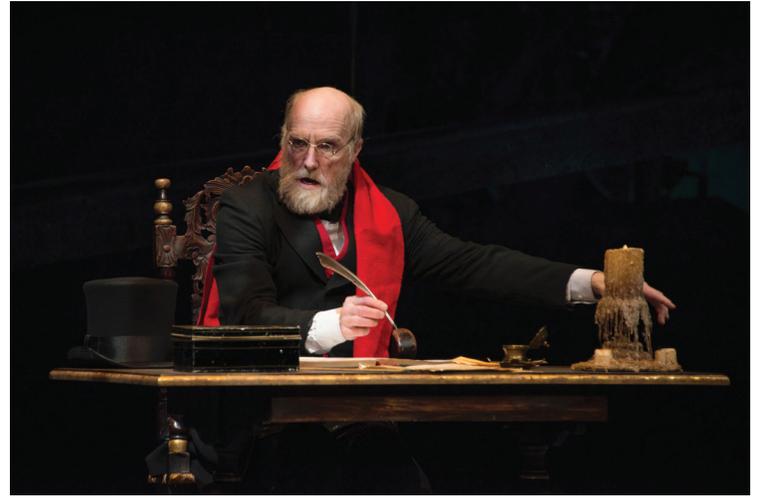
The head of the University of Tennessee’s Master of Fine Arts Acting Program, Diamond returns to the role this holiday season for the annual Clarence Brown Theatre production of “A Christmas Carol,” based on the story by Charles Dickens. He’s no stranger to acting in roles that age him — the very first role he auditioned for, in fact, was that of a 95-year-old man in a wheelchair — but this season’s production makes the sixth time he’s played the iconic character, whose transformation via the ghosts of Christmases past, present and future is a heartwarming and familiar tale.

“You get to take a spiritual journey in this production,” Diamond told *The Daily Times* recently. “You go to the dark place where Scrooge is when it starts — a lonely, hardened, bitter, lost old man who’s stuck in his ways and has built an incredibly tough carapace around his heart, mostly because his heart has been wounded many times. You go through the journey of his unconscious erupting into the room in the form of a ghost. You can see it as an extended nightmare that he has, and in the nightmare, he’s made to look at his past and take responsibility for what he has done and forgive what was done to him. And then he gets a chance to see the world as a place of possibility again, and he has to choose to stand in that.

“And then, when he goes into the future thinking, ‘I’m going to change,’ the ghost says, ‘If you don’t change, you’re going to die.’ It’s the lance that opens his heart completely, and I get moved every time. It’s just this very powerful story, because if you do not have the darkness, you do not have the joy in the end.”

First published in 1843, “A Christmas Carol,” took the world by storm and helped to elevate Christmas into the most revered holiday of the year. Although Diamond doesn’t categorize it as one of the greatest pieces of Western literature, it’s certainly a work that’s had an impact that reverberates to this day. Even Dickens, he pointed out, understood the magic he managed to capture in the the story.

“People don’t realize that Dickens wrote this story because he



Jed Diamond will act the part of Ebenezer Scrooge in this season’s production of “A Christmas Carol” at the Clarence Brown Theatre in Knoxville, which opens on Friday. Courtesy of Brynn Yeager

went to the north of England to see the child laborers in the coal mines, and he wanted to write a socio-political tract about what Britain was doing to its children in its mines and factories,” Diamond said. “That connected profoundly to him, because when he was 12, his father — on whom Bob Cratchit is modeled — went to debtors prison, and as a 12-year-old kid, Dickens had to go work 12 hours a day in a boot-blacking factory, and it struck him to his soul.

“He came home with the idea to write a socio-political tract; he was a huge walker, and he would walk through London up to 20 miles a day. On one of his walks on a winter night, the whole story came to him, and he told a friend, ‘I’ve got something in hand that will be more powerful than any social tract I could possibly write.’ It’s a fascinating tale, how quickly it caught hold and how deeply it affected everything we associate with Christmas. Dickens spent his late life doing this story as a one-man show, and he made more money doing that than he did from his writings. He performed in the U.S. and Britain to crowds of 5,000 and 10,000, and he did it obsessively until right before he died. It was a mission he had.”

Although the crowds won’t be as large, portraying Scrooge is still a mission for Diamond — and a sometimes grueling one at that. There are 30 performances starting Friday and running through Dec. 17, and one day when the cast and crew do a morning show for school groups and an evening performance as well, he’s often at the theater from 8 or 9 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.

And yet no matter how often he does the role, whatever sense of curmudgeonly dread he feels when he returns to it is dispelled by the power of the story, he said.

“When I step into it, it rejuvenates me,” he said. “There’s a power in the kind of depth of what Dickens did that is restorative in and of itself. What’s interesting for me, and it’s a deep part of what I try to teach and believe, is the core value I hold for the actor’s art: generosity of spirit. I find that the more generous I am, the more I get back from it. It’s deeply rewarding, and it’s a privilege to do this role — to go through something that’s not just Christian, although it mirrors the Christian myth of crisis, death and resurrection, but that is a very profound story.

“There’s a connectedness to the audience that you live for in theater; a communal feeling that happens in this story — and in its offshoot, ‘It’s a Wonderful Life.’ The deep silences, the people moved to tears and then laughter and then joy — it works on people. ‘A Christmas Carol’ gets deeply encrusted with sentimentality, and it’s a powerful thing. Even graduate students who come in thinking, ‘That old tale? That old thing?’ They get in it, and they have an experience with joy, and they connect with the audience in a way that they seldom ever have, and they end up loving doing it.”