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In Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, it is Christmas Eve and time is of the essence for Ebenezer Scrooge. The familiar tale of Scrooge, from the 1843 Dickens novella that inspired a plethora of film and television interpretations, is the story of a miser/moneylender hardened by greed and lack of love who undergoes a dramatic transformation into one who sees the welfare of mankind as his true business.

On the off chance that one should miss that concept of time in the current Clarence Brown Theatre production of *A Christmas Carol*, a giant clock looms over the stage, symbols glowing and ominous hands taking us forward and backward in Scrooge’s life. While time keeps the beat for this production's storytelling, time has also established that storytelling as a tradition. Although CBT is now in its third holiday season with this particular *A Christmas Carol* (an adaptation by Edward Morgan and Joseph Manreddy), it has been offering versions of the story as a seasonal favorite for several decades. In this case, I strongly suggest succumbing to tradition and allowing this production's charming storytelling, captivating theatricality, and heartwarming music to work its seasonal magic.

This production, which first appeared on the CBT stage in 2016, is directed by Kathleen F. Conlin with a set by Kevin Depinet. Making up the ensemble cast are the resident company’s MFA actors, UT Theatre faculty members, undergrad students, and a smattering of regional professionals, many of whom return to the same roles year after year, the very definition of tradition.

Tradition, though, can have a downside when our image memories have been sketched and shaped by years of cinematic, or other theatrical interpretations. With a mere mention of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, thoughts fly to Victorian London and snow-covered streets, lumps of coal, warm gaslight glowing in the blue-gray twilight, and festive gatherings decked with greenery and bursting with food, drink, and song. Too, we often have images of the characters in our minds, painted there with the brushes of films or illustrations we have seen.

Changing the face of tradition this year in the character of Scrooge is Terry Weber, a familiar face for CBT audiences over the years, this time taking on one of the most difficult character arcs in literature. Weber's Scrooge is not the cackling, crusty old miser that Hollywood has given us, but rather a somewhat more agile, younger man made old by an emotional deprivation—an amalgam of hate and mistrust that lies simmering just under the surface. This Scrooge seems a rational enough human being, despite being dull and mean-spirited, leading us to wonder whether he really has a great emotional journey ahead of him and where the all-important dramatic threshold will be.
Happily, the transforming Scrooge does take an emotional journey as he is buffeted by the visiting spirits. Conlin throws Weber about the stage, pushing and pulling him with the uncomfortable recollections and sending him scurrying to make way for the materializing ensembles of the past, present, and future. As Christmas Day dawns, Weber's Scrooge, exhausted from his transformative dreams, embraces the responsibilities he has somehow accepted, unable to change the past, but eager to correct it.

The role of family as both the cause of Scrooge's emotional deprivation and the goal of his eventual reformation is a prominent feature in this adaptation. Returning to the role of Fred, Scrooge's nephew, is Brian Gligor, painting a solidly warm and forgiving character. Aleah Vassell as Fred's wife, Catherine, had that beautiful, all-important moment of forgiveness, where grace overcomes the pain of insult.

UT faculty actor Jed Diamond, who has performed the role of Scrooge in the two previous years, turned this year to the role of Jacob Marley. Diamond was anything but 'dead as doornail' as the ghost of Marley, bringing an energy to despair, sorrow, and regret that was deeply affecting, maybe even a little bit scary.

Once again, Peter Kevoian brought an entertaining depth and humor to his two roles, that of Fezziwig and the Ghost of Christmas Present. New to the production was Brittany Marie Pirozzoli, as a really engaging and illustrative Ghost of Christmas Past.

In the side story of the Cratchit family, Collin Andrews returned this year as an excellent Bob Cratchit, the epitome of forgiveness in the face of abuse. As a mark of depth as an actress, Emily Helton captured a veritable gamut of emotions as Mrs. Cratchit.

This production also contains smaller roles that are true gems of succinct characterization, all intriguingly accomplished by both new and returning actors: Laura Beth Wells as housekeeper Mrs. Dilber, and Mrs. Fezziwig; Brenda Orellana as Scrooge's lost love, Belle, and as the romantically challenged partygoer, Miss Lucy; and Brady Moldrup as Young Scrooge and Mr. Topper.

Arrangements of Christmas carols, integral to the rhythm and character of the work, were the theatrical glue. Performed with tight integration between well-performed onstage choral ensembles and recorded orchestration, the ensemble music came this year courtesy of musical director, Terry Silver-Alford and sound designer Mike Ponder. Also bringing texture to the ensemble scenes was the choreography by Casey Sams, often a whirl of bright colors against muted Victorian ones thanks to the costumes by Bill Black. I’ll leave counting the vast number of costume changes made by the actors to another year.

As mentioned, the clock is a focal point of Depinet's spectacularly inventive set, giving an exclamation point to the sweeping walkway that offers an infinite variety of positions for the ensemble. Also adding energy and depth to the stage picture are the projections by Joe Payne and lighting by John Horner.

Whether you gravitate to seasonal traditions, or eschew them, CBT's A Christmas Carol is a definitely a theatrical one that is still worth considering. A Christmas Carol continues at Clarence Brown Theatre through December 22.