

Review: Clarence Brown Theatre Returns To Dickens In A New 'A Christmas Carol'

Although Charles Dickens' novella *A Christmas Carol* was published to great popularity in London in 1843, it wasn't until December of 1867 that the author managed to visit fans of the best-seller in the United States. In a *New York Times* account of his arrival, a writer described Dickens' sold-out public reading several nights later at the 14th Street Steinway Hall, relating that Dickens "...makes free use of gesticulation...and reads with incredible vigor..." It's worth noting that Dickens depended on such public appearances and readings since the lack of international copyright laws prevented him from enjoying any financial return from American editions of the novella.

The popularity of *A Christmas Carol* has scarcely waned a bit in the ensuing 178 years, in fact, having become the basis for a mind-boggling number of diverse adaptations for the stage, screen, and television. The Clarence Brown Theatre has for years employed several different theatrical adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* as its holiday season production and continues this year with a new one. Adapted and directed by UT Theatre's Kate Buckley, this new slant on the work returns its narrative spine to the original Dickens text, avoiding most of the usual dramatizations and interpretations that have crept into popular film and stage adaptations. This production also bears another similarity with the 1867 Dickens reading in New York—its entire run of performances through December 18 sold out quickly.

With the pandemic-induced goal of shortening the evening and eliminating an intermission mingle, Buckley's one-act adaptation is somewhat condensed and simplified compared to more familiar versions. Some characters and situations have



2021 CBT Production of 'A Christmas Carol' - David Brian Alley and Davion T. Brown
Photo: Chloe Baker

been minimized, such as Tiny Tim, Jacob Marley, a four-poster bed, and the concept of time. However, the gist of the Dickens characters has been retained, relying completely on an ensemble approach to give life to the story, just as one might do in a staged reading. In this case, only 10 actors carry all the parts and groups, including the all-important "narration" that is the voice of Dickens himself. This voice, some of which rarely makes it into adapted scripts, is certainly one of the charming and dramatically effective aspects of this version.

Compared to other theatrical adaptations, audiences will note a more intimate, warm, and immersive scenic presence from designer Katherine Stepanek, relying on complex projections (Joe Payne) and lighting (Travis Gaboda) to back up an acting space that is flanked with racks of props and costumes. While previous CBT productions have had an interwoven musical presence of adapted carols and a choral ensemble, musical director Terry D. Alford has carefully chosen music and sound here for flavor and segue. Costume designer Lauren T. Roark has created a beautifully muted array of 19th-Century-ish costume changes for the ensemble members as they flow in and out of their characters.



Ensemble from the 2021 CBT 'A Christmas Carol' - Photo: Chloe Baker

While the majority of film adaptations picture the character of Ebenezer Scrooge as aged, bitterly crusty, and life-weary, actor David Brian Alley and director Buckley have firmly planted their Scrooge in middle-age. Nevertheless, the requirement that Scrooge undergo a transformation is inescapable and Alley manages one that may induce a tear or two in the final scene.

Almost imperceptibly, the ensemble members took on characters, then returned to take a bench in the background. Davion T. Brown had a busy night, taking on Bob Cratchit and Fezziwig. As the “ghosts” here are labeled simply Past, Present, and Future, Brady Moldrup made an admirable nephew Fred, as well as the “Past.” Shinnerrie Jackson was a jovial Mrs. Fezziwig and an equally jovial “Present.” Rachel Darden was the black-clad and silent “Future”, while having plenty to say as Miss Ortle. Zachariah Lidstone was the younger Ebenezer, while Christine Sage was his forsaken love, Belle. Amberlin McCormack was Scrooge’s sister, Fan. Michael Najman took the roles of the Schoolmaster and Scrooge’s pal, Dick Wilkins. Gwyneth Doppelt filled out the ensemble.

Clearly, some mental and theatrical adjustments may be required of audience members that have flocked to and enjoyed the spectacle of previous CBT productions of A Christmas Carol—productions that have featured large-scale staging and an extensive Christmas music score. Nevertheless, the important essence of Dickens is here in this production, projecting the work’s social concepts of wealth being a vehicle to lessen the scourge of poverty. And, the theatrical Dickens no doubt would have approved of this marvelous ensemble of actors.