

Review: Traditions Get Even Better with CBT's 'A Christmas Carol'

It seems that it is impossible to start a review of Clarence Brown Theatre's *A Christmas Carol* without including the word "tradition." CBT has been offering up various theatrical productions based on the Charles Dickens classic novella for decades, with many regular theatre-goers—and many occasional ones—making attendance a part of their own Holiday tradition. Of course, tradition depends on memory. But, can a fine tradition get even better?

The current returning version—an adaptation by Edward Morgan and Joseph Hanreddy with music by John Tanner—premiered in 2016 and returned for three more years before being set aside due to the pandemic closure in 2020. A visually simplified version, adapted and directed by Professor Emeritus Kate Buckley that emphasized the actual Dickens text carried by an ensemble cast, was mounted in 2021 and 2022 with a nod to pandemic precautions.



Shinnerrie Jackson and Jed Diamond; by Ella Marston

Admittedly, though, audiences had missed a number of things from the 2016 Morgan/Hanreddy version including designer Kevin Depinet's gloriously inventive and eye-catching set that is a feast of stagecraft intrigues. Depinet's upwardly sweeping ramp beautifully defined the space, while drawing the eye to a huge Victorian-detailed clock, the clever movement of its hands underlining particular points in Scrooge's night of redemption. If tales be told, audiences were delighted for the return of the substantial music score of interpolated carols and energetic Christmas-time music. It is this music and corresponding sounds that not only provided the glue between scenes, but carried quite a bit of the period flavor and background energy.

Of course, staging *A Christmas Carol* offers the opportunity to create new traditions as well as follow old ones. This season's production was directed by CBT's Production Stage Manager Patrick Lanczki with an energetic pacing begun in the original direction by Kathleen F. Conlin. With music and movement being so important in this version, major contributions came from music director Terry D. Alford and choreographer Casey Sams, both UT Theatre faculty.

Speaking of traditions, it goes without saying that Jed Diamond as Ebenezer Scrooge is most definitely a tradition that is a joy to behold. One of only a small handful of local actors able to credibly become Scrooge, Diamond brought new energy and spark to his portrayal, delightfully building some fresh dramatic angles onto a Scrooge he has taken many times.

Returning to the role of Jacob Marley was another tradition, David Brian Alley. Generally happy to be totally unrecognizable, the familiar face and voice to CBT audiences enters from the stage depths amid hellish green smoke, bound in the chains that he “forged in life.” Later in a flashback, we get to see him doing just that as a Marley even more wicked than Scrooge himself. And, in a separate role of Old Joe, the “estate goods dealer,” we see the kind of perfect off-the-wall interpretations Alley is known for.

Making a relatively minor role significant, even memorable, can be a joy to watch.

That is the case with Laura Beth Wells in the role of Scrooge’s housekeeper, Mrs.

Dilber. Wells also carried away the role of Mrs. Fizziwig in another creation of a richly dimensional character using endless amounts of voice inflection and body language.



Ensemble in A Christmas Carol – Photo by Ella Marston

It is said that Dickens was intrigued by the idea of “ghosts” or spirits, and thus incorporated them into his novella. Theatre directors, as well as creators of film/television interpretations of *A Christmas Carol*, have taken particular creative liberties with Dickens descriptions—and this CBT production is no different in adapting the look and characterization to fit the possibilities of casting and costumed appearance. Given an ethereal audio voice, Develyn Jayan was Christmas Past and Shinnerrie Jackson was Christmas Present. The monstrous Christmas Future was Denzel DeJournette.

The role of Scrooge’s nephew, Fred, has a more important presence in this adaptation, with Joseph Coram giving it a satisfying strength and likability. Sarah Wahrmond took the role of Fred’s wife, Catherine.

The cast is a large one, with most taking multiple roles and appearing as part of the choral ensemble. Many are MFA candidates who will become familiar faces in the months to come. Sammy Pontello was an excellent Bob Cratchit with Lake Cooney as Mrs. Cratchit. Jackson Neilson was the young adult Ebenezer Scrooge, with his lost love interest, Belle, delivered nicely by Grace Belt.

Of course, a huge part of this production are its visual and sonic delights: sumptuous costumes, clever stagecraft, atmospheric sound, colorful projections and lighting effects, and the original set itself. Bill Black’s original costumes have been added to and adjusted by Liz Aaron. John Horner’s lighting and Joe Payne’s projections and sound effects are now essential components of the successful production.

Yes, traditions can get even better—and this production of *A Christmas Carol* proves that point. This particular tradition continues at the Clarence Brown Theatre through December 21, but beware. Shows often sell out.