

S·T·U·D·Y  G·U·I·D·E

*Charles Dickens Writes*

---

*A*  
**CHRISTMAS  
CAROL**



**BAG &  
BAGGAGE**



## STUDY GUIDE CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

### THE LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS

### CHARLES' COMEDIC TECHNIQUE *OR* HOW TO WRITE LIKE THE DICKENS

### VICTORIAN CURRENCY

### CHARACTER NAME MEANINGS

### OUR PRODUCTION

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & WRITING ACTIVITIES

### SOURCES & FURTHER READING

---

## BAG&BAGGAGE STAFF

### Scott Palmer

Artistic Director

### Beth Lewis

Managing Director

### Cassie Greer

Associate Artistic Director

### Arianne Jacques

Patron Services Manager

### Jim Ricks-White

Technical Director, Resident  
Lighting Designer, The Vault  
Theater and Facilities Manager

### Alec Lugo

Marketing & Development Assistant

### Megan Wilkerson

Resident Scenic Designer

### Melissa Heller

Resident Costume Designer



Artistic Director Scott Palmer

# CHARLES DICKENS WRITES A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Based on the story by Charles Dickens

Adapted and Directed by Scott Palmer

November 30 - December 23, 2017

The Vault Theater

## CAST

Scrooge .....	Kymerli Colbourne‡
Dickens/Tiny Tim .....	Peter Schuyler‡
Actor One .....	Jessi Walters‡
Actor Two .....	Joey Copsey†
Actor Three .....	Andrew Beck‡
Actor Four .....	Jessica Geffent†
Actor Five .....	Morgan Cox†

## CREW/PRODUCTION TEAM

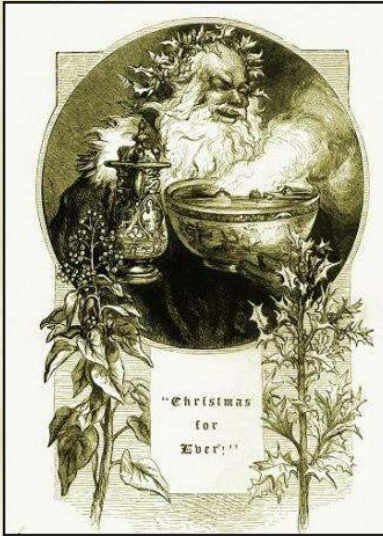
Director .....	Scott Palmer
Stage Manager .....	Ephriam Harnsberger
Costume Designer .....	Melissa Heller
Scenic Designer .....	Megan Wilkerson
Lighting Designer & Technical Director .....	Jim Ricks-White
Sound Designer .....	Carlee Whalen^
Assistant Director .....	Cassie Greer
Assistant Stage Manager .....	Renée Zipp^
Props Master .....	Tiffany Rousseau ^
Dramaturg .....	Grant Thackray^
Marketing Assistant .....	Tiffany Rousseau^

‡Member of the Bag&Baggage Resident Acting Company

†Bag&Baggage Associate Artist

^Bag&Baggage Emerging Artist

## INTRODUCTION: PUTTING THE "CHRISTMAS" IN A *CHRISTMAS CAROL*



*Our toast it is white and our ale it is brown  
Our bowl it is made of the white maple tree  
With the wassailing bowl, we'll drink unto thee.*

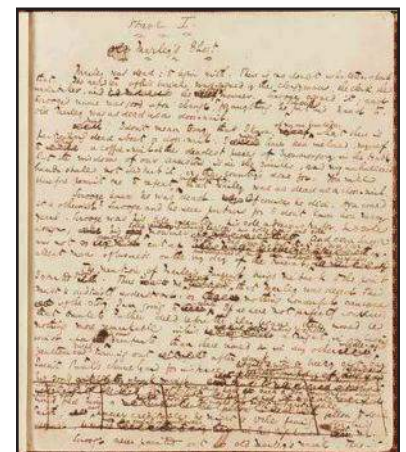
Thus goes the vibrantly upbeat "Gloucestershire Wassail," a Christmas carol dating back to the Middle Ages. And such is the theme of many other joyful songs that persist to this very day, from the figgy pudding of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" to the more modern "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire." Singing and games, holly boughs and mistletoe, and succulent food and merry-making drinks are such important parts of the Christmas culture that they must seem baked into its very being, like candied fruit inside a fruitcake. Much Christmas imagery is still steeped in the folky Christmases of the Victorian era—Hallmark cards bear images of sleigh rides, and carolers will to this day don top hats and capes, carrying candles door to door in an homage to a simpler era where people really knew how to Christmas it up.

However, it may be surprising to learn that the heady Christmas traditions we picture with the Victorian era had in fact fallen out of favor in England by the time Queen Victoria was on the throne. Many classic Christmas traditions as we now know them began as pagan traditions, from Druidic worship of mistletoe to the German tribes' Yule log to the Saturnalian ideologies of gift-giving. But in the seventeenth century, when Oliver Cromwell and his fellow Puritans seized control of England, they endeavored to expunge from the Christmas holiday anything that they viewed as non-Christian. So out the window went feasting, drinking, singing, and nearly everything that didn't involve biblical devotion towards God. Almost two centuries later, when the Industrial Revolution rolled around, it seemed the revelry of the past had mostly died out—even though the Puritans had since lost control over England. The Christmas customs of old were only seen rarely out in the countryside, as factory owners did not often truck to giving their city-dwelling workers time off for Christmas Day.

Then, enter Charles John Huffman Dickens—perhaps the greatest novelist of the English language. Growing up, Dickens had been a great admirer of American essayist Washington Irving. Irving had famously penned tales of idyllic country Christmas in Yorkshire, England, that really resonated with the young Charlie Dickens, growing up in poverty in the rough town of Chatham. These stories of Christmas jingled around in Dickens' head until he finally let loose onto the world, many years later, the immortal tale that is *A Christmas Carol*, which is among other things a love letter to those long-forgotten customs.

The novel caught England by storm. It was first published on December 19th, 1843, and was completely sold out by Christmas Eve. So vibrant were Dickens' depictions of the joyful laughter of the holly-clad Ghost of Christmas Present, the merry games and drinking of punch at Fezziwig's party, and the humble turkey dinner held by the Cratchit family on Christmas day, that the British public could not help but feel the infectious spirit. The traditions Dickens described practically leapt from the page and firmly entrenched themselves back into the culture of the holiday season, earning Dickens the title of "The Man Who Discovered Christmas."

So the next time you drink a glass of eggnog, or hang the star on your Christmas tree, or hear "Jingle Bells" playing at the mall, you can thank Charles Dickens for making that happen.



*The opening page of Dickens' original manuscript of A Christmas Carol*



## THE LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS



A sketch of a 30-year-old Charles Dickens in 1842

It's no wonder that Dickens wrote so much about the lower class—so much so that the word “Dickensian” is synonymous with poor social conditions and comically repulsive characters—since he grew up in conditions very similar to the Cratchit family.

Charles John Huffman Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England, the son of a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. His family was very poor, moving from city to city, all over London, and having to sell many of their belongings to pawn shops. He was forced to take a job tying and labeling pots of blacking in an old warehouse—the type of dangerous, filthy, soul-crushing job common in those halcyon days before child labor laws—and before long his father was thrown into debtor's prison. Only after his father had the fortune to receive an inheritance that got him out of prison was Charles able to leave work and receive formal schooling. Yet still, his early financial hardships in life are clearly echoed in the nature of his works, often focusing on the lives of the poor.

Dickens began writing short sketches under the pseudonym “Boz,” but before long he was given the chance to publish under the firm Chapman and Hall, and his first widespread piece came into the world as *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens became a worldwide phenomenon, publishing great classics such as *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*, among many others.

But Dickens wasn't simply a writer. He also loved acting and enjoyed portraying his stories in front of live audiences, doing all the voices and all the characters. He even toured the United States performing *A Christmas Carol* as a one-man play. He was also fascinated with individual actors playing multiple characters. He loved the idea of an actor's ability to morph themselves into different characters—an experience you'll get the chance to witness firsthand at Bag&Baggage's production. Dickens loved acting so much, he would even often appear in minor roles, unattributed, in plays written by his friends and colleagues.



Like Dickens, many children had to work in dangerous and disheartening conditions at factories and textile mills



The world-famous Charles Dickens at age 56

Near the end of his life, Dickens took on a career as a public reader, travelling the world and performing his own works for adoring audiences. He loved the experience greatly, but being a man of almost sixty years, the stress and fatigue wore him out. When he finished an exhausting speaking tour of the United States, he returned home to England and began writing a detective story he would never get the chance to finish. He passed away suddenly at the age of fifty-eight on June 9, 1870. He had become the most famous novelist in America and England, leaving a long-lasting impact on the world of fiction, as well as the world itself.

## CHARLES' COMEDIC TECHNIQUE OR, HOW TO WRITE LIKE THE DICKENS

*"Laughter lay very near the surface of Dickens; it was always on the verge of breaking out, generously, ruthlessly, uncontrollably, as if someone had struck a match near a volatile substance."*

- Philip Hensher



Scrooge, as depicted in an etching by John Leech in the initial 1843 publication of *A Christmas Carol*

Charles Dickens' obituary in *The Spectator* referred to him as "the greatest humourist whom England ever produced, Shakespeare himself certainly not excepted." This is undoubtedly true—Dickens was a profoundly funny man. As any comedian knows, the surefire way to ruin any joke is to explain it. But as any academic knows, it's their solemn duty to dissect literary works; thus that is what the following section aims to do.

Charles Dickens' comedic stylings can largely be categorized by his use of four different techniques:

### Perspective

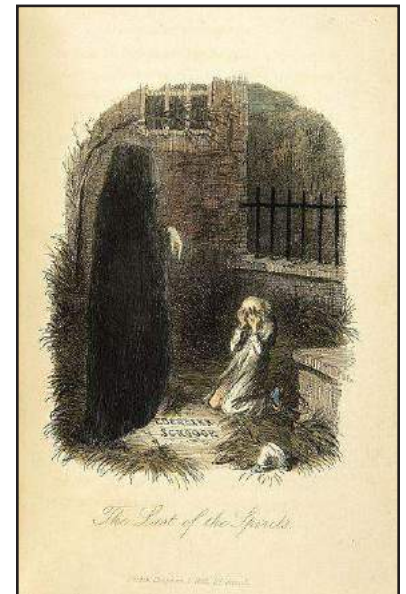
To quote English writer G. K. Chesterton, "Nothing can be funnier properly considered than the fact that one's own father is a pygmy if he stands far enough off." Dickens is a master at controlling the distance between his readers and his characters. Ebenezer Scrooge is, when seen up close, a terrible person with almost no redeeming characteristics. If you were to truly work for him, you would certainly not crack a smile at any of his miserly antics. It is only in our standing far enough away from the horrors of life in the Victorian age, and the despicable way characters like Scrooge can tend to behave, that we are able to appreciate them with a smile on our face.

### The Use of the Concrete

This is a very difficult concept to explain (which goes to show how great Dickens is, by very precisely describing very difficult things to explain). Dickens is very precise with his writing: every character speaks in a certain, distinct way—one could pull a snippet of dialogue from the book at random, and would at once be able to tell who said it just by the way it's said. Nothing is muddy or blurred at the edges in Dickens' work. Even the voice of the narrative itself, the prose holding the story together, acts as its own distinct voice, separate from any one character.

### Savagery

In the words of English writer John Middleton Murry, Dickens' "comic vision was the fiercest that has ever been in English literature, so savage as to be sometimes all but unbearable." In short, Dickens doesn't pull any punches. He isn't afraid to throw open his characters' closets and dance with the skeletons inside. His stories tell the tales of people who are rough, and rude, and flawed, and he is extremely frank in his descriptions of them, rough spots and all.



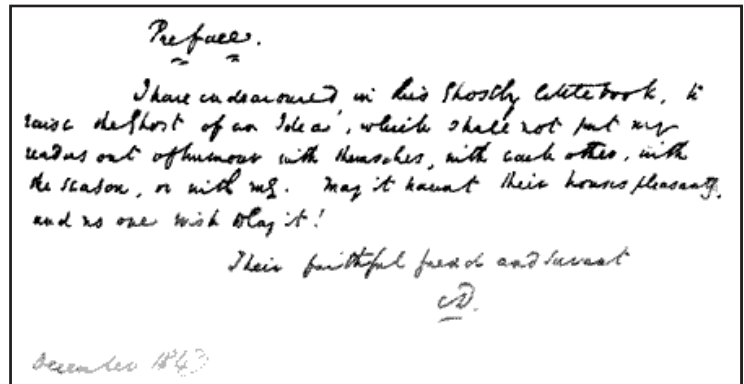
John Leech's 1843 etching of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come



## Darkness

Closely tied to his use of savagery, Dickens loves to revel in the darkness. He asks his readers to laugh at the very things he, in other parts of the story, forces us to sympathize with or be angry about—injustice, death, greed, loneliness, disease, etc. It is in this back-and-forth between emotions that Dickens is able to snare his readers and draw them closer to the story. It's a bit funny that *A Christmas Carol*, which is known by all to be a festive holiday story fit for a season of love and joy, is filled with ghostly scenes of rattling chains and frightful imagery fit for a story set at Halloween! That on top of Tiny Tim's sickly fate, Scrooge's disregard of the dismal living conditions of the poor, and a multitude of descriptions of the biting, icy cold of winter, make this charming wintertime comedy surprisingly full of dark moments.

Dickens wrote in the preface to the original printing of the story, "I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their houses pleasantly, and no one wish to lay it." The grim, gaunt specters of the story are meant to haunt pleasantly! Dickens meant to show that joy only exists when contrasted against sorrow and rage. The light can only truly shine when the dark is represented as well.



Dickens' handwritten 1843 preface



Joey Copsey, Jessi Walters, Jessica Geffen, Morgan Cox, and Andrew Beck bring to life the ensemble of varied wacky characters in Bag&Baggage's Charles Dickens Writes A Christmas Carol

## BACKGROUND: VICTORIAN CURRENCY

Money is a concept that rests at the very heart of *A Christmas Carol*. It is the acquisition and maintaining of money that drives Scrooge's miserly ways, and it is the lack of a sustainable income that keeps the poor Cratchit family in poverty. But what exactly is the nature of the currency used in Victorian England? Dickens' book and Bag&Baggage's adaptation both mention such things as "shillings," "crowns," and "farthings." For an American audience that deals only in dollars and cents, the Victorian British money system can seem a bit confusing—and that's because it is! Here's a chart of a few of the types of coins used by Charles Dickens and his fellow Victorians:

As you can see, it's not very well streamlined and requires a lot of mental arithmetic to understand how to give someone their change. (And heaven knows why they needed both a coin worth 20 shillings and another worth 21 shillings...) It's not important that you understand how many farthings are in a threepenny or anything like that, but rather that you understand what value those coins have. That's what money's for, after all!

Let's give a bit of context. In *A Christmas Carol*, Bob Cratchit works for 15 shillings a week. In terms of 2015 purchasing power, factoring in inflation, this would be approximately £63.00 or about \$94 US per week for a 60 hour work week. That's about \$1.50 an hour. It's clear to see that poor Bob is extremely underpaid.

COIN	VALUE
Pound (£)	20 shillings
Shilling (s)	12 pence*
Penny* (d)	4 farthings
Sovereign	1 pound (20 shillings)
Guinea	21 shillings
Half Crown	2 shillings and 6 pence (30 pence)
Florin	2 shillings
Silver Sixpence	6 pence
Threepenny	3 pence
Halfpenny (or Ha'penny)	½ pence
Farthing	¼ pence

\* pence means pennies



Note the image of Queen Victoria on the front of each coin - the same Queen Victoria for which the Victorian Era is named.

At one point during the story, Scrooge threatens to dock Cratchit "half-a-crown" for taking Christmas off. A half crown coin is worth 2 shillings and 3 pence, so if you work out the math you'll find that means Scrooge wanted to take off one sixth of Cratchit's wage. That makes sense, given Cratchit likely worked six days a week. What could you buy with such a pitiful amount of money, though?

It is estimated that the Cratchits would have spent a week's wages on their Christmas feast. That means seven shillings for their goose (which was cheaper than turkey at the time), five for the pudding, and three for the onions, sage, and oranges to garnish the meal.

Near the end of the play, it's not clear what the massive turkey hanging in the window (which Scrooge sends the young child to fetch for him) would cost, but he offers the urchin half-a-crown simply to run and get it for him. Remember, that's the very same amount Scrooge threatened to dock Cratchit for having Christmas off—an entire day's wages for the poor clerk!

Just this simple bit of knowledge about the value of the money discussed in the show really shows Scrooge's transition from penny-pinching miser to generous warm-hearted soul throughout the story.



## BACKGROUND: CHARACTER NAME MEANINGS

### Ebenezer

Prior to Dickens' time, the name Ebenezer would have been an allusion to the memorial stone which the prophet Samuel set up to commemorate the Israelites' victory at Mizpeh, literally meaning "the stone of help." More colloquially at Dickens' own time, it adopted a meaning by Methodists to mean a particular chapel or meeting-house, used contemptuously as a synonym for "dissenting chapel," or houses refusing to conform to the tenets of the restored Church of England. Basically, it's literary shorthand for someone refusing to go along with the way everyone else is doing something.



*The type of ebenezer referenced in the Biblical Book of Samuel*

### Scrooge

The name "Scrooge" could come from the archaic English word scrouging, meaning "crushing or squeezing," reflecting Scrooge's vice-like grip on his finances. Possibly, it could just be a phonetic play on screw, a common 19th-century slang for a miser. In the more modern era, the word "scrooge" has been entered into the dictionary as a word indicating a mean or miserly person—all due to the popularity of Dickens' book.



*A Restoration-Era Jacobus*

### Jacob

Jacob was a biblical figure, found in the book of Genesis, who was a sharp trader, a keen bargainer, and a good man of business—keeping in line with the biblical roots of Jacob Marley's partner's name. Additionally, a "Jacobus" was a gold coin during the Restoration period. Jacob, like Scrooge, is another name rooted in biblical history and money.

### Marley

Jacob Marley's surname is a reference to a marble, or possibly, a marble headstone. It's a word associated with earth, soil, and thus, death. Fitting, seeing as Marley starts the story already six feet under.

### Bob

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "Bob" as a verb meaning "to befool, cheat, make sport of...mock, deceive"—a meaning consistent with Scrooge's view of Bob as a fool whose enjoyment of Christmas time should place him in Bedlam. Perhaps more fittingly, however, a bob was also a colloquialism for a shilling, which is not a very large amount of money—thus showing Bob Cratchit's general perceived worth by his employer.

### Cratchit

Cratchit is commonly associated with "crotchet" (think "crotchety"), defined by the OED as "a whimsical fancy; a perverse conceit; a peculiar notion on some point (usually considered unimportant)." Bob and his family are always concerned with things Scrooge believes to be peculiar and unimportant, such as Christmas spirit and familial togetherness.



*Illustration of the Cratchit family by E. A. Abbey for the American Household Edition of A Christmas Carol (1876)*



## OUR PRODUCTION

It is said that when Dickens had the idea for *A Christmas Carol*, he felt the power of the story like a sledgehammer, and he immediately ran home to write. It is furthermore said that when he got home, he locked himself in his room, and wrote with such fervor that his friends could hear him speaking aloud from outside, as if he were conversing with the characters of the story. We cannot know for sure exactly what happened in that historical moment, but Bag&Baggage's *Charles Dickens Writes A Christmas Carol* tells the story of Dickens' very characters stepping out of his mind and speaking right back to him as he writes.

Dickens is, of course, the centerpiece of the play, patiently working his way through his holiday classic while the voices in his head squabble about him. Those voices manifest as five distinct characters—five aspects of Dickens' psyche—who each take on the roles of the various colorful characters that make up the world of *A Christmas Carol*. The standout amongst these characters is the anchor point of the story: Ebenezer Scrooge himself, who skulks onto the stage fully formed, and stays that way throughout the play. The other five disparate characters swarm about Scrooge, arguing about everything from plot points to word choice, and quarrel over who gets to play which role in the story. Meanwhile Dickens leads the charge, crafting the story to his own creative vision—although at times it seems he is being dragged along for the ride by his cast of characters.



*Peter Schuyler and Kymberli Colbourne play Charles Dickens and Ebenezer Scrooge respectively in Bag&Baggage's production of Charles Dickens Writes A Christmas Carol*

*Charles Dickens Writes A Christmas Carol* is a comedy, in as much as the original tale was able to find humor in this dark winter's tale. However, it's not without its serious moments; adaptor and director Scott Palmer describes his approach to the tale as "Heart on a Shtick." In his own words:



*adaptor and director Scott Palmer*

*Dickens is a fascinating literary and historical figure. Arguably the very first celebrity in Western civilization, Dickens' life and work literally transformed literature, culture, entertainment, and our thinking about an enormous range of political, social, and religious institutions (including Christmas). Jane Smiley's biography of Dickens highlights an aspect of the writer that I think is far, far too often ignored:*

*Dickens was hilarious.*

*In fact, according to Smiley, Dickens' unending energy, his boundless enthusiasm and his limitless creativity were only exceeded by his childish and broad sense of comedy! Dickens' friends and colleagues commented constantly on how funny he was, how much he enjoyed creating and writing comedic scenes, and how effortlessly he wove humor into all aspects of his literature and characterizations. I mean, seriously, anyone who could come up with the name "Martin Chuzzlewit" can't be half bad, right?*

*But more interesting to me, and more directly relevant to our production of Dickens' little "Christmas Carol," is Dickens' fascination with mimicry, voices, and individual actors playing multiple characters. Dickens said that if he hadn't become a writer he would have been an actor, and amateur dramatics played an enormously important role in his personal and professional life. He performed his own work regularly, often playing all of the characters (including developing funny voices for them!) for thousands of people across the UK and the US, as well as performing in plays written by his friends and colleagues (including The Frozen North, in which Dickens would often play as many as six different characters).*

*Dickens' children have written and spoken of their father's playful nature and his affinity for funny voices, seamlessly transitioning from one character to another using vocal inflection, accents, and changes in his physical body...not at all unlike what you will see in Bag&Baggage's performance.*

*The actors and I have spoken often of the power of humor to open an audience's heart to the more profound and emotional messages of this particular story. As Dickens himself writes in his novella, "Nothing good ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter."*

---



*Dickens does his best to keep control as his characters argue around him how best to be written in Bag&Baggage's production of Charles Dickens Writes A Christmas Carol. Pictured are B&B actors Jessi Walters, Morgan Cox, Joey Copsey, Peter Schuyler, Andrew Beck, Kymberli Colbourne, and Jessica Geffen.*



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & WRITING ACTIVITIES

### Before you see the show:

1. Victorian England was notorious for treating factory workers poorly, forcing them to work long hours in dangerous conditions for little pay.
  - a. Describe ways in which we, in the United States today, have made a change for the better, putting people before profit.
  - b. Describe ways in which our society still places a higher importance on money.
2. What do you think is the true spirit of Christmas, or of whichever winter holiday you celebrate? What is "the reason for the season"? If you don't celebrate any holiday, why not?
3. What are some ways in your own life that you've made efforts to create positive differences in the lives of other people, however small they may be? What are some reasons that people choose not to or are unable to be charitable?

### After you see the show:

4. The way a work is titled tells a lot about the author's intent for the story. In *Charles Dickens Writes A Christmas Carol*, the actors sing several carols, but remember, Dickens' original book didn't have musical accompaniment. Why do you think Dickens titled this story *A Christmas Carol*? What might you have titled the book if you wrote it?
5. Why do you think Dickens chose to fill his Christmas book with ghosts, disease, and death? Does the spooky imagery of Marley in chains and the spectral Ghost of Christmas Future feel out of place with the lively spirit of the season? Why or why not?
6. Despite being a rather antagonistic person, Ebenezer Scrooge is, in fact, the protagonist of this story.
  - a. Why did Dickens choose to center his story around such a flawed human being?
  - b. Describe three instances when Scrooge displayed cruelty or immoral behavior near the start of the play, as well as three actions Scrooge takes at the end of the play to show he has changed.
  - c. Can you empathize with Scrooge's behavior at the start of the play at all? Why or why not?
7. Did you see any Christmas traditions displayed in this play that you think ought to come back in the modern day? Or do you have any traditions in your own family that you'd like to see celebrated by more people? Write a short story that might inspire a modern audience to reinstate those traditions, the way Dickens did with the traditions in his book back in Victorian England.
8. Why do you think Bag&Baggage chose to present this story with Charles Dickens writing *A Christmas Carol*, rather than just presenting the story as originally written? What extra meaning comes from having Dickens himself onstage, talking with the characters?
9. It is said that money can't buy happiness. Do you think this is true? Give three examples from the play of characters being either happy or unhappy, because of or regardless of their financial status.
10. *Charles Dickens Writes A Christmas Carol* requires its actors to have a broad acting range: the ensemble plays a variety of parts, and Scrooge must be distinctly different at the start of the play from the end. Name some ways the actors and director were able to distinguish characters from each other, even if they were played by the same actor.

---

## SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

### To Find In Your Library:

Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol*. Ed. Jane Yolen. New York, NY: Tom Doherty Associates, LLC, 1988.

Smiley, Jane. *Charles Dickens: a life*. Penguin, 2011.

### On The Web:

"The Naming of Names in Charles Dickens A Christmas Carol" from victorianweb.org

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/xmas/names.html>

"Money in Victorian England" from logicmgmt.com

<http://logicmgmt.com/1876/living/money.htm>

"Charles Dickens, the comic crusader" from *The Telegraph*

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/charles-dickens/8968910/Charles-Dickens-the-comic-crusader.html>

"Dickens and Laughter" from victorianweb.org

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/kincaid2/intro1.html>

---



*Dickens, ever true to his values, is not afraid to face the darkness of the Cratchits' mourning of Tiny Tim, and the emotional impact this has on Scrooge. Joey Copsey and Jessi Walters play Bob and Mrs. Cratchit, while Kymberli Colbourne as Scrooge looks on in Bag&Baggage's production of Charles Dickens Writes A Christmas Carol.*