

GeVa's Christmas gift brings Dickens classic to dramatic life

By Emily Morrison

The Christmas, 1893, edition of the Catholic Journal contains an unobtrusive item, nearly buried among the advertisements for dry goods and recipes for close approximations of Dickensian Christmas puddings.

"Why Men Open Their Hearts" is the title, one that might strike us as particularly ironic simply by virtue of its juxtaposition to an even smaller filler that reads, "Speeches at Christmas banquets will be stuffed with chestnuts this season, as usual."

This is a chestnut that warrants frequent repetition, however, both on the printed page and the dramatic stage. "There is nothing more effective or oft-quoted than those lines from the *Christmas Carol* of Charles Dickens," the item reads. "There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say," returned Scrooge's nephew, "Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas when it has come round — apart from the veneration due its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can be apart from that — as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of in the long calendar of the year when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut up hearts freely and to think of people below them, as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and I say, God bless it!"

Days after discovering this gem of Christmas wisdom in the microfilm files of what later became the Courier-Journal, I was fortunate enough to procure a ticket to one of the previews of GeVa Theatre's current production of the classic Dickens tale of spiritual conversion. William Barclay's intriguingly mechanized set wasn't quite completed, and the curtain call was yet to be rehearsed and cued, but the heartwarming splendor of Dickens' message was there in full measure, beautifully rendered by Howard Millman's cast, Phil Monat's eerie lighting design, Nic Minetor's effectively choreographed sound, and Pamela Scofield's delightful period costumes.

The passage quoted in the Catholic Journal appears in Eberle Thomas' GeVa adaptation in a far less cumbersome form befitting the immediacy of the dramatic medium. As the "whole, long calendar of the year" draws to a close once again this Christmas — and well over a century since Dickens first expressed it — the sentiment rings as true as ever. Eberle Thomas has captured the spirit of Christmas past, present, and yet to come, the conversion of "a man who carries, throughout the year, a winter in his soul," in a timeless way that bears as much relevance to the present day and place as it did to Dickens' London in 1843.

Thomas, an actor and playwright who has previously adapted for the stage Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Moliere's *Tartuffe*, Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque*, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, appears onstage in the current GeVa production as Ebenezer Scrooge's manservant, Mr. Dilber. As GeVa literary director Ann Patrice Carrigan, SSJ,

appraises Thomas' adaptation, he has successfully preserved the spirit of Dickens' narrative while translating it into the dramaturgy of the stage.

"There are about 20 adaptations we could have chosen," says Sister Ann Patrice. "Barbara Field's is the most popular. In her adaptation, Dickens himself is the narrator." The focus of Field's adaptation, however, is more domestic, and the scope, in Sister Pat's opinion, is smaller than that of Eberle Thomas' version.

"Eb's adaptation embraces all of London," says Sister Pat. "It's a microcosm of the entire society. All of the people in the street scenes are incorporated into the dream sequences; we see the London workmen in the first scene later metamorphosed into ghosts. Greed permeates an entire society riddled by poverty."

Sister Pat interprets this adaptation of Dickens' timeless message as an expression of the evil in society that stems "not just from great individual acts, but from the hardening of a community's spirit. A *Christmas Carol* is the story of someone frozen in the isolation of his own selfishness and greed," she theorizes. "When Scrooge's conversion comes, his change of heart, it affects everybody. They're all swept up in it."

Although the play is not overtly religious, Dickens' theme emphasizes the great outpouring of emotion possible between human beings, according to the GeVa dramaturge. Cast members, she points out, play a series of roles, so that the same faces echo their previous appearances in successive scenes. "The beggar boy becomes the young Scrooge in the first dream sequence; the little apple vendor becomes one of the ladies at the party," Sister Pat notes. "It has a nice dramatic unity to it, but it also goes to the heart of Dickens' message: human beings touch each other's lives."

Dickens' story in any form continues to touch lives almost a century-and-a-half after it was written, perhaps primarily because the character of Scrooge is someone we can all identify with on some level.

"Scrooge is a person who is really worth the struggle of bringing his conversion about," says Sister Pat. "Even before it, he is the wittiest, most mobile person on the stage. He is a resourceful man, a man of great stature, great potential that has been



Jeff Gouling / Courier-Journal

The ghost of Jacob Marley (Leonard Kelly-Young) appears in Scrooge's window.



Scrooge collapses in despair and apprehension.



Scrooge (Gerald Richards) is braced by the Ghost of Christmas Past (Michael Rogers) during a frightening revelation.



The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come (John Greenleaf) singles out Scrooge for dire predictions of the future.