A Christmas Carol

based on the novel by Charles Dickens
adapted by Peter Hinton
dramaturgy by Paula Danckert

a National Arts Centre English Theatre Company production

Study Guide

THE NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE ENGLISH THEATRE
PROGRAMMES FOR STUDENT AUDIENCES
2009-2010 SEASON

Peter Hinton
Artistic Director, English Theatre

This Study Guide was written and researched by Jim McNabb for the National Arts Centre, English Theatre, September, 2009. It may be used solely for educational purposes.

The National Arts Centre English Theatre values the feedback of teachers on the content and format of its Study Guides. We would appreciate your comments on past Study Guides, on this current one, or suggestions on ways to improve future Study Guides. Comments may be directed to Martina Kuska either by email at mkuska@nac-cna.ca or by fax at (613) 943-1401.
About This Guide
This Study Guide contains a large amount of varied resource material to accommodate different classes and levels. Teachers need not use all the material found here but should choose appropriate activities from pages 21-23, then select the corresponding support material. Topics may be used separately or in any combination that works for your situation.

Table of Contents

About the Play: Background, Plot, Characters, Themes ......................................................... 1 - 4
Things to Watch for in the Production ....................................................................................... 4
Who Helped Put the Production Together? ............................................................................... 5
Scene Excerpt from A Christmas Carol ..................................................................................... 6 - 9
An Interview with Director Peter Hinton .................................................................................. 10 - 11
The Life of novelist Charles Dickens ....................................................................................... 12 – 13
Other Novels by Dickens .......................................................................................................... 14 – 15
Some Terms Encountered in A Christmas Carol ................................................................ 16 - 17
Life in “Dickensian” London ................................................................................................... 18 - 19
Suggested Websites, Movies and Books .................................................................................. 20
Activities Before and After Seeing the Play ............................................................................. 21 - 23
Theatre Etiquette ..................................................................................................................... 24
A Sampling of Eo Sharp’s Designs for the Production .............................................................. 25 - 26
Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 27
About the Play (see Activity #1)

Background on the Novel and the Play

A Christmas Carol was the most successful book of the 1843 holiday season. By Christmas it had sold six thousand copies and it continued to be popular into the new year. Eight stage adaptations were in production within two months of the book's publication. The book is as popular today as it was over 150 years ago. Charles Dickens, through his character Ebenezer Scrooge, continues to urge us to honor Christmas in our hearts, and "try to keep it all the year."

The play, adapted from Charles Dickens' novel, deals extensively with two of Dickens' recurrent themes, social injustice and poverty, the relationship between the two, and their causes and effects. These themes were constantly in Dickens' mind, as seen in a number of his books where he writes vividly of life in London. He is credited with bringing an awareness of these issues to the general public, and using his novels to bring about real social and political change.

Dickens wrote A Christmas Carol following the British government's changes to the welfare system known as the New Poor Laws, passed in 1834, which required, among other things, welfare applicants to "work" on treadmills and live in workhouses. He was also moved by a shocking government report on the abuse of child labourers in mines and factories. Dickens' aim in writing this Christmas novel was to "strike a sledgehammer blow ... on behalf of the Poor Man's Child". Dickens asks his readers to recognize the terrible state of the people whom the Industrial Revolution displaced and drove into poverty while the owners and managers of companies became enormously wealthy. He also points out the obligation of society to provide for them humanely. Failure to do so, Dickens warns -- through the personification of Ignorance and Want shown to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come as ghastly children -- will result in "Doom" for those who, like Scrooge, believe their wealth and status allows them to sit in judgment of the poor rather than assist them. (In a later novel, A Tale of Two Cities, Dickens reminds his readers that similar conditions in Paris brought about the French Revolution.)

The Plot

Very briefly, A Christmas Carol is a Victorian morality tale which centres on the miserly and ill-tempered Ebenezer Scrooge who bullies his downtrodden clerk Bob Cratchit and rejects his nephew Fred's wishes for a merry Christmas. The night of Christmas Eve, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner Jacob Marley and three other prophetic ghosts who show him his happier youth, the joy that others experience at Christmas time, and finally his impending death under dire conditions, provided he does not mend his ways and become charitable. When Scrooge awakes on Christmas morning he has been miraculously transformed into a generous, kindhearted...
About the Play

old man who pledges help to Bob Cratchit’s family including his crippled son Tiny Tim. He became “as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew,” and for the rest of his life “it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.”

The Characters

**Ebenezer Scrooge** - The protagonist, Scrooge is a cold, miserly creditor whose redemption to kindness and selflessness forms the arc of *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge represents the Victorian rich who neglect the poor and think only of their own well-being. The most motivation Dickens provides for Scrooge's character is his depiction of him as a young boy; neglected by his peers and, it appears, by his father, the young Scrooge seemed determined to live only for himself as he aged.

**Bob Cratchit** - Scrooge's overworked employee, a timid man afraid to stand up to his boss' demanding ways. The father of a family poor in wealth but rich in love, he cares especially dearly for his crippled son, Tiny Tim. Cratchit is a symbol for the Victorian poor, good-hearted and hard-working but unable to climb out the stifling conditions of poverty.

**Ghost of Christmas Past** - The first Christmas ghost to visit Scrooge, Scrooge’s mother.

**Ghost of Christmas Present** - A giant clad in robes and greener who has 1800 brothers and a life span of one day. He represents celebration and charity.

**Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come** - This solemn, silent phantom represents death, but also the possibility that the future is not determined, but open to the free will of humans.

**Fred** - Scrooge's nephew, Fred, who embodies the jollity and sharing of Christmas. He refuses to let Scrooge's "Bah! Humbug!" attitude bring him down, and is overjoyed when his uncle converts and attends his party.

**Tiny Tim** - Cratchit’s crippled son, Tiny Tim, who represents the overwhelming goodness of the Christmas spirit.

**Jacob Marley** - Scrooge's old partner, Marley, who appears to Scrooge as a ghost and warns him about the dangers of being obsessed with money.

**Fezziwig** - The young Scrooge's jolly, selfless boss.

**Belle** - Scrooge's former girlfriend, who breaks up with him because of his greed.

**Fan** - Scrooge's older sister.
About the Play

Major Themes
The Christmas Spirit - A Christmas Carol is a celebration of the good inspired by the Christmas season. At Christmas time, people forget their selfishness, hectic schedules and petty daily disputes, and instead turn to charity and celebration with family and friends. Several representatives of these virtues stand out in Dickens' cast. Fred is a model of good cheer, Fezziwig a great friend and generous employer, Tiny Tim's inspiring courage and selflessness in the face of his ill health, and the loving nature of the entire Cratchit family. Scrooge learns the lessons of the Christmas spirit through his visions of Christmases past, present, and future; in each he sees either the bad effects his miserly nature has created or the good tidings that others bring about through their love and kindness.

Redemption and Free Will - The great pleasure we get in A Christmas Carol is watching Scrooge's transformation from a penny-pinching grouchy to a generous, jolly gentleman. His reformation, or redemption, is made possible through his own free will. While Scrooge is shown visions of the future, he learns that they are only visions of things that "May" be, not what "Will" be. He has the power to change the future with his present actions, and Dickens tries to impart this sense of free will to the reader; if Scrooge can change, then so can anyone.

Critique of Victorian Society - Dickens blames the huge class stratification of Victorian England on the selfishness of the rich and on the Poor Laws that keep down the underclass. Scrooge is the obvious symbol of the greedy Victorian rich, while the Cratchits represent the working poor. In the scene of the thieving workers divvying up the dead Scrooge's possessions, the accountability for their actions is put on Scrooge: had he not been such a miser, they would not have resorted to stealing from him. When the children of Ignorance and Want crawl out from under the robes of the Ghost of Christmas Present, the ghost sends a message to Scrooge, and the same is given to the Victorian reader: help out those in Want and beware of Ignorance in oneself and others or suffer the consequences.

Capitalism, Time, and Epiphanies - At the beginning of the play, Scrooge seems aware of only the present tense, the tense of capitalism. Right now is the time to make or lose money, and the past and future exist only to serve the present. Dickens' attention to clocks and bells reinforces Scrooge's mania with time. However, Scrooge is redeemed when he learns to integrate the past, present, and future into his worldview. He moves beyond the capitalist obsession with the present and into a timeless appreciation of why qualities like generosity and love are the most important in life. His appreciation of the three tenses also comes in one fell swoop, overnight, in an epiphany, the sudden revelation of the profound meaning in life.
About the Play

Form and Style of the Play

The word carol means a joyful hymn specific to Christmas. Dickens’ short novel is just that, a literary hymn to the Season. A musical notation is written on five staves or lines; Dickens takes his analogy a step further in writing the novel in five sections which he calls ‘staves’ rather than chapters.

The play A Christmas Carol is divided in the same way, into staves rather than acts. Stave One introduces us to Scrooge on Christmas Eve with his opposition to the Season and the good will of those around him, as well as to the Ghost of Jacob Marley with his warning of the events to soon happen that night. Stave Two sees the Ghost of Christmas Past taking Scrooge on a journey to visit his young former self and the optimism he formerly held. It also points out where Scrooge went wrong in choosing to devote his life solely to making money. In Stave Three, Scrooge travels with the Ghost of Christmas Present to see the happiness of some as well as the poverty of others. Scrooge sees into his bleak future in Stave Four as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows him his dismal death if he does not reform. Stave Five reveals the transformed Scrooge on Christmas morning with his new desire to rectify his past vices and spread charity and joy to all around him.

Taking the analogy of a carol still farther, this stage adaptation uses caroling as an integral part of the presentation. Carolers sing joyful Christmas songs of Dickens’ period throughout the play. They also take on the narration of the tale in the style of Story Theatre, helping to act out the parts as the play progresses. Each member of the chorus steps forward at different times to play one of Dickens’ characters. In fact, if you watch closely each one plays more than one character, but there is a commonality in the roles.

Things to Watch for in the Production (see Activity #9)

- Notice how all the costumes and set appear to be black. However, at certain moments the stage instantly explodes into a festive colourful scene. What statement is this effect making?
- Two characters in the play are not members of the chorus of carolers. Watch for which ones these are. Is this significant?
- Watch the roles played by each member of the chorus and try to decide what is the common feature or personality trait. Could each quality be a part of Scrooge himself?
- The company of actors represents a wide variety of ages, races and abilities chosen from across Canada. Do you think a statement about Dickens’ work is being made?
- Watch for how the bickering shoppers waiting in the street to get into the baker’s are transformed by the Ghost of Christmas Present.
- Notice how “special effects” would have been done in the 19th century. There is a range of effects used, from contemporary to old fashioned.
- Pay close attention to the torch of the Ghost of Christmas Present.
- Watch for a bed that does some magical things.
Who Helped Put the Production Together?
(see Activity #12)

Cast
STEPHEN OUIMETTE as Ebenezer Scrooge
with the 40th Anniversary English Theatre Acting Company:
NISHA AHUJA, JOSHUA BAJPAI, MICHAEL BLAKE, RICHARD DONAT, RANDI HELMERS, TANJA JACOBS, GEORDIE JOHNSON, KRIS JOSEPH, RON KENNELL, JOHN KOENSGEN, JANI LAUZON, JULIE TAMIKO MANNING, ALEX McCooEYE, NIALL McNEIL, MATT MIWA, ANANYA RAJKUMAR, JEREMIAH SPARKS, WANETA STORMS, MATTHEW TAPSCOTT, NINA ROSE TAYLOR

The Creative Team
Novel Written by: CHARLES DICKENS
Adapted by: PETER HINTON
Directed by: PETER HINTON
Dramaturgy by: PAULA DANCKERT
Set and Costume Design by: EO SHARP
Lighting Design by: JOCK MUNRO
Music Direction and Arrangements by: ALLEN COLE
Sound Design by: TROY SLOCUM
Choreography by: DAYNA TEKATCH
Design Assistant: VÉRONIQUE La PERRIÈRE M.
Directing Intern: BRONWYN STEINBERG

Stage Manager: JANE VANSTONE OSBORN
Assistant Stage Manager: STÉFANIE SÉGUIN
Scene Excerpt from *A Christmas Carol* (see Activity #6)

The Ghost of Christmas Past takes Scrooge to visit a very seedy slum to show him a sobering sight - people greedily dividing up his belongings after his death. An old man enters, smoking a pipe. He is met by a charwoman, a laundress, and an undertaker’s man. Each carries a bundle. Meeting each other they burst into laughter.

CHARWOMAN Let the charwoman alone to be the first! Let the laundress alone to be the second; and let the undertaker’s man alone to be the third. Look here, old Joe, here’s a chance. If we haven’t all three met here without meaning it!

OLD JOE You couldn’t have met in a better place... Come into the parlour. You were made free of it long ago, you know; and the other two ain’t strangers. Let me open the grate to warm ourselves. Ah... how it skreeks! There ain’t such a rusty bit of metal in the place as its own hinges, I believe; and I’m sure there’s no such old bones here, as mine. Ha, ha! We’re all suitable to our calling, we’re well matched. Come into the parlour. Come into the parlour.

The charwoman throws her bundle on the floor, and sits down in a flaunting manner on a stool: crossing her elbows on her knees, and looking with a bold defiance at the other two.

CHARWOMAN What odds then. What odds, Mrs Dilber? Every person has a right to take care of themselves. He always did.

UNDERTAKER That’s true, indeed.

LAUNDRESS No man more so.

CHARWOMAN Why then, don’t stand staring as if you was afraid: who’s the wiser? We’re not going to pick holes in each other’s coats, I suppose?

LAUNDRESS No, indeed.

UNDERTAKER We should hope not.

CHARWOMAN Very well, then! That’s enough. Who’s the worse for the loss of a few things like these? Not a dead man, I suppose.

LAUNDRESS *(Laughing)* No, indeed.
Scene Excerpt from *A Christmas Carol*

CHARWOMAN  If he wanted to keep them after he was dead, the wicked old screw, why wasn’t he natural in his lifetime? If he had been, he’d have had somebody to look after him when he was struck with Death, instead of lying gasping out his last there, alone by himself.

LAUNDRESS  It’s the truest word that ever was spoke - It’s a judgment on him.

CHARWOMAN  I wish it was a little heavier judgment; and it should have been, you may depend upon it, if I could have laid my hands on anything else. Open that bundle, old Joe, and let me know the value of it. Speak out plain. I’m not afraid to be the first, nor afraid for them to see it. We know pretty well that we were helping ourselves, before we met here, I believe. It’s no sin. Open the bundle, Joe.

UNDERTAKER  I’ll go first, just to show we all got trust in each other.

LAUNDRESS  Undertaker’s are always gentlemen-like, I find.

*The undertaker’s man takes a small pouch from his breast pocket and gives it to Joe. He lists the contents from a small notebook checking off each item with a pencil. Joe scrutinizes each item.*


OLD JOE  I’ll give ya eight shillings for this lot, and I wouldn’t give another sixpence, if I was to be boiled alive for not doing it. Who’s next?

CHARWOMAN  Well go wan, Mrs. Dilber - let’s see what you’ve brung us.

LAUNDRESS  Very well. I haint ashamed to be the second.

*The laundress puts out a larger white bundle and reads from a paper pinned to it.*


*Joe looks through the goods and gives his account.*
Scene Excerpt from *A Christmas Carol*

OLD JOE   Seventeen and six... I always give too much to ladies. If I weren't an open Christian, I'd regret my liberality. It's a weakness of mine, and that's the way I ruin myself.

LAUNDRESS  Bloody hell.

OLD JOE   That's your account and if you ask for another penny, and make it an open question, I'll repent of being so liberal and knock off half-a-crown.

CHARWOMAN  Now undo my bundle, Joe.

The charwoman's bundle is the largest of all. Having unfastened a great many knots, Joe drags out a large and heavy roll of some dark stuff. He looks it over with the oil lamp.

OLD JOE   What do you call this?

CHARWOMAN  Bed-‐curtains!

OLD JOE   Bed-‐curtains?

CHARWOMAN  Yes - bed-‐curtains.

OLD JOE   You don't mean to say you took them down, rings and all, with him lying there?

CHARWOMAN  Yes I do. Why not?

OLD JOE   You were born to make your fortune, madam, and you'll certainly do it.

CHARWOMAN  I certainly shan't hold my hand, when I can get anything in it by reaching it out, for the sake of such a man as he was, I promise you, Joe. Don't drop that oil upon the blankets, now.

OLD JOE   His blankets?

CHARWOMAN  Whose else's do you think? He isn't likely to take cold without them, I dare say.
Scene Excerpt from *A Christmas Carol*

OLD JOE                Eh... he didn't die of anything catching, did he?

CHARWOMAN             Don't you be afraid of that. I am not so fond of his company that
                      I'd loiter about him for such things, if he did. And you may look
                      through that shirt till your eyes ache; but you won't find a hole in it,
                      or a threadbare place. It's the best he had, and a fine one too.
                      They'd have wasted it, if it hadn't been for me.

OLD JOE                What do you mean, "wasting it?"

CHARWOMAN             Why, they'd've buried 'im in't a'course. But I took it offa him again.
                      As if calico ain't good enough for such a purpose, it isn't good enough
                      for anything. It's quite as becoming to the body. He can't look uglier
                      than he did in that one.

*They all break out in gales of laughter.*

UNDERTAKER            It's poetic justice. He frightened us away when he was alive, and now
                      we profit from him when he's dead.

*They all laugh.*

*End of Scene*
An Interview with Director Peter Hinton

In this 40th Anniversary season at the NAC, why did you choose to stage a production of A Christmas Carol?

Peter Hinton: We chose it because it is the most requested title by audiences ever. Strangely, the NAC has never done a big family production of it. The novel has had an incredible popularity since 1843 when it was written, as well as a long history with the stage. Even by 1844 there were nine different productions of A Christmas Carol onstage in London. It’s become one of the greatest classics of English literature and an excellent way for families to be introduced to the NAC if they haven’t been here before.

What is the reason for its popularity?

P.H.: It’s a story about transformation, about charity and goodness in people, as well as about capitalism, the ethics of doing business. It’s as much about money and its dangers as about the human heart. Margaret Attwood in her book Payback makes many references to A Christmas Carol and creates her version of it if it were written today. Interestingly, A Christmas Carol is revived more in North America than it is in the UK. It speaks to us as an allegory of charity, family and love in the capitalist age. There are so many entry points into it. You can see it as a character study. There are so many wonderfully detailed characters in it, such as Bob Cratchitt, Tiny Tim, all of the Ghosts, Jacob Marley and, of course, Ebenezer Scrooge. A great example is the scene in Old Joe’s Pawn Shop with the four characters all of which are a dream for character actors. There’s a family entry point where children are revered and cared for. They become a measure of a society as to how children are treated. And then, of course, it’s a ghost story. I remember as a child loving to sit up on Christmas Eve to watch the Alastair Sim movie version because the ghosts were so scary. It has so many appealing qualities from comedy to real pathos.

Why was this the right time for A Christmas Carol?

P.H.: When we were talking about it around a year ago, we said, if we only had a really great company of actors, and a superb actor like Stephen Ouimette, let’s say, to play Scrooge, we should do it. So I called up Stephen and asked if he’d consider it. He immediately replied that he had always, always wanted to play Scrooge. So the decision was made right then. The role is such an amazing part with such a huge arc from beginning to end. He’s such a horror at the beginning and then reverts to a playful schoolboy and finally a generous humane gentleman.
How does its message resonate with you now?
P.H.: I think it reminds me to keep the charity of Christmas in my heart 365 days of the year, not just on one day. What is charity in a meaningful way? Scrooge changes but does the world? The day after Christmas in London, there’s still the workhouses and prisons, the Poor Law, barefoot children in the icy streets. Scrooge’s ghosts don’t change the world, just one person. That says that we each individually have the capacity to change, even though the world may not. It’s like the much quoted line “God bless us everyone” which comes from Tiny Tim. So to me it poses some very strong challenges for us about need in our society and the greater world, a very pertinent topic right now in the face of the economic downturn.

What do you think a production of *A Christmas Carol* holds for viewers who are non-Christian?
P.H.: There are elements of Christmas in all faiths. It’s a time in the darkness of winter when all denominations meditate on goodness and light. You don’t have to be Christian to consider “how do we be good to our fellow men?” Charity is an important element of all faiths, found in the Koran, in the Torah, and so on. In our acting company we have members of many faiths – Jewish, Muslim, non-believers. I’m not a Christian, yet it holds a great deal for me.

*A Christmas Carol and Mother Courage and Her Children* will be performed by the NAC English Theatre Company, a company happily reinstated after many, many years. Tell us about the new company.
P.H.: Our company includes people from Nova Scotia to British Columbia. It also includes actors from all different cultural backgrounds and traditions. We’re also exploring different enabled people as a representation. We have a marvelous actor from Vancouver, Niall McNeil, who has Down Syndrome. He’s such a great complement, especially for *A Christmas Carol* which demands all different things of everyone. It demands a different way of approaching rehearsal because Niall doesn’t read. A theatre is not just a director and a playwright; it’s about an ensemble. An ensemble of actors representing so many aspects of Canada enriches the relationship of the work that we create, and the relationship that we’re building with our audience.
The Life of Charles Dickens (see Activity #2)

Charles Dickens (7 February 1812 – 9 June 1870) was the most popular English novelist of the Victorian Era and perhaps one of the most popular of all time. He created some of literature's most memorable characters, such as Oliver Twist, Ebenezer Scrooge, Nicholas Nickleby, Tiny Tim, the Artful Dodger and Uriah Heep, to name a few. His novels and short stories have never gone out of print. His concern for the urgent need for reform of socio-economic and labour conditions is a theme that runs throughout his work.

- Charles Dickens was born on 7 February, 1812 in Portsmouth, Hampshire, on the south coast of England.
- His early life was happy, filled with education at a comfortable private school, extensive reading of novels and production of theatricals with his siblings. His photographic memory even at a young age stored images for characters which he later used in his many novels and short stories.
- When Charles was 10, his family moved to Camden Town, a district in London. Shortly afterward, his father ran into financial problems and was imprisoned for his debt.
- Charles, at age 12, went to work at a shoe polish factory for meager wages to help support his family. Working here under appalling conditions provided firsthand experience which he used in later novels.
- After his father’s release from debtor’s prison, Charles was enrolled in a second-rate academy for higher education, an experience which, again, he recounted in his semi-autobiographical novel David Copperfield.
- At age 15, Charles took up work as a junior clerk at a law office; after a year, with the help of a relative, he became an apprentice reporter in a court of law.
- By age 21, Dickens had become a journalist for a newspaper covering election campaigns and political matters. This soon led to his creation of a series of short stories and sketches and then a serialized novel, The Pickwick Papers. He often wrote under the pen-name of Boz.
- Dickens' keen perceptiveness, intimate knowledge and understanding of people, and ability to spin a tale before long earned him world renown and a certain degree of wealth.
- By 1840, Dickens, at age 28, had already written five very successful novels, including Oliver Twist. All of them had first been published as monthly installments in literary magazines.
- In 1836 he married Catherine Hogarth, daughter of a newspaper editor. They eventually had ten children.
- In 1842, Dickens made his first visit to the United States and Canada where he not only met with the American President but was feted by the elite wherever he went. He gave lectures to adoring audiences and raised support for copyright laws and the abolition of slavery.
- Dickens’ work continued to be popular, especially *A Christmas Carol* written in 1843, the first of his Christmas books, which was written quickly to meet the expenses of his wife's fifth pregnancy. To keep it affordable, he self-published it and sold it at a very low price of five shillings. Unfortunately because of this, and rampant piracy, he made very little on the novella, a work that turned out to be one of the most loved Christmas stories in English literature.
- Throughout the rest of his life he continued to write, give readings of his works, engage in philanthropic works which supported hospitals and homes for destitute women and children, and lecture on the need for social reform.
- Most of Dickens' major novels were first written in monthly or weekly installments in journals and later reprinted in book form. These installments made the stories cheap and accessible, and the series of regular cliff-hangers made each new episode greatly anticipated on both sides of the Atlantic. Part of Dickens' great talent was to incorporate this episodic writing style but still end up with a coherent novel at the end.
- The last book published by Dickens was a comedy called *Our Mutual Friend*. An unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* was published posthumously.
- Charles Dickens died from a cerebral hemorrhage on 9 June 1870 at his country home, Gad’s Hill, in Kent, England.
- He is buried in Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey, London, with the inscription on his tomb reading: “He was a sympathiser to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England’s greatest writers is lost to the world.”
Other Novels by Dickens (see Activities #2 and 4)

Charles Dickens published over a dozen major novels, a large number of short stories (including a number of Christmas-themed stories, one of which was A Christmas Carol), a handful of plays, and several non-fiction books. If you enjoyed A Christmas Carol, here are some other books by Dickens that you should try:

**Oliver Twist** – Dickens’ second novel and the first English novel to use a child protagonist is notable for Dickens' unromantic portrayal of criminals and their sordid lives. This is an early example of the social novel which calls the public's attention to various contemporary evils: the Poor Law that stated that poor people should work in workhouses/poorhouses, child labour, and the recruitment of children as criminals. This melodramatic novel tells the story of a young orphan forced to endure the horrors of a workhouse until he is apprenticed to an undertaker. When he escapes the cruel abuse there, he is made to join a band of young pickpockets.

**The Cricket on the Hearth** – The third of Dickens’ five Christmas novellas, it centres on the poor Peerybingle family who live with a mysterious lodger and a cricket that constantly chirps on the hearth and acts as a guardian angel for the family. The story also tells of Caleb Plummer, a poor toymaker who works for the miserly Mr. Tackleton, and whose son Edward went on a voyage and apparently never returned. A heart-stopping crisis occurs and a strange coincidence is revealed during the Christmas season.

**Great Expectations** - It is regarded as one of Dickens’ greatest and most popular novels, having been adapted for stage and screen over 250 times, including a 1998 film starring Ethan Hawke and Gwyneth Paltrow reset in modern day New York City. The novel follows the story of the orphan Pip in his quest for maturity starting from childhood and ending with his eventual adulthood. All along the way Pip tries hard to be the gentleman he believes he is. Throughout his young life, Pip is mentored by a number of people: Magwitch, an escaped convict, Herbert Pocket who educates him to be a gentleman, and the eccentric, elderly Miss Havisham whose ward Pip falls in love with.
**David Copperfield** – This largely autobiographical novel records the events in the life of the title character as he grows from impressionable youth through adulthood. His experiences shape his character and therefore the choices he is forced to make. The people involved in his life, with their positive and negative influences, play a role in determining who he will become. This classic coming-of-age tale explores 19th century social conditions and their affect on one person, David Copperfield.

**A Tale of Two Cities** - This novel is set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. It depicts the plight of the French peasantry under the oppression of the French aristocracy in the years leading up to the revolution, the corresponding brutality demonstrated by the revolutionaries toward the former aristocrats, and a number of unflattering social parallels with life in London during the same time period. It follows the lives of Charles Darnay, a former French aristocrat who falls victim to the revolution despite his virtuous nature, and his friend Sydney Carton, a British barrister who loves Darnay's wife. A last minute surprise changes the course of events. The opening line of this novel is perhaps the most famous opening line of any novel: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times ...”

**The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby** – This comic novel centres on the escapades of a young man who must support his mother and sister after his father dies. His Uncle Ralph, who thinks Nicholas will never amount to anything, plays the role of an antagonist. Episodes in the eventful life of Nicholas include a brief period when he serves as a tutor at a horribly cruel private school run by Mr. Wackford Squeers, and a colourful interlude when he is engaged as an actor in a theatrical troupe run by Mr. Vincent Crummles. Needless to say, Nicholas overcomes the hardships and villains encountered in his life, and in the end becomes a thoroughly upstanding, well-adjusted citizen.
Some Terms Encountered in *A Christmas Carol* (see Activity #7)

**Debtor’s Prison** – Scrooge threatens Samuel Wilkins with Debtor’s Prison if he cannot repay the 20 pounds he owes him. Until 1869 in Britain, unpaid debts resulted in a term in prison. Since prisons were private enterprises, conditions varied from appalling squalor with prisoners of all types (often along with their families) crowded into large common cells to those where the prisoners were allowed to leave during the day to earn their keep and eventually pay off their debt.

**Counting House** – Scrooge ran a financial office where accounts of trade and lending were kept.

**Union Workhouse** – Poor people who could not afford to live unassisted were required to reside in the charity-run workhouse where conditions were harsh and work demeaning so as to encourage the able-bodied to help themselves.

**Treadmill (or tread wheel)** – This machine was used as a form of punishment in prisons in which the prisoner operated the device for long hours to grind grain or raise water. It was a machine powered either by stepping on a continuous series of treads or steps or by pushing a spoke of a large wheel to make it go round.

**Poor Law** – A system of poor relief in which paupers were either forced into workhouses or given to overseers who hired them out as cheap labour. The law was in effect in Britain until the modern welfare state emerged after World War 2.

**English Money** – Before decimalization in 1971, there was a bewildering set of money notes and coins. The British **Pound** Sterling (or quid) was about the largest unit, and a considerable amount in the time of *A Christmas Carol*. The pound was divided into 20 **Shillings** (or ‘Bob’) and each Shilling was divided into 12 **Pence** or pennies. Some other coins included the **Farthing** (1/4 pence) and **Quarter Farthing** (1/16 pence), **Ha’penny** (1/2 pence), **Tuppence** (2 pennies), **Sixpence** (6 pennies), **Florin** (2 shillings), **Crown** (5 shillings), **Sovereign** (20 shillings) and **Guinea** (21 shillings). Note that Bob Cratchit earned 15 shillings a week at his job. Cratchit would have spent a whole week’s wages to buy the ingredients for the Christmas feast: seven shillings for the goose, five for the pudding, and three for the onions, sage and oranges.

**Camden Town** – The unfashionable, market area in the northern part of old London where Bob Cratchitt and his family lived. This is also where Charles Dickens lived as a boy while working to support his parents and siblings.

**Roger de Coverley** – When Scrooge is taken by the Ghost of Christmas Past to visit the home of Fezziwig, Scrooge’s old employer, this is the name of the festive country dance they perform. It is related to the Virginia Reel with two rows of dancers facing each other and individual dancers weaving between the lines.

While the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to view merry London at Christmas time, the carolers sing of a variety of seasonal foods. **Gammon** is a type of ham; **Boiled Duff** is a pudding made of flour and water, sometimes with suet and raisins added, and boiled in a cloth bag. **Norfolk Biffins** were a variety of apple which were short and fat and became dark brown or maroon in colour by Christmas time, hence “**Norfolk biffins, squab (fat) and swarthy (dark skinned)**”.
**Gruel** – A thin, soupy form of porridge made of boiled ground grain such as millet, oats or barley, or even acorns or peas.

**Carrying Dinner to the Baker’s** – The homes of the poor were equipped with open fireplaces for heat and cooking but not with ovens. When something such as a goose had to be roasted it was taken to a bakery to be cooked. Bakers were forbidden to open on Sundays and holidays but would open their shops on these days to the poor and bake their dinners for a small fee. Christmas was a very busy time for bakers.

**Twice-turned Gown** – Mrs. Cratchit’s best dress which she wears at Christmas has been turned inside out to get more wear out of it. When the inner side became worn also it was turned back out again to get still more wear.

**The Pudding singing in the Copper** – The Christmas pudding is steaming in the copper vat over the small stove used to heat water for washing and laundry. The steam is whistling out of its spout.

Martha Cratchit is an **Apprentice at a Milliner**. Apprenticeship was a system of training young people in a skill or trade. Apprentices were usually about ten to 15 years of age and would live in the master craftsman's household for the seven years required to be accepted into the profession. Although most apprentices were boys learning all kinds of trades, girls were occasionally apprenticed to dressmakers or milliners (hat makers).

**Smoking Bishop** – A drink made of wine and port, sweetened and steeped with oranges, grapefruit and cloves, and served warm.

**Smoking Bishop Recipe**

- 5 unpeeled oranges
- 1 unpeeled grapefruit
- 36 cloves
- 1/4 pound of sugar
- 2 bottles of red wine
- 1 bottle of port

1. Wash the fruit and oven bake until brownish. Turn once.
2. Put fruit into a warmed earthenware bowl with six cloves stuck into each.
3. Add the sugar and pour in the wine - not the port.
4. Cover and leave in a warm place for a day.
5. Squeeze the fruit into the wine and strain. Add the port and heat. DO NOT BOIL!
Life in “Dickensian” London (see Activity #8)

Because Charles Dickens wrote with such detail from 1836 to his death in 1870 about the people and locations in and around London giving us intimate knowledge of the society of the period, this time is often referred to as Dickensian England. It corresponds to some degree with the Victorian Era, the period from 1837 to 1901 in which Queen Victoria reigned over the United Kingdom. Her reign was a long period of prosperity and relative peace for the British people, as profits gained from the overseas British Empire, as well as from industrial improvements at home, allowed an educated middle class to develop.

**The City’s Growth** - London in Dickens time was the largest, most spectacular city in the world. While Britain was experiencing the Industrial Revolution, its capital was both gaining the benefits and suffering the consequences. The population of London increased by a factor of four and one half between 1800 and 1880 reaching 4.5 million people. Unskilled rural people flocking in to take up industrial jobs were joined by poor Irish trying to escape the devastating potato famine. The fashionable middle class areas like Regent and Oxford streets were growing in the west, while in the east new docks were being built as London became the centre of world trade. The Thames River was clogged with ships from all over the world and London had more shipyards than anywhere else on the globe.

**The Streets** - The price of the population explosion in London was unbelievable squalor and filth as the city’s infrastructure was overwhelmed. Rich and poor mingled together in the crowded streets. Street sweepers attempted to keep the streets clean of manure, the result of thousands of horse-drawn vehicles. Hackney cabs used to carry one or two people were gradually phased out and replaced by omnibuses which carried several dozen passengers. Still, a traffic count in Cheapside showed a thousand vehicles an hour passed through the narrow streets in the area during the day. The city’s thousands of chimneys belched coal smoke, resulting in soot settling everywhere and making the air unbreathable. In many parts of the city raw sewage flowed along gutters emptying into the Thames. Livestock was driven through the streets to slaughter houses while street vendors hawking their wares added to the rattle. Pick-pockets, prostitutes, drunks, beggars, and vagrants of every description added to the confusion. At night the major streets were feebly lit by gas lamps. Side streets and lanes were rarely lit at all and torch bearers were hired to guide people out at night.

**Sanitation and Disease** - Living conditions were so unhealthy that the rapid increase in population, despite the enormously high death rate, was sustained only by a more rapid influx of immigrants from other parts of Britain. The death rate in the city in the mid 1800s was twice the birth rate. The average life span of an Englishman, during the previous century, was 29 years, and in London the average was considerably lower. Personal cleanliness was often
not a priority, nor was clean laundry. In unventilated, crowded rooms the smell of unwashed bodies would be stifling. Until the second half of the 19th century London residents who didn’t own a well were still drinking water from the very same parts of the Thames River that the open sewers flowed into. Deadly cholera outbreaks as a result of contaminated drinking water were common. Child mortality rate was extremely high. In 1839 it was estimated that nearly half of all funerals in London were for children under the age of ten.

**The Law** - London’s first police force, was created by Sir Robert Peel - hence the name Bobbies - in 1829 with headquarters in what would become known as Scotland Yard. The old London “watch” system, which depended on individual neighbourhoods hiring men to patrol for crime and which had been in effect since Elizabethan times, was eventually abolished. However, law and order rarely extended into the back streets and slums where violence and crime was a way of life. Dickens in his novels tried to bring about a desire to reform the Poor Law which sent the needy to prisons or workhouses and which he felt kept the poor downtrodden with no hope of bettering themselves.

**Education and Children** – In response to the fact that poor families could not afford to send children to schools, charitable and religious societies set up a system of “Ragged Schools”. These provide free education, the rudiments of literacy and numeracy, with a generous amount of religious instruction. Dickens disapproved of introducing religious doctrine at the expense of a practical education which would help the pupil become a self-sufficient member of society. Despite the availability of these schools, most poor children remained uneducated due to the demand for child labor and the apathy of parents, terribly poor and uneducated themselves. Children as young as five years of age were often sent to work begging or sweeping chimneys. Due to their small size, children were desirable for work in mines and on certain factory jobs where tiny hands were needed. The cycle of poverty continued as poor children, suffering with rickets and lung disease from working long hours in polluted factories and mines, had little chance of surviving to become healthy, let alone wealthy, adults.
Suggested Websites, Movies and Books

Websites of Interest

http://www.online-literature.com/dickens/  A large site which includes a biography of the author, online copies of each of his novels, short stories and essays, as well as a number of articles on the author.


http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/dickensbio3.html  A discussion on the traumatic effect Dickens’ brief period of child labour in a blacking factory had on his life and works.

http://charlesdickenspage.com/dickens_london.html  A description of the city of London where Dickens lived.

http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/exhibns/month/dec1999.html  Comments on and illustrations from the original publication of A Christmas Carol.

http://charlesdickenspage.com/fast-facts.html  A large site with much information on Dickens and the world he lived in.

Movies and Videos of Interest

A Christmas Carol (1951) starring Alastair Sim, Mervyn Johns, Michael Hordern and Glyn Dearman 86 min. This is the most well-known movie version of the story.

Scrooge (1970) a musical version starring Albert Finney as Ebenezer. 115 min.

Scrooged (1988) a modernized version starring Bill Murray as a nasty TV station executive. 111 min.


The Muppet Christmas Carol (1992) Kermit the Frog, Miss Piggy, Fozzie and the entire cast of the Muppet Show come together to re-tell the Dickens classic.

Books

The Annotated Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens with an introduction, notes, and bibliography by Michael Patrick Hearn. Available at Ottawa Public Library.

The Man Who Invented Christmas by Lee Standiford. A study of the story behind A Christmas Carol describes how Charles Dickens self-published the holiday classic, revitalizing his failing literary career and reviving the celebration of Christmas amid the struggles of the Industrial Revolution. Available at the Ottawa Public Library.
Activities

Before Seeing the Play
1. A Reading Assignment
Distribute copies of the section on “About the Play” (pp.1-4). Almost everyone is familiar with the storyline and the characters of A Christmas Carol, but it will be interesting to note that Dickens wrote the story in anger as a “sledgehammer” to bring attention to capitalist greed and social injustice. It is important for students therefore to read the background on the novel (p.1), as well as the short piece on the major themes expressed in it. The class could discuss whether change took place or not; if the same conditions exist today; what societal issues exist today that could be highlighted by another Christmas story if Dickens were alive.

2. A Reading Activity.
Have the students read the sections “The Life of Charles Dickens” (pp.12–13) and “Other Novels by Charles Dickens” (pp.14–15). Two fun quizzes on the information learned in these sections can be found at http://www.online-literature.com/quiz.php?quizid=223 and http://www.online-literature.com/quiz.php?quizid=42. It is interesting to note how much personal biographical detail Dickens included in his novels. The locations he described in his novels were known intimately by Dickens who walked hours each day through London.

3. An Improvisation Activity
Experiencing a variety of improv topics will help students relate to the material of A Christmas Carol. Some improv scenarios could be:
   a) a lazy student is wakened in the night by the ghost of a drop-out and three ghosts who show him his former diligence, the success others are now having in school, and what will happen in the future if he doesn't work harder.
   b) the grumpy manager of a fast-food outlet bullies his employees to work harder; when he is knocked unconscious by a falling box of frozen meat patties, he dreams of how loved the former manager was and how hard everyone worked for him; upon his recovery he is transformed to a generous, congenial boss.
   c) a bossy, mean older sibling dreams of how his younger siblings greedily divide up or sell his possessions on eBay after he is found mysteriously dead.

4. a) Writing Assignment to Learn about Story Theatre
Dickens’ novel of A Christmas Carol has been adapted for the stage using the style of Story Theatre in which the role of the narrator is played by the various characters in the story. Each steps forward to advance the tale and then enters into the scene with the other characters. Students can easily learn how to adapt short stories or novels for the stage. An activity outlined in the Study Guide for the NAC production of Angel Square illustrates the technique using the story of Peter Pan. Visit http://www.artsalive.ca/pdf/eth/activities/angel_square.pdf to get the idea. Almost all students are already familiar with A Christmas Carol, but another Dickens’ charming Christmas novella, The Cricket on the Hearth (see “Other Novels by Dickens” (pp.14-15) is less familiar and would be an ideal exercise to develop. Have the students read all or part of this story at http://www.online-literature.com/dickens/cricket-on-the-hearth/1/. Students will have fun writing parts for the kettle, the cuckoo clock and the cricket as well as the interesting human characters in this comedy.

21
4. b) Writing Assignment (continued): Younger students might find it amusing to write an episode of “The Simpsons”, casting Simpsons characters in the various roles of *A Christmas Carol* and then writing the dialogue for a plot based on the Dickens’ story.

5. Enrichment Activity.

6. A Scene Study Activity
Use the Scene Excerpt from *A Christmas Carol* (pp.6-9) for a scene study activity. This will require teams of four students to play the roles, with perhaps a fifth student to coordinate the team and work as director. Some of the language might initially be a challenge because it is written to suggest the cockney dialect of central London. To hear what the dialect sounds like visit [http://web.ku.edu/~idea/europe/england/england79.mp3](http://web.ku.edu/~idea/europe/england/england79.mp3). Additional work needs to be done on the physical interpretation of the more awkward characters. Find the comedy and the emotional discoveries each character makes as he or she tries to cheat the others. After some rehearsal try performing the scene excerpt to bring the various characters to life. (For students or teachers who are interested in using an accent for a play, visit [http://web.ku.edu/~idea/dialectmap.htm](http://web.ku.edu/~idea/dialectmap.htm) for an extensive sampling of accents and dialects from around the world.)

7. Enrichment Activity. Make the section “Some Terms Encountered in *A Christmas Carol*” (pp.16-17) available to the students so they can become familiar with certain names and customs no longer in use. Money is of constant concern by the characters in the play, so some familiarity with the monetary system of the time, such as shillings, pence, etc. might be useful. Parents might find the recipe for “Smoking Bishop” useful at Christmas time.

8. Another Enrichment Activity. Read the section “Life in ‘Dickensian’ London” (pp.18-19) to try to imagine what life for a child or a parent would have been like 150 years ago in this crowded city. Students will find it shocking to learn of the life expectancy of the period, the deplorable level of sanitation and the fact that children might be set to work by age 5 to support their family.

9. Students should be given copies of page 4, “Things to Watch for in the Production”. Keeping these events in mind will help them be drawn through the production.

10. Any trip to the theatre should also involve the students learning proper theatre etiquette while at the NAC. A handout is available on page 24. Please photocopy this page and distribute to students.
After Seeing the Play

11. Topics for Class Discussion on the Production (students may want to review the material About the Play (p.1-4).

- Style of acting chosen for this play; the use of song, dance and movement.
- Themes explored – what was it about? (Refer to “About the Play – Major Themes” (p.3) to spark discussion.)
- Production aspects:
  - Costumes – How well did they define time period, location, character? Examine the design drawings on pp.25-26.
  - Set – How well did it define location, the Christmas Season nature of the story? What mood did it convey? How well did the actors use the set? How did it change in appearance as the play progressed?
  - Lighting – What did it add besides making the action visible?
  - Sound and Music – How did the music contribute to the atmosphere and mood?
- Relevance of this story set many years ago in England to today’s Canadian audiences.

12. Write a Play Review. While the production is still fresh in their minds, have students review A Christmas Carol.

For older students have them refer to play reviews in The Ottawa Citizen or Xpress to give them an idea of the standard approach to theatrical criticism. You’ll find an outline for writing a review on page 12 of the Study Guide for The ‘Vaudevilles’ of Chekhov found in the NAC website http://www.artsalive.ca/en/eth/activities/. Theatre Ontario has an excellent guide at http://theatreontario.org/content/play_reviews.htm. Students should refer to their program (if supplied) or page 5 herein for correct production information. A review should cover, in general and more specifically when merited: design elements (lighting, sound, set and costumes), performances, direction, text (basic narrative, dialogue and the central themes).

For younger students they could write about their favourite moments, what the costumes looked like, what the set looked like and how it changed during the play, what they thought about the music in the play and what they thought was the moral of the tale. They could also draw pictures of their favourite moment(s) in the play.
Theatre Etiquette

Please take a moment to prepare the students for their visit to the National Arts Centre to explain what good Theatre Etiquette is and why it will enhance the enjoyment of the play by all audience members:

1. *A Christmas Carol* will be performed in the Theatre of the NAC. Matinées at the NAC are for students and the general public. It is important for everyone to be quiet (no talking or rustling of materials) during the performance so others do not lose their immersion in the “world of the play”. Unlike movies, the actors in live theatre can hear disturbances in the audience and will give their best performances when they feel the positive involvement of the audience members. The appropriate way of showing approval for the actors’ performances is through laughter and applause. For the enjoyment of all, people who disturb others during the show may be asked to leave the Theatre.

2. If you plan to make notes on the play for the purposes of writing a review, please do not try to write them during the performance, as this can be distracting for the actors. Wait until intermission or after the performance is finished to write your reflections, please.

3. It is important that there be no electronic devices used in the Theatre so that the atmosphere of the play is not interrupted and others are not disturbed. **Cell phones, pagers and anything that beeps must be turned off. Cameras and all other recording devices are not permitted in the Theatre.**

4. Tickets with assigned seats will be distributed by your teacher and to avoid confusion it is important to sit in the designated seat. In the Theatre all even numbered seats are on the left side and all odd numbered seats are on the right. This means that seats 10 and 12, for example, are actually side by side.

5. Programs may or may not be distributed at this student matinée. Some programs can be made available to teachers if desired with names of the artists. The program may also be used as a teaching aid to show how a program is put together.

6. The running time of the production is estimated at 1 hour 40 minutes, and there will no intermission. It is advisable to make a trip to the washroom before the performance starts, as anyone leaving while the play is in progress runs the risk of not being allowed back into the Theatre.
A Sampling of Eo Sharp’s Designs for the Production

costume concept for the ghost of Jacob Marley
concept for the offices of Scrooge & Marley
National Arts Centre programmes for schools made possible in part by

The National Youth and Education Trust

supported by Founding Partner TELUS, Sun Life Financial,

Michael Potter and Véronique Dhieux,

supporters and patrons of the annual NAC Gala,

and the donors of NAC Foundation’s Corporate Club and Donors’ Circle.

National Arts Centre Foundation