

PERUSAL SCRIPT

**A DICKENS
OF A TALE**

Written
by Geoff Callaway

A Performance Piece



Newport, Maine

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A DICKENS OF A TALE

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Author's Notes

This piece can be performed by a number of different actors, from a cast of eight, to a cast of four, to a one-person tour-de-force. The important thing to emphasize is the range of issues connected with holiday traditions surrounding Christmas. By no means does this piece attempt to cover all of the potential Christmas and Redemption themes; it does attempt to cover a few of those elements which appear in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and some inspirations from the author of this work which do not appear in Dickens' story.

The intent, above all, is to have fun. The cast should feel free to update any obsolete jokes, interact with the audience, ad lib and 'play' to the extent of their best judgment—and the Director's of course. But the relationship of the characters to Dickens' novella and its plot should not be altered beyond the liberties which I have already taken.

I have inserted "A Carol is Performed" into the line of soliloquies here and there to indicate that the audience would probably enjoy a brief intermezzo at that point. The choice of music and method of performance is entirely up to the Director's and the performers' discretion.

As much as possible, the characters should look and sound as if they have aged along with Scrooge, and are reminiscing after his recent demise—say ten years after the Christmas party at Fred's house at the end of *A Christmas Carol*. For the sake of clarity, that would probably make the period 1853.

Dramatis Personae 4m 4f with doubling, 6m, 4f without doubling

THE GHOST OF JACOB MARLEY, former business partner to Ebenezer Scrooge

BELLE, Scrooge's first love

TURKEY BOY, a Londoner

MRS. CRATCHIT, wife to

BOB CRATCHIT, Scrooge's Clerk

MRS. FEZZIWIG, wife to

MR. FEZZIWIG, Scrooge's first employer

FRED, nephew to Ebenezer Scrooge

MRS. DILBER, former housekeeper to Ebenezer Scrooge

TIM CRATCHIT, a celebrity—also known as "Tiny Tim"

A DICKENS OF A TALE by Geoff Callaway. 4m 4f. Doubling possible to 1m 1f, or all the characters could be played by 1 performer. Simple setting. About 80 minutes. Mid-19th Century costumes. It is ten years after Ebenezer Scrooge's "Great Epiphany" and he has gone on to meet his maker. Some friends and family have gathered together to eulogize him in a heartfelt memorial service that celebrates him--not as he was, but what he became. A comedic take on the power of redemption and forgiveness, *A Dickens of a Tale* brings together favorite characters from the novel to "sing" another Christmas Carol. **ORDER #3299**

Geoff Callaway is a classically trained actor who considers himself just barely "wise enough to play the fool." Along the way he has directed and written many works for the stage and served as a consultant on independent films. *Dickens* is one of his favorite pieces and comes from a place of love for Charles Dickens' work--and the fact that Geoff has performed the role of The Ghost of Christmas Present more times than he can recall. "There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humour." --Charles Dickens

A Dickens of a Tale was first performed by Bankside Repertory Theatre Company at the Jacoby Arts Center, Alton, IL in December 2015. Written and Directed by Geoff Callaway, the play featured the following players in the following roles:

Jacob Marley.....John J. O'Hagan *
Belle.....Colleen Vucinovich
Turkey Boy.....Weston Williams
Mrs. Cratchit.....Chrissy Calkins Steele
Mrs. Fezziwig.....Geoff Callaway *
Fred.....Caleb King
Mrs. Dilber.....Kate Roark
Tim Cratchit.....Michael Harrison

*denotes a member of Actor's Equity Association, the union of professional live stage performers and artists.

A DICKENS OF A TALE

Act I

THE GHOST OF JACOB MARLEY:

(THE GHOST OF JACOB MARLEY takes the stage. He is still carrying “the chain I forged in life.” He is also in the clothes he wore in life—a little worse for the wear. His make-up is a fright, and his hair tends to stand on end from all the heat in the Underworld.)

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that...Old Marley was as dead as a doornail.”

Funny expression, that. Imagine his surprise if a carpenter ever picked up a live doornail. It’s a wonder they even use that simile nowadays. And would a living doornail be suitable to the purpose even? I shouldn’t think so....

I suppose you could say that ‘twas I that sort of started the ball rolling with old Scrooge lo, those many Christmases ago. I, being dead, as was aforementioned, was given a brief furlough from Hell to come back and warn Scrooge about the eternal consequences of his current behaviour. I was half hoping that Ebenezer would be down soon to join me in my agony—him being accmpt for greater sins than mine. We could pick up where we left off: “Scrooge & Marley—Come visit us in our new location—Hell.

Borrow funds at diabolical rates!” That sort of thing.

On earth, we were partners in the most successful non-Jewish usury business in Greater London and experimental adventurers in the loan sharking trade. I was beginning to miss the old bugger. It had been, after all, seven years that I had predeceased him—to the day, don’t you know. Hell of an exit from Earth, eh? Kicking the bucket on Christmas Eve? I don’t believe in poetic karma justice, but dying on Christmas Eve has a most pathetic quality to it. And it was no consolation that my wife died the same night. Sent straight to Purgatory together, cheek by jowl as it were. Both of us are convinced it was the salmon mousse we had for dinner. Sigh. I was going to have the pate, but she said “No.....”

But anyway, a reprieve from Hell is a reprieve from Hell so I took the opportunity and came back up here to let him know that higher powers had arranged for him to be visited by three Ghosts: Christmases Past, Present and Future. If, after hearing their commentary on his miserable life on Earth, he decided not to redeem his blessings and live a life of Christian charity and service, then he'd be welcome to join me in our nice little hovel that I share with the Missus on the Fourth Level of the Inferno.

I had intended to give it a fair go: warning him that his “chain” of misdeeds was already three times longer and heavier than mine and he wasn't even dead yet. I know I scared the stuffing out of him—appearing suddenly in his bedroom on Christmas Eve and playing up the whole Scary Ghost bit—which was as much fun as I've had in years. “Scrooooooge!!” Rattle, rattle, clink with the chains. A bone-chilling scream. Moaning. “EBENEEZER SCROOOGE!!” Knocking books off the shelf. Blowing up the bed curtains. He was practically pissing himself, he was. Really put the wind up him and set the table for the three Ghosts. But I never expected him to embrace a full conversion. None of us did.

I mean, we're talking about a 19th Century middle-class English businessman and Type- A-pain-in-the-arse. Odds are against it, eh? Who would have thought it? I mean, I even left his bedchamber with the whole “Whhoooooo, Scrooooooge, Repent, Repent, Repent!” Doing my best rendition from *Hamlet*: “Swear, swear, swear...” because I was so sure he'd “Bah Humbug” me and carry on being mean and miserable. I even put a “Welcome Home Ebenezer!” sign on the front door of our HellHovel, I was so sure that he'd be down to join me.

...CONTINUES FOR ANOTHER PAGE AND A HALF

(MARLEY exits, lamely trying to frighten the audience.)

BELLE:

(BELLE enters. She is a well-to-do grandmother who looks years younger than her age. She has the air of a matriarch who successfully rules over a very large brood with elegance and grace.)

I am continually amazed by the bone-headedness of parents who name their children with odd monikers that are more or less guaranteed to produce frequent abuse from their schoolmates. Even if they are revered family names, give them a chance, why don't you? If you are trying to scar the child by sending them out named Ignatius or Fauntleroy or O'Bomber, then that's your own issue with the Lord, and you shouldn't be taking it out on the innocent children in the first place.

I knew this one lovely lad, Ebenezer, not a bad sort, but very introverted—probably because he had to endure the taunts of “Ebenezer, Bloody Geezer” or “Ever-Sneezer” or heaven knows what else. Kids are merciless; especially in this world.

I was just finishing school in those days and very impressionable. To be fair, Ebenezer was very charming in a sheltered, Mama's boy, overly-mannered sort of way. No trace of the bad-boy or pirate there. Now that would be quite funny, you know: “The Dread Pirate Ebenezer.” Hardly the sort of name that inspires fear in the British Navy. Oh dear, I seem to be channeling one of those merciless kids I was just warning you about. But the difference is that I truly loved Ebenezer Scrooge.

It did seem a bit awkward at first talking to him because he had no nickname. One had to address him as Ebenezer all the time which helped to preserve the distance and reserve in the relationship. My name has always been simple: Belle. It's not short for anything, but it sounds a bit like a pet name or another more intimate label. It means “beautiful” and I'll thank my parents forever for that particular gift. Even at this advanced age, I have been told that I still have “it.” Belle by name, belle by nature. Vanity. Ah well, it comes with success, I suppose.

But enough about me. Ebenezer's recent passing has left a bit of a void in my life. Not a lot, but a little bit. We never carried our relationship past what once it was, when we were young. I left him, in practical terms, but it was he who left me for an idol of gold.

We became aware of each other through Mr. and Mrs. Fezziwig when Ebenezer first came to apprentice in Mr. Fezziwig's accounting firm and warehouse. I was a mere village girl who did some part-time work there, though I enjoyed school and was very dedicated to it. Ebenezer was the cleverest of all of Mr. Fezziwig's apprentices; he could do large sums and equations in his head and had uncanny focus where business was concerned. He was rather handsome as well, in a stoic, measured sort of way. I liked the fact that he never went out of his way to impress me, as some of the other apprentices did. He simply did what he thought best and I thought to myself, "There is a young man that knows himself, knows what he wants and has the brains and diligence to be a success."

Naturally, I set my hat for him.

I mean, why wouldn't I? It wasn't as if I would be going into business or starting a career of my own. Most women really didn't pursue careers in my day. I knew my best prospect for happiness was to be a loving mother and a capable wife to a successful husband. With both of our efforts, at home and at large, we would thrive and be happy.

However, I think I would have made a good travel consultant if that had been an option. I read a lot of books set in places other than England.

As we got to know each other better, I realized that I would never find that space in Scrooge's heart—it was too full of ambition. Once he completed his apprenticeship to Mr. Fezziwig, he would set out on his own—to the City of London—and set up his own counting house for the big financiers of our industrious capital.

"Would you have space for a 'helpmeet' in your luxurious London home," I once asked him coyly.

"Oh Belle, that's so much to consider," he hedged. "You know starting out I will have to be very careful with expenses. I very much doubt I will be living anywhere near luxury. You wouldn't like that, would you?"

"I would be happy wherever there was a husband who truly loved me," I replied. "And who loved children. I don't need a stately home and servants; just the comforts of family and a roof that doesn't leak."

He chuckled at that. The place where Ebenezer slept at the Fezziwigs had a leaky spot in the roof, and if the rain was fierce, he'd have to move his pallet around at night to stay dry.

“Dearest Belle,” he said. “I should take you and wrap you up right now and bring you with me to the City.” I flushed. Could it be happening this suddenly? I was not sure I was ready, though I had given much thought to what I might say if Ebenezer asked for my hand. “But I cannot,” he continued. And all the light seemed to go out of the room.

“I must first be worthy of your love. I come from... difficult means and a broken family situation. My mother, she... well, Father had me board at school—a thoroughly horrible place—run down, harsh, depressing. I spent too many Christmases there alone while the other boys went home for the holidays. Even when my little sister, Fan, came to collect me one year...it was only slightly better. Father and I never got along.”

...CONTINUES FOR ANOTHER TWO PAGES

INTERMEZZO: A Carol is Performed

TURKEY BOY:

(“Turkey Boy” has no name. He represents the poor side of the holidays and is dressed in what used to be a halfway decent suit, but it does not fit him well and is obviously thoroughly worn. Still, it is his “Sunday Best” and he was proud to attend Scrooge’s funeral. He tends to twitch or fidget from time to time from hunger.)

I seen them take him away, I did. Poor old sod. Lost his mind at the end, they say. But he was good to me then. First years I seen him he looked at me like I was something you'd scrape off your boot before you went into the house; but then one Christmas morning, about ten years ago when I was a lad, everything was different. I was strolling down Scrooge's street in me Sunday clothes headed to church—my parents being

their usual late selves far behind me. I was tired and yawney from the night shift at the post office—catching rats, mostly—and I took my usual route past Mr. Scrooge’s dingy big house when he throws up his window and barks at me from the first-floor: “What’s today??!!”

“Eh?” I says, wondering who he’s talking to. “What’s today, my fine fellow?” he says.

“Today! Why, Christmas Day,” I’m looking up at him and I see that he’s in his cap and nightshirt looking as wild as if he’d spent the night playing tennis with bats. He starts muttering and gibbering to himself, so I thinks it’s a good idea to keep heading churchward—don’t want contagious madness falling all over me on Christmas, eh?

Then he says, “Do you know the Poulterer’s in the next street but one, at the corner?”

Was this a trick question, I asks myself? I says, “I should hope I did!” And still he keeps talking to me and jabbering to himself.

“An intelligent boy! A remarkable boy! Do you know whether they’ve sold the prize Turkey that was hanging up there? Not the little prize Turkey: the big one?”

“What, the one as big as me?” Heh, I was a bit smaller back then. Can you imagine now? It’d be the Bird that Ate Eastcheap.

Batty Master carries on, “What a delightful boy! It’s a pleasure to talk to him. Yes, my buck!”

“My ‘buck’??” I thinks to myself. He’s definitely winging off his perch he is. But being as it’s Christmas I only says “It’s hanging there now.”

“Is it?” the daft geezer says. Then, “Go and buy it.”

Well, that about set me off. What’s his game playing with poor folk like that? It’s an insult it is. We could no more afford that bird than we could sprout wings and lay eggs. So I says to him....well this is a family story so I won’t repeat what I said, but Scrooge then says to me:

“No, no. I am in earnest. Go and buy it, and tell ‘em to bring it here, that I may give them the direction where to take it. Come back with the man and I’ll give you a shilling. Come back with him in less than five minutes and I’ll give you half-a-crown!”

God’s in Heaven, you didn’t need to tell me twice with that kind of money on offer. So I sprinted up to Geoff’s and told him that Old Scrooge had lost his mind and was buying his prize turkey, no questions as to price, so leg it quickly over to his house and get the cash before he comes to his senses. I knew Geoff was in his shop because I had passed it every day wishing upon wishes that we could have a Christmas dinner like that bird with all the trimmings.

You didn’t have to tell Geoff twice neither. We leg it as fast as we can to Scrooge’s and sure enough, we get to his house and he’s still in his nightgarb looking every bit like the bats were still swarming around his head. He greets us at his door with a “Whoop! How are you?! Merry Christmas!”

He’s chuckling like a maniac, but true to his word he pays us both: half a crown to me, and a fiver for Geoff, PLUS he says “Why, it’s impossible to carry that to Camden Town. You must have a cab.” And as quick as Bob’s-Your-Uncle he pays a cab to take Geoff to someplace in Camden Town and back. Doesn’t even keep the bird for himself.

If I hadn’t seen it, I wouldn’t have believed it. The wheezy bugger blathers out his window not even knowing what day it was, buys the biggest turkey I’ve ever seen for dinner and then ships it off to God-knows-Who in Camden Town. I was thinking of going by Scrooge’s after church to see what else he might hire me to do: get the Butcher to send pig ears to Parliament?

Now, I suspected that he’d been up all night drinking the furniture polish, because no one would credit that “Bloody Geezer Scrooge” would caper around in his nightshirt and buy prize turkeys that he didn’t intend to eat. Generosity? Charitable spirit? Don’t make me laugh. Them’s hardly the words you’d pin on Scrooge. Bellicose? Dirty Tricks? Now that’s more like it...

Mind you, this is the same cantankerous old buzzard that didn’t give a tinker’s cuss about working people on the street. Didn’t even acknowledge their existence. And now it’s like I’m one of the family. Oh he

remembered me, all right. He became like a distant uncle I never had suddenly returned home from the sea, or a foreign war or something. If I was ever in need, all I had to do was call on him in his office and offer to do a bit of work and there'd be a shilling or two in it for me. Or Mr. Cratchit. He's as good as Mr. Scrooge when it comes to that. Messenger jobs, bit of cleaning or fetching, I don't mind. I'm not so clever with counting and figures or maybe there'd be a permanent situation there for me. But I still bless the day I ran beneath Scrooge's window that Christmas morning.

You see, he made a real difference in the end with how he lived. You weren't there, of course, but you should have seen how many people turned out for his funeral. You'd think the Prime Minister was being buried, such a crowd pressed into the church. Which is funny, because he would mention from time to time that he dreamed of being buried in a forlorn and forgotten churchyard with a pitiful slate headstone surrounded by weeds as the only marker of what he was. Not that he felt like he needed to be mourned; he said all his goodbyes whilst he was still with us. He remembered his friends in his will, but gave most of his fortune to the aid societies and widows and orphans.

But in the end, you see, he was only one man. I won't belittle what he did do, but it wasn't enough to bring any of us up to Belgrave Square. Don't know what I'd do if I lived up there, so it's not something I've thought about too much. However, I wouldn't mind a couple of extra rooms in our present digs. Just to have a bit of extra peace and quiet at the end of the day. Simple folk, simple needs.

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(TURKEY BOY exits softly singing an appropriate hymn or carol.)

MRS. CRATCHIT:

(MRS. CRATCHIT enters dressed well but modestly. She is animated, perhaps slightly nervous to be addressing the crowd. In her excitement, she sometimes loses sight of Victorian propriety.)

Bob's done so well for himself—and for us. I wasn't thinking so at first when he started clerking for Scrooge & Marley, but it all turned out well in the end, don't you know. Thank Heavens! It was touch and go there for a while—might have been the end of the whole Cratchit line. Well, at least his coat of arms; we'd have had to sell those off long ago just to keep body and soul together.

That's a bit of a joke. Robert Cratchit and family never had a coat of arms. We were lucky to have a coat *over* our arms. Hee! There's another joke. I shouldn't be laughing, though. Not so soon after Mr. Scrooge's passing. Lovely man. And you know, ten years ago, I would have been shocked to hear myself say that.

It's so hard to make ends meet these days. I was saying just that to the kids years ago before "The Blessed Day."

"Mummy," they were saying, "Mummy these sausages taste funny. They're like real sausages in the middle, but they taste like old breadcrumbs on the ends!"

"Well darlings," I says, "these are difficult times for your father and me. These days it's hard to make both ends meet."

It took them a while, but eventually they got it. How 'bout you lot? Need another minute? Hee hee hee, I can't seem to help myself. Must smack of ingratitude, eh? Laughing like a hyena here not three days after Mr. Scrooge's funeral. But you want to know something, I'll be glad to tell you: perhaps Uncle Ebenezer wouldn't have it any other way. Joy was the thing for him. Laughter, bonhomie, all of that; if he could have, he would have told jokes at his own funeral. Or danced a jig.

And yes, that's right you clever customers that heard me just now. I DID say "Uncle Ebenezer." Because he insisted that we must call him that the day he doubled Bob's salary and took such a great interest in our family. I was concerned at first. Ebenezer Scrooge was the type to invite you over for dinner and then cook you *for* the dinner rather than play the charming host. I never liked him. I told Bob so. But Bob is a saint: Saint Bob. Somehow, he has unconditional love for everyone—even the monsters.

It's unconditional love what has got us through. Sickly kids, long work hours for low wages, cramped living conditions—it's all enough to drive a normal family around the bend. But we loved our way through the

leaky roof, the leftover food, the dogpile into the beds at night in the single bedroom and we always found some comfort and humor, aye, humor in finding a way to keep calm and to carry on.

We've been lucky, but for most of our early days as a family we were struggling as most others are like to do. When the employers set the pace, you've got to run or fall down, you know? I mean, when it was just Bob and me, we did all right. But the money Mr. Scrooge and Mr. Marley was paying didn't go so far when the kids started coming along. We were grateful to have two pennies to drop into an empty tea tin at the end of a month.

I wasn't keen on Bob taking that job in the first place. Clerk at a counting house, horsefeathers! Bob could have done much better. He's always been dead clever with figures, and such an accommodating man—too accommodating sometimes—but you won't hear complaints about him from me. Sweet as pie, and really loves the children. He could have been assistant manager at a bank, or done the accounts at a large import firm, but Scrooge & Marley's was where he landed, God bless him.

Marley was the worst, by the way. It was no wonder the Devil came for him first. Although, actually, now that I think about it, it was hard to tell. Maybe Mr. Jacob was always so flamboyant that it covered up how mean Mr. Ebenezer really was. Marley was in-your-face evil; Scrooge was “lurking evil.” The two of them together ran off every decent clerk they ever had until Bob came along. And when Mr. Jacob died in agony from that awful food poisoning, did Mr. Ebenezer recognize Bob's gifts and implore him to become the next partner in the firm? No. He just let Marley's chair sit empty and took the profit shares all for himself.

I mean it, he was a poster boy right out of *The Seven Deadly Sins*. AVARICE (modelled by Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge).

I blush to say it, but in my weaker moments I suggested that Bob sneak home an extra lump of coal or two from work. But he wouldn't hear of it, thank goodness. Saint Bob. “Besides,” he said, “he counts them he does; he'd miss one if I nicked a crumb, and that would be the sack for me for sure.”

“He what?” I said.

“The lumps of coal. He counts them—right down to the dust. He keeps the offices cold enough to store meat in them in winter, but he knows exactly how many lumps of coal are in the chute at any given time. If you hadn’t knitted me my sweaters, my love, I would long ago have keeled over like a frozen cod right at my desk. Thanks!” and then he kisses me. Honest Saint Bob. If Shakespeare had modelled Macbeth on *him*, the “Scottish Play” would last about three-and-a-half minutes:

Witches: “Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter.”

Bob: “If Chance will have me king, then Chance may crown me king.” Witches: “But...um...uh....”

Bob: “Good night to you, fair ladies, and a very Happy Christmas to you all!”

“Boom!” END OF PLAY

Well, it was “The Blessed Day” what changed all that. We call it that here in Castle Cratchit. It was the Christmas Day ten years ago when Mr. Scrooge had his great Epiphany, or Dance With the Devil, or whatever you call it. We were so grateful to have Bob home for Christmas Day that we weren’t even minding the leftover porridge and the bean and barley soup that we’d be having for meals. It was good to be a family, warm, happy and waiting impatiently to give the presents that we had made for each other.

It had not been long after we returned from church that there was a knock on the door and a large man with a huge parcel asked if we were the “Bob Cratchits.”

“We are,” says Bob. And the man comes into the house brisk-as-you-please. He puts the package in the kitchen and says, “Right, well that’s all sorted then. Merry Christmas all!” and he skips right back out the bleeping door and into a waiting cab before any of us can object. I didn’t think we were in any danger, of course. Camden Town is not the hotbed of anarchy and exploding parcels that one would think. In a few more years....who knows?

...CONTINUES FOR ANOTHER 3 PAGES

(MRS. CRATCHIT exits, blowing her nose loudly. BLACKOUT. END OF ACT I.)

INTERVAL

Act II

INTERMEZZO: A Carol is Performed

MRS. FEZZIWIG:

(Enter with food and kitchen paraphernalia, which she eventually takes back to the kitchen. She is another grandmotherly type who looks younger than her years. She is unaware that her party guests have arrived before she expected them and is already slightly tipsy.)

[Ad libbing with the Caterer who is offstage: “Cary, you can’t serve this swill! That’s for later. It’s practically cooking wine. Put out the good stuff now. That way, when their tastebuds are all numb, we can shove the cheap plonk on ‘em. What? Who’s here already? The guests?!! No!!! You didn’t.... Oh Dear, & etc.”]

Hello, Hello, welcome to the party. If you’re here for the Women’s Auxillary Temperance League---you’re in the wrong place. If you’re here to get Rogered, then you’re in the right place.

Blast the luck! For almost fifty years, Mr. Fezziwig and I have hosted a Christmas party that—well, it’s become something of a local legend. And though I loved Ebenezer Scrooge like a son, I find it highly inconvenient that he died this week and had his Memorial on this particular day. But, we women of a certain age are resourceful and resolute! I shall not allow something as trivial as Death to interfere with tradition and celebrating the birth of Baby Jeebus. *[Yells to Cary (o.s.): “No no, leave off the brandy. Put it down, lad! There’s nothing wrong with it, and you don’t need to sample any more of it!”]*

My solution was, if I can’t leave the Fezziwig Christmas Party to attend the Memorial for Scrooge, I’ll bring the party to the memorial. If you’re quick about it, there’s brandy and punch over on the buffet. But don’t dally; Cary can’t seem to keep a cork in it apparently...

In addition to the Country Reel, and the Mummer's Waltz, we dance all of the most popular jigs, reels and waltzes and newfangled gyrations that the young ones are all abuzz about. [*She demonstrates some inappropriate dance moves.*]

But we always finish with the "Sir Roger" to close out the festivities. Yes, nothing says "Merry Christmas" like a good "Rogering."

By the way, now that we're all here, don't stint. Cary and I have been cooking all day. The dancing will start in an hour, after everyone has had some drinks and a bite to eat.

[*She starts to interact with the audience.*]

Bless me but I love the end of the year holidays. Can't get enough of them. The festive decorations, the parties, the tradition. December is one mad rush at the Fezziwigs. And of course, when you swing both ways, there's so much MORE to do. Isn't that right, luv?

Yes, that's right, we celebrate Christmas *and* Chanukah here. Mixed marriage, you know. Fezzi is a nominal Christian and I'm a fully-fledged, zaftig Jewish Belle of the Ball.

[*points to an audience member: "and I'll be dancing with YOU later on, bubbie."*]

...CONTINUES FOR ANOTHER PAGE

[*To another audience member as she exits:*

"Here, luv, you look half starved, have a bit of this..."}]

FRED:

(*FRED enters looking like a prosperous businessman. He has about him the relaxed air of a gentleman who has already finished his "bucket list".*)

Family always wins through in the end. Or so they say. Maybe it doesn't, now that I think of it, but in my case it did. Eventually.

Ebenezer Scrooge was my uncle, God rest his soul now. He was my mother's brother and never had children of his own, but also never seemed interested in our family's affairs in any significant way. Four times a year—especially at Christmas—I would do my duty as a nephew and make, as my wife would say, “the voyage of futility” to Uncle's office to invite him to holiday dinners. New Year's, Easter, Mid-summer's Eve, Christmas, it made no difference to Ebenezer Scrooge. He wasn't having any of it. And to tell you the truth, I started to become glad of his refusals. Who would want a sour, socially inept old geezer moping around and sucking all the joy out of the room? Still, I always held out hope that the Lord and crushing loneliness would do the work of the ages and change his mind.

Ten years ago, it changed. No one was prepared for it. Least of all him.

He caught us totally by surprise, I must say. I had done my usual duty on Christmas Eve, calling on him at his business—never have I dared to stop by his home to be told “Bah, Humbug!” whilst I stood on his steps. We chatted for a bit: him bashing the whole Christmas tradition, me holding the high ground with as much grace as I could muster. And I left Scrooge & Marley's as I always did—Christmas Dinner invitation offered, Christmas Dinner invitation chewed and spat back at me for my trouble. If I had dared, I would have invited his long-suffering clerk, Bob Cratchit and his family to dinner as well. But I was not certain that Bob would ever dare to accept an invitation with Uncle Ebenezer looming over him snorting disdain from both nostrils.

My wife jumped three feet and landed side-saddle in a chair when Uncle suddenly stuck his head around our dining room door on Christmas Day—unannounced—and barked “Fred!”

I had my back to the door, or I would have landed in my wife's lap. When I turned round, there he was, dressed to the nines looking like some earl that had just come from Whitehall.

“Why bless my soul!” I said, trying to get my breath back. “Who's that?”

“It is I. Your uncle Scrooge,” he said, with a heartbreaking mix of sorrow and joy joined to an air of humility that I had never suspected he would be capable of. “I have come to dinner. Will you let me in, Fred?”

Let him in!!! Why, it’s a wonder I didn’t shake his arm right off of his elbow. We had only just started to enjoy some hors d’ oeuvres when Topper and all the rest of them arrived. After a moment’s shock to all, they all embraced Uncle and drank many a toast to him for a long overdue visit. Topper drank a few too many toasts and had to be eased onto the settee.

It was well-nigh on midnight when Uncle Ebenezer finally took his leave. He said that he had to be sure to get enough sleep because he had a busy day at the office on the morrow—and a special surprise for Bob Cratchit. Now, if I hadn’t just seen him make merry with my household and friends, and seen him at the center of the games and songs, I would have worried for old Bob. But there was a gleam in Uncle’s eye that told me that all would be well and that perhaps this was more than a brief holiday from his usual misery and complaint. He never said what had caused the change of heart, but for my money, I wouldn’t care if a whole host of demons visited him in the small hours of the night and scared him right back to humanity. Serve him right, it would, and I mean that literally. Whatever it was that made him human again, I thank Heaven for it. For he was the cheeriest, liveliest and most magnanimous gent you would ever chance to meet from that day on—this side of being fitted for a strait-jacket.

We carried on the next day when he sent a messenger to my house to come meet him at his house. An invitation! Who would have believed it? A few folk had already gathered on his stoop by the time I had arrived—Bob Cratchit was there, I was glad to see, and even his housekeeper, Mrs. Dilber. We followed him around the rest of the morning just to witness the miracle. He wished everyone a good day, and a “Happy Christmas” and said that he was so glad to be out of the office while other businesses were still open.

He bought Mrs. Dilber a new gown that was suitable for a regal ball, a fine new heavy overcoat, with gloves and a top hat for Bob Cratchit, and bless my soul, a new wallet and a gorgeous walking stick for me.

We were all lunching at The Savoy and earning curious looks from the patrons—well, we *were* rather an interesting circus of folk after all—when Uncle touched me on the arm and told me he'd like a private word when the meal was concluded. We toddled out of the dining room mid-afternoon with much shaking of hands and “A thousand thanks Mr. Scrooge!” and all of that. We “hip-hoorayed” him merrily as he “Whoop! Whoop” ed the rest of them into cabs and took me by the arm, saying,

“Walk with me, dear Nephew.” I wanted nothing else at that moment. I had no idea what to say further, but I was content just to be with the dear old man and to listen closely if he chose to speak.

And speak he did. It was not the number of words that caused my eyes to water, but the feeling which he gave them. “My boy,” he began, “I am sorry that I have almost wasted my life.”

“Almost?” I said, instantly regretting the witticism. What was I thinking?! Would I undo in a moment what must have taken a lifetime for him to realize? Cursing my cleverness, I was in the act of apologizing when he cut me off—

“Aha! Well said, Fred. You have every right to chastise me for the way I've treated your generosity and hospitality all these years past. Yes indeed. I have been an abominable boor and killjoy ever since your dear mother passed on—yes, and for many years before that too.”

I was speechless. He pressed on, visibly moved by what he was about to say.

“You see, my boy.....ahhh, I beg your pardon. You see, I loved my sister more than my own life. She was the only thing in this world I cherished more than wealth and status. Fan was so precious to me that all the spark seemed to die in me when she died...far too young...far too young. I never got over it; not even to this day. You may know from her that I once considered betrothal to a sweet young woman—Belle was her name—but never thought myself worthy until I could provide a suitable situation for a family. That became my excuse. As I sought to insulate myself from the disagreeable world your sister and I grew up in, I became more enamored of all that money can buy and I swore that I would free us from father's influence once and for all.”

...CONTINUES FOR ANOTHER TWO AND A HALF PAGES

(Lights out on FRED.)

MRS. DILBER:

(MRS. DILBER enters. She is a little bit overdressed, but not untastefully so. She's "sparkly". She tends to move a little more coarsely and practically than her fine dress would demand, but she is not slovenly.)

My old gran was fond of saying, "Well, you know you can't take it with you." It was easy for her, and us; we never had much in the first place. You come from nothing, you go on with nothing.

And that's exactly what I've learned from working for Mr. Scrooge. All that money he had—all the privileges he might want and what good is it doing him now? He traded a fine townhouse for an oaken casket and nearly nothing from his life went into it with him when he died. But to his credit, he learned the truth of it ten years ago on that miraculous Christmas Day. One day, he's a miserable old miser, eating cold soup and porridge in a dark, drafty house, and the next he's as happy as Larry—throwing money and favors around like King Midas on a spending holiday.

Here, I had worked for him for, Lord, it seems forever, and was never convinced that he even knew my name half the time. It was "here, you!" or "Hey!" One might have thought my name was Hey You, the way he used to carry on. I don't know why I bothered, except that he did pay wages on time and was no more abusive than most employers—better than a few, I expect.

But the change in him that Christmas morning ten years ago was something to behold, it was. I had the day off—without pay, of course—because I had asked for it to be home to cook for me mum and the rest of our family. I didn't think of him all that blessed day, so thankful I was to be in a place of warmth and cheer and love. Ahhh, we had such a lovely time and went to bed late because we didn't want to see the end of Christmas Day.

Boxing Day, of course, I had to be back on the job—though how much of a mess one man could make in his own house when he didn't even celebrate the holiday made me wonder why he didn't just let me stay home then as well. But as I'd had no word to the contrary, I rushed to get to Mr. Scrooge's house so as not to be too late—him being a stickler for punctuality and all. Up I come only to find the servants' entrance locked and bolted. "Oh dear," I says to myself, "this can't be good."

So I runs around to the front, knowing that it would cause even more of a stir—late to work, coming in the front door—only to find it locked up tight as well. No candles burning inside, no sign of life.

"AAcck!" I thinks, "he's fallen off his perch and no one can get in to see to him."

It was a desperate situation, let me tell you. I was so frightened for Mr. Scrooge's well-being that I strolled up the street to the café and had a nice quiet pot of tea with a scone and strawberry jam. I kept looking down the street every once in a while to monitor the progress, expecting any moment for the Coroner and a meat wagon to show up and sort out the carcass of Master Ebenezer the Skinflint. I was on such pins and needles that I got up, stretched and ordered another pot of tea and scones. A manic concern for my employer animated my whole being as I chatted amiably with a lorry driver who was soon off to Southampton with a load of throw rugs.

Sorry luvs; did I drip any of my sarcasm on you there? Hard to control sometimes— especially when reminiscing about Mr. Scrooge and the way he *used* to be.

But let me tell you what happened—that which I can't still reckon now ten years after the event. I'm sitting in the café, about to go home for a nice, well-earned, lie-down when I see Mr. Scrooge and some other well-to-do folk come up to his door and go inside as merry as a circus troupe. "What's all this, then," I wondered. "I'd better get down there spit spot and have a look."

Well, I come up to the front door—which was still standing wide open, mind you—and take a peek inside to see Mr. Scrooge in the middle of the parlour being the life of a party that had obviously started the day before and was carrying on through Boxing Day. His nephew, Fred, was there with his wife, some others

who might have been relations for all I knew, and a couple of tradesmen following behind—apparently taking orders for goods to be delivered.

I thought I was dreaming. “Pinch me,” I thought, “the dear buzzard has finally gone off his trolley.” And that was when he noticed me standing in the doorway. “MRS. DILBER!” he shouts, making me jump, “Come in here at once and close the door behind you!”

“Oh dear,” I think to myself, “I’m in for it now. Late, lurking at the front door, no excuse that could be considered reasonable—except for being locked out.” I just hoped that he wouldn’t shame me too badly in front of his friends and relations. “Yes, sir,” I said as I approached. “Yes, sir. Very good Mr. Scrooge, sir.”

“This woman!” he bellows, and I think “Right, now I’m in for it; reprimands for everyone to hear. I wonder if they need housekeepers down in Chelsea...”

“This woman,” he repeated, “has been in my employ for...well, it seems like forever.” “...and now she’s sacked and out in the streets,” I was hearing him finish in my head.

...CONTINUES FOR ANOTHER TWO PAGES

(MRS. DILBER wipes a tear and turns very elegantly to exit.)

TINY TIM:

(TIM enters like a celebrity—which he is, in a way—and enjoys interacting with the audience as if they all know him as a celebrity. He is huge, and his suit is about two sizes too small for him.)

Hello, hello, nice to see you. Hey, hows ye been? All right, eh? Good, good. Thank you for coming. It would have done Nuncle proud to see all of the folk who turned out for the funeral and said such nice words and such. Can you all hear me in the back? Yeah? Good, good. Em, heh, heh,... I hope Uncle Scrooge will forgive me this suit. I, uh, well normally I have to have my suits tailored as the ready-mades don’t quite do the job, you know. Too small. And I have one at my tailor’s right now, but the gent said it wouldn’t be ready

until tomorrow. Fat lot of good that does now, right? But not to worry, I says, I have an old suit that might serve. I don't have many clothes in black, because... well.. that's just not my style you know?

But I figured that what I have in my wardrobe back at the flat would be ok, except that when I packed for this current tour, I grabbed all the clothes that fit and sort of forgot that what I left behind were the clothes that I don't wear for one reason or another—this apparently being one of the reasons. Plus, it's the only thing in black in the closet.

See, when I heard Mr. Scrooge had died, I hopped the next train for London and didn't even take an overnight case. Figured I'd have enough in the London flat, right? My manager says, "Here now. Hang on a minute. We've got bookings lined up! You can't just pop off to London for a week in the middle of a tour; what'll I tell the promoters?"

"Tell 'em I'm recovering from a minor injury," I says. "What minor injury?" he says.

"You," I says.

"Me? What about me?" he says.

"You're a pain in my arse," I says. 'Scuse the French and apologies to the kids in the audience who should be in bed anyway this time of night, no? Eh? Ok, just don't tell your mums.

"We'll make up the dates when I get back," I says. So I suppose I should pick up that suit and then perhaps pick up some more clothes before I head back up to York.

Couldn't miss the funeral, though. And I was glad that folks were kind enough not to laugh. At me, not at Uncle Scrooge. No one was laughing at him. I think folks were genuinely sorry that he passed. Which is interesting when you consider how he was for so many years.

I know he did me Dad a great kindness, and as for me, well, I was pretty nigh a goner years ago, what with a bum leg and always feeling like I never got enough to eat. I knew it was rough on me parents though, so I always tried to be chipper and not add to the burden. It was better anyway to be like that; if you focus on the good, the bad doesn't seem to be so horrible. And horrible it was when I was young. But Mum and Dad kept

the horror from the household as best they could. Still, you couldn't hide from it once you walked out the door. All-pervasive, it was.

As a weak and sickly child I suppose I felt it more than most people. So I'd tend to daydream to escape from the oppressive air, misery, what have you. Daydreaming came easy to me—especially when I was hungry. I would daydream that I was a knight of King Arthur's Round Table, rescuing maidens and helping the poor. Or a great inventor who thinks up useful machines to help society. But mostly I dreamt of being a champion prize-fighter.

You're laughing. Why? Why wouldn't a kid nicknamed "Tiny" Tim want to grow up to be a famous prize-fighter? Despite a chronic cough, dodgy leg and undernourished frame, a kid can dream, can't he? And such a kid as that, might, conceivably, dream of being a powerful champion, a righter of wrongs....and attractive to the ladies. Am I right? I'm right, aren't I? I'm still single, you know. If you're interested....

Never underestimate the power of an optimistic outlook! That's the lesson I learned from my father. See things as they *should* be, not always what they look like on the surface. I love me Dad....and me Mum. Such good role models they've been. When I told them about my dream, they didn't laugh, they didn't scold; they smiled at me and said they hoped that since my body wasn't working so well for me that maybe I'd be happy using my mind to help people, right the wrongs, help the poor and such.

So I set about to arrange my mind to become a famous inventor. But one Christmas, about ten years ago, a miracle happened. Dad's boss, a dire old badger, suddenly decides that he's going to become our personal benefactor. He starts by sending over a huge turkey dinner, without so much as a "by your leave," and...oh, Heaven above,...I ate for England. I mean I was stuffing it down. There was so much, none of us had to stint to be sure that everyone got some. It was lovely.

...CONTINUES FOR ANOTHER PAGE

Whatever that is.

This is just me so don't take offense: Merry Christmas to All, and to All a Good Night!

And..... Wait for it.....

God bless Us, Every One!

(TIM rocks his exit to raucous Christmas music, shaking hands, high-fiving, and playing the crowd.)

CURTAIN

End of Play