

Program Notes

BY ANIKA CHAPIN

It all began, they say, with a gravestone. In 1841, Charles Dickens, already a famous and celebrated writer, was giving a lecture in Edinburgh, Scotland. While sightseeing, he wandered into a graveyard, where he spotted a grave that read "Ebenezer Lennox Scroggie - Meal Man." The title referred to Scroggie's career as a corn merchant, but Dickens misread it as "Mean Man" and was left wondering what a man could do in life to earn that title written upon his gravestone for eternity. Two years later, Dickens was planning to write a pamphlet appealing to the British public to pay more attention to the horrific working conditions of the poor, but decided that he would have more impact with a story instead. He remembered Mr. Scroggie and turned him into Ebenezer Scrooge, a mean man, indeed. Scrooge became the incarnation of the selfish rich, hoarding his own money and indifferent to the suffering of the good people around him.

To say that the story was a hit would be an understatement. Written in less than two months in 1843 and published on December 19th of that year, it had sold out its entire run by New Year's. Thirteen editions had to be printed in 1844 alone, and the story, which Victorians had dubbed "a new gospel," is credited for popularizing both the phrases "Bah! Humbug!" and, more remarkably, "Merry Christmas," which wasn't widely used before the story's publication. The story's fame lasted well beyond Dickens. Reading the story on Christmas Eve became a key tradition in many families, and it is said that it is the most popular Christmas story of all time (and possibly also the most famous ghost story, too.) To this day, *A Christmas Carol* has the honor of being the most adapted story ever, with 24 film adaptations (the earliest from 1901), dozens of television versions, and several theatrical incarnations.

Although Charles Dickens had first conceived of the story as a way to wake the people of his time up to a specific issue, his story captured themes that were far more universal. Scrooge is not an evil man, but he is a man who has allowed his life to get wildly off course, valuing money over every other human connection and shutting himself off from the world around him. The visits from the ghosts are a supernatural wake-up call, a reminder to Scrooge



An illustration from the first edition of *A Christmas Carol*

that it's never too late to reconcile with the pain in his past and set himself on a path of caring and connection. Although most of us could do without ghostly visitors, we could all use a reminder to be loving, generous, and kind to those around us.

The writers of *A Connecticut Christmas Carol*, L J Fecho and Michael O'Flaherty, recognized the universality of Dickens' story. In 2009, they were working together at Genesis Theatre in Reading, Pennsylvania, which Michael had co-founded in 1971. The two wanted to offer their audiences a new take on the classic tale. Inspired by the German heritage of many of the people in their area, they created The Belsnickel

Scrooge, which drew on characters from Germanic folklore. The show was a hit and has been performed several times since its premiere.

They decided to work the same magic for Goodspeed, where Michael O'Flaherty has been the longtime Resident Musical Director. They set their new version on the stage of the Goodspeed Opera House in 1925, where the actor William Gillette has been asked to play the role of Scrooge by Mr. Goodspeed himself. And, although this Scrooge will face the same ghosts—Christmas Past, Present, and Future—that we know and love, they take a new form in this version. For it stands to reason that Connecticut, with its illustrious inhabitants, would have some illustrious ghosts. You'll meet a few loved (and not-so-loved) Connecticut figures in this version of *A Christmas Carol*, along with the familiar favorites from the original story.

This is the third year that *A Connecticut Christmas Carol* has been presented at Goodspeed, and each year it has grown more beloved. And it's not stopping here—director Hunter Foster, who is also the Artistic Director of the Redhouse Performing Arts Center in Syracuse, NY will be directing a new Syracuse version of the show there later this year. The tale that sparked from a simple misreading of a gravestone (a grave misunderstanding?) almost two centuries ago has found a new telling that reminds us all, no matter where we are, to celebrate the true meaning of Christmas with kindness and generosity—and a special community flare.

*a Connecticut
Christmas Carol*