

Writer's Notes

BY L J FECHO

Back in 1971, Michael O'Flaherty (Goodspeed's Resident Music Director) co-founded, along with the late Jane Simmon Miller, a community theater called Genesis in Reading, Pennsylvania. Michael was in his early twenties, and I was just thirteen years old when I found my way to this very special theater that opened its arms to young people, encouraging them to explore every facet of musical theatre. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship. In later years, a second theatrical collaboration evolved when I talked Michael into writing a musical about Genesis' fabled early days, called, appropriately, *GENESIUS, The Musical*. The show was presented in 2007 at Goodspeed's Festival of New Musicals and was subsequently showcased in New York City the following summer.



Michael and I were not writers by trade, although we had dabbled in the process throughout the years. But after *GENESIUS*, we had caught the "creating-bug" and wanted to write something else. I had been the Artistic Director at Genesis Theatre for over a decade, and I was looking for an annual production of *A Christmas Carol*. Many of the versions I found had already been presented several times in the Reading area, and, to be honest, we were looking for something where we wouldn't have to pay royalties. Reading is in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutch Country, so I thought it would be very unique to take this classic story and set it in Berks County, which has an abundant German heritage. The "Belsnickel" is a sort of "Bad Santa" etched in Germanic folklore, and from that character concept, Michael and I created *The Belsnickel Scrooge*, a Pennsylvania Dutch version of *A Christmas Carol* set in Reading during the Great Depression. The production has been performed at Genesis and other Berks venues since 2009, with much success.

Approximately five years ago, Michael mentioned that Goodspeed was looking for a holiday production to call their own, and I jumped right on that and suggested that we take the coveted Dickens tale and transplant our Pennsylvania Dutch version of the musical to Central Connecticut—Hartford/East Haddam. We decided to set the show on the stage of the Goodspeed Opera House in 1925. The premise is that Mr. Goodspeed himself has requested that legendary Connecticut actor and original Sherlock Holmes (and hometown boy) William Gillette play Scrooge in a final production of *A Christmas*

Carol before the Opera House is shuttered for good. After doing extensive research, I discovered that the great showman P. T. Barnum and satirist Mark Twain not only lived in Central Connecticut at one time, but they knew each other and were also friendly with William Gillette. Those historical figures created the very foundation for the ghosts that visit Scrooge on that fateful Christmas Eve. To add to the fun, J.P. Morgan, the influential Hartford financier,

visits Scrooge as the musical's new version of Jacob Marley. All the other classic Dickens characters are on hand, too, such as Bob Cratchit, Tiny Tim, Scrooge's nephew Harry, and his sister Jen, to name a few.

Taking a page from the late, great Broadway librettist Peter Stone's theatrical playbook (*1776, Titanic*), I appropriated Gillette's, Morgan's, Barnum's, and Twain's humorous and often times thought-provoking quotations. I stitched them together throughout the scenes so their sage advice and comedic mockery of old Scrooge, entwined with Michael's inspiring music and lyrics, make for a lighthearted, amusing, and very special holiday experience!

In our first year tryout of this new musical, Michael and I couldn't wait to see how audiences would react to this unique retelling of the Dickens story. Their overall reaction to the show last year was nothing short of overwhelmingly wonderful. We had successfully created a new version of *A Christmas Carol* without taking anything away from the soul-searching, heartfelt, life-affirming message found in the original book.

And now, we are both truly looking forward to finding out your reactions to this customized storyline once again, with a few new surprises added in, as we fully digest your localized "Nutmegger" input.

Thinking long term, Michael and I have high hopes that this magical Christmas story will become a tradition at Goodspeed and be presented annually for many Decembers to come. However, since "the gift is the present," it's our sincerest wish that you and all of Connecticut embrace our new version of *A Christmas Carol* that features this great state and the wonderful people in it, as we hope you make this your newest holiday tradition!

*a Connecticut
Christmas Carol*