

# WILL & COMPANY

## *A Christmas Carol*

**Art Form: Theatre**

**Style: Classical**

**Culture: Western European**

### MEET THE ARTIST:

**Will & Company** is a multicultural theatre ensemble with Professional Designation in Arts Education that performs exciting adaptations of some of the world's greatest classic literature. Under the artistic direction of *Colin Cox*, they present major scenes from plays interspersed with narration and background information. Trademarks of Will & Company include physical humor and dazzling swordplay. The troupe performs Shakespeare's perennial favorite *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as well as adaptations of literatures great works: *Robin Hood*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Homer's *The Odyssey* and Charles Dickens' novella *A Christmas Carol*. Will & Company has performed locally at The Geffen Playhouse, The Los Angeles Theatre Center, and El Capitan and tours nationally to present both classic works and original plays on diversity. In 2005, Will & Company was nominated for a GLADD award for their production of *A Pebble in My Shoe*.

### ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

*A Christmas Carol* is a humorous and touching tale by one of England's most beloved authors, Charles Dickens. This story is a non-denominational thematic exploration of poverty, family and giving. True to the Will & Company style, *A Christmas Carol* is highly interactive - students get the chance to act alongside a group of professional actors and contribute to a delightful rendition of the famous story.

### PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

**About the Author** Victorian novelist Charles Dickens (1812-1870) is one of the most popular writers of all time, with credits including *Oliver Twist*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*. He became known for his rich characters and vivid prose. Dickens' mother forced him to work in a shoe-polish factory starting at age twelve, driving him to incorporate the woes of the working into his writing. However, he covered such diverse social topics as the economy, Victorian bureaucracy and rigid social stratification. Dickens was also known for his evocative descriptions of London, elevating the city almost to the status of a character.

Narrator Charles Dickens (Stephan Wolfert) looks on as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come (Seth Laursen) shows Scrooge (Ventura Alvarez) his grim future.



MUSIC-CENTER

**About the Novella** Dickens wrote five Christmas novellas, of which *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is the first and most famous. This ghost story tackles the problems of social injustice and poverty. It was written as a *potboiler* (a book written for profit that lacks literary strength) in order to pay off his mounting debt. Despite this inauspicious genesis, the novella proved that not all potboilers lack artistic merit. *A Christmas Carol* not only provided Dickens needed money, it quickly became one of the most iconic Christmas tales ever written. His story is also credited with reinvigorating Christmas traditions, at a time when they were in decline. The original printing included illustrations created by noted English caricaturist, John Leech, a man of sharp wit who was of like mind with Dickens when it came to social injustice and poverty.

**Synopsis** Ebenezer Scrooge, the main character, is a mean and miserly man believes that Christmas is just an excuse for otherwise productive members of society to miss work and for the poor to expect handouts. He doesn't believe in the good cheer and charity that the season promotes. On Christmas Eve, Scrooge is working in his counting house with Bob Cratchit, his clerk. It is cold, as Scrooge will not allow any use of coal. After visits from his irrepressibly cheerful nephew Fred (who is dismissed with the famous "Bah! Humbug!") and two solicitors seeking money for the poor (who are similarly rebuffed), Scrooge lets Bob Cratchit go home to his poor family. That night, Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former business associate, Jacob Marley -- a man who was as greedy and cold as Scrooge is. Marley warns Scrooge that if he continues to live so selfishly, he will spend eternity wearing the chains that his greed has forged.

Three ghosts visit Scrooge that night: the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. In different ways, they show Scrooge the error in valuing money over people. Scrooge is frightened by the bleak picture of his life and promises to change his ways. He awakes on Christmas morning a changed man. He becomes jolly and charitable, and transforms into the man he promised the ghosts he would become. He carries the spirit of Christmas with him all year round.



(Photo by Chris Emerick)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- If you were to retell the story of *A Christmas Carol* in two or three sentences, what would you say?
- Which characters did you identify with most? Which characters did you identify with least? Why?
- Describe Scrooge when he was young. What occurred that hardened his spirit, turning him into a cold-hearted miser?
- What things did you learn from this story?
- What are the characteristics of the holiday season that are portrayed in the story?
- Did Will & Company's performance stir your interest about the books of Charles Dickens? In what way?
- Have you ever heard, read or seen a film, play or other presentation of *A Christmas Carol*? If so, how was this performance different?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

As a class, think about *A Christmas Carol* and follow these steps to dramatize a class version:

Outline and record the key scenes on the blackboard.

List the main characters and choose three words that describe their personalities or physical characteristics.

Discuss the setting of the story. How many different locales and time periods are depicted? Ask the class how these places and times may be represented.

Refer to your plot outline; divide the scenes into three parts -- beginning, middle and end.

Cast the scenes. (By dividing the story into three parts, different students get a chance to portray the main characters.)

Perform the story, improvising the dialogue and action, or have different narrators tell the beginning, middle and end while others act out or mime the parts.

After the performance, discuss the scenes, emphasizing positive things the students did. During discussions, refer to character names instead of names of students who played the parts.

Legend:

- ⦿ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▮ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- \* Connections, Relations, Applications

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ❖ Charles Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* as if it were a "carol in prose." Christmas carols were often written to tell stories of the Christmas season. Take a favorite Christmas carol and use it as a musical structure to tell part of the Dickens' story.
- ▮ Party games were very much a part of a traditional Victorian Christmas. Notice that there is no mention of the giving of gifts throughout *A Christmas Carol*. Instead, this was a holiday for gathering with friends and family over good food and good company. The Cratchits sit by the fire after their meal and sing songs or tell stories, while at Fred's the revelers provide us with examples of the popularity of games such as Blind Man's Bluff and Questions. Make a list of the special traditions (games, songs, foods, visits, etc.) your family and friends use to celebrate Christmas or other winter holidays.
- ⦿ This story concerns the reversal of fortune of a rich miser. It has a pattern similar to many popular stories: the poor and deserving people end up doing well, and the villainous miser ends up a changed man or is ruined. How many other stories can you compare with this one? Consider another popular Christmas story: *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*. Make a list of other stories whose lessons revolve around too much or too little wealth, greed or misplaced values.
- ⇒ How is listening to a story a valuable experience? How does it compare to reading it or watching a film or video of a book?



## SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Dickens, Charles. *The Annotated Christmas Carol* with notes by Michael Patrick Hearn. Norton, 2003.

Gaslight etext of the reading edition: <http://www.mtroyal.ab.ca/gaslight/carol.htm>

Resources about the Victorian era in England: <http://www.victorianweb.org/>