

A Christmas Carol

A Conversation with Carey Perloff, Co-Adaptor and Director of *A Christmas Carol*

ONE OF THE MOST BASIC QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT IS, WHY ARE WE DOING A NEW CAROL? HOW IS IT GOING TO BE DIFFERENT FROM A.C.T.'S OLD PRODUCTION? WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS, AND HOW HAVE THEY CHANGED DURING THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THIS PIECE?

CAREY PERLOFF: We went through incredible institutional soul-searching as we discussed *Carol's* continuing significance to A.C.T. artists and audiences. Contrary to popular belief, *A Christmas Carol* is not a cash cow. It takes tremendous resources, in terms of staff time, creative energy, and financial support to mount a production of such grand scale each year, and we knew it would take even more to create a new production from the ground up. Yet there are deeply compelling reasons to keep this extraordinary story in our repertory. Among the foremost reasons is the multigenerational aspect of the production. Every winter, *Carol* announces to the world that young people are central to A.C.T.'s aesthetic experience. Our Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) Program and our Young Conservatory (YC) are incredible, and here is our chance to really celebrate them and say, "Look what this institution can do."

I think we also realized that one of the amazing things about theater is the degree to which it swims in a river of its own time, that any great classic is reflected in the present moment. The particular way *A Christmas Carol*, the novel, was adapted 29 years ago was very much a reflection of its own moment, historically and theatrically. And theater has changed so much, our theater in particular. In the intervening years, the earthquake hit and the theatre collapsed, and it was rebuilt as one of the great fly houses in the country. It is fully trapped, it has all kinds of bells and whistles that the theater never had before that should be used and imagined, and could be used to great effect to tell this story, this ghost story, which is what Dickens called his novel.

This emphasis on the imagination just jumped out at me when I reread the novel. Dickens really felt that if he could create a character as desiccated, as cut off—the word "Scrooge" really comes from a word meaning "squeeze," and Scrooge has really squeezed every drop of joyfulness out of himself—could it be possible to somehow trigger his own empathy? Is it possible to bring somebody like that back into the world? I think the entire journey of *Carol* is about triggering someone's empathy and imagination, such that someone persecuted and removed from society finds a way back into the family of man.

Dickens was also playing with the idea of the ghost story. Could he create a situation in which this man was forced to believe in these three ghosts? So, of course in the beginning Scrooge is saying, I don't believe in any of this, it's rubbish, it's humbug, but slowly he starts to believe, and that is the power and artistry of the imagination.

I went and talked to [San Francisco Ballet Artistic Director] Helgi Tomasson, and he told me that the ballet had faced the same question: *Why a new Nutcracker?* And he told me, "If you want *Carol* to be important to A.C.T., you have to do it. You have to put it at the center of your agenda." I had never thought about doing a new adaptation myself. Never. And I remember this long lunch in January with [co-adaptor] Paul [Walsh] when I first brought it up. I had no idea what he was going to think of this—and then we went for it. We agreed to keep everything we treasure about the old version, but to otherwise start from scratch. We worked out a system that we never really had to articulate. I said I would do the songs, and went away and did the lyrics, while Paul pulled all the dialogue from the book that we thought we wanted. Then

we just looked at it scene by scene and kept going off to work on our own and then bringing things back to each other. It was surprisingly easy. We didn't feel the least bit territorial, or that we were writing in two different voices. It all seemed very clear, which in part is because from the beginning we set ourselves some ground rules.

WHAT WERE THE GROUND RULES?

First, no narration. We were excited to see whether everything that happens in the novel could be dramatized. There are many "story theater" versions of *A Christmas Carol*. I wanted to see if we could really make this a play. When A.C.T. first did *Carol* [in 1976], it was more customary for children to be read aloud to, but I do think children for better or worse have shorter attention spans now. In the previous version, because there was so much time spent on setting the scene and narration, we didn't get to Marley until 40 minutes into the first act. I thought, This is a ghost story! We need to be at the first ghost within 15 minutes. The second rule: we decided that while we will keep it in Victorian England, we're not going to be slaves to that setting. We didn't want it to be realistic because it's a piece about the imagination. So the ghosts have to drive it. The third rule: create two 40-minute acts with an intermission. Children had a hard time sitting through the longer version and one of the fun things about coming to the American Conservatory Theater is intermission. You get to wander that gorgeous space and look down that beautiful staircase and go into the balconies.

We also wanted to try to create three distinct worlds for the ghosts of Past, Present, and Future. Christmas Past sings, "Do you remember?" We like to think that is an easy verb, but memory can be a very fraught, difficult thing, particularly if you are disconnected from your own childhood; or if you've had an unhappy childhood, then remembering things about your past can be painful and confusing. Part of what Christmas Past wants Scrooge to feel are the sensations he felt as a child, when he was more available to be touched by life, by others.

Christmas Present is about seduction, in a way: sensual and lively and very pleasurable, with the vibrancy and light of the present moment that you wish Scrooge would enter into.

And Future is about terrorizing somebody with the potential consequences of his behavior. So the ghost of Christmas Future in our production is a terrifying presence that rises up above the stage, reminding and warning Scrooge of what will happen to him and his own culture if he doesn't take responsibility for contributing to the world around him.

HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE NOVEL AND DECIDE WHAT TO KEEP AND FOCUS ON?

We went through the novel very carefully and looked at Scrooge's psychological journey. When you first meet him [in the book], he is a lonely schoolboy, and he seems to be sort of an abandoned child. There is a suggestion that his mother died in childbirth and that his father has had a very hard time with it. The novel also implies a kind of crossroads moment where Scrooge chooses money and wealth over love and family. Now, I wouldn't say that the moral of *Carol* is "Money is a terrible thing," but I do think the piece is about what happens when money and work become such obsessions that one's primary connection to the world gets severed. That's what happens to Scrooge. He starts as someone who knows how to love: he loves Fan; he falls in love with Belle; he has Dick as a good friend. And then what happens to him? Dickens gives us an incredible scene where Scrooge breaks up with Belle, and that turning-point scene was missing [from A.C.T.'s old version]. That's really the choice that puts him on the wrong path. I also felt the production should be much more dreamlike, like the book, which is very filmic. It cuts back and forth in time in this fantastic way. So instead of detailing Scrooge's adventure with the ghosts in a

conventionally linear scene-scene-scene structure, we tell his story in a kind of swirling pageant with scenes dotted throughout. So, for example, the Fezziwig dance represents the passage of time, as told in the evolution of Scrooge's relationship with Belle.

The other thing I wanted to see is if we could find a language for the script that echoes Dickens's. His descriptive passages are filled with surprisingly sensual adjectives and active gerunds. That's why I started the first song, "Piercing, piercing, piercing, piercing, / Biting, biting, biting, biting cold." It's right from the book! I thought it would be wonderful to preserve the kinetic energy of his descriptive prose. I chose lines I love, like the words about how cold it is, "stamping, biting," and the descriptive "clinking, clanking money," and just tried to create lyrics out of that. It was the same with the descriptions of the fruit. One thing that struck me when I reread the novel was how incredibly sensual it is. Particularly in *Christmas Present*. It made me think of an English cookbook by Elizabeth David called *Mediterranean Food*, which came out during World War II, when the English were doing without so much. Dickens's descriptions of the foods of Christmas reminded me so much of David's sense of the sort of miracle of Mediterranean bounty. I thought, here we are in Victorian England [in *Carol*], and it's cold and dark, and suddenly someone sees an olive. A fig. It's about Christmas's seductiveness.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT, IN TERMS OF THE COMMUNITY OF CAROL?

I think we always have to remember the number of people who are part of A.C.T.'s life who first came to A.C.T. to see *A Christmas Carol*. Every year it's in part an audience that's seeing theater for the first time. That's an important and inspiring thing. My hope is that this new piece will continue the tradition of welcoming a whole new generation of theater-goers to A.C.T. and to the world of theatrical transformation. It's important for the actors to remember that when you're standing on that stage, somebody is sitting out there seeing live theater for the very first time, and you will be what they remember years later. They will say, "I saw that performance, and it changed me."