

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
Carey Perloff, Artistic Director Ellen Richard, Executive Director

PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

A Christmas Carol

BY CHARLES DICKENS

ADAPTED BY CAREY PERLOFF AND
PAUL WALSH

MUSIC BY KARL LUNDEBERG

DIRECTED BY DOMENIQUE LOZANO

BASED ON THE ORIGINAL DIRECTION
BY CAREY PERLOFF

CHOREOGRAPHY BY VAL CANIPAROLI

MUSIC DIRECTION BY ROBERT RUTT

SCENERY BY JOHN ARNONE

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A.C.T.
american conservatory theater

DREAMING A NEW *CAROL*

BY ELIZABETH BRODERSEN (FALL 2005)

LOOK UP! LOOK UP! LOOK UP, KNOW ME BETTER!
FOR I AM THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS!
LOOK UP! LOOK UP! LOOK UP, KNOW ME BETTER!
I HAVE COME TO OPEN YOUR HEART,
I AM HERE TO BANISH THE DARKNESS . . .

—*A Christmas Carol*, adapted by Carey Perloff and Paul Walsh

From June to August this year, the unlikely sounds of Christmas could be heard wafting through A.C.T.'s offices in San Francisco, as early visions of sugarplums and holiday revelers danced their way across the rehearsal room floor just down the hall. This is an auspicious moment for A.C.T., which, after producing 27 incarnations of the company's beloved 1976 adaptation of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, has marshaled its creative talent and energy to create a brand-new version that will premiere at the Geary Theater in December.

When A.C.T. originally mounted Dickens's classic Christmas tale nearly 30 years ago, the Powers That Were felt optimistic that the show might be successful enough to return for one more season. At the time, A.C.T.'s *Carol*, adapted by Dennis Powers and Laird Williamson, was one of the few theatrical productions of Dickens's 1843 novella being performed in the United States. Over the next three decades, however, the annual production of *A Christmas Carol* became a cornerstone of the A.C.T. repertory, performed 832 times to a collective audience of more than 775,000, employing nearly 1,000 actors (including seven different Ebenezer Scrooges and hundreds of children) and 600 backstage staff along the way. After successfully remounting the same production for three decades—using the same set pieces, props, and costumes, with only occasional refurbishment—and in light of the plethora of new Bay Area holiday productions, including the San Francisco Ballet's new *Nutcracker*, Best of Broadway's new *White Christmas*, and Mark Morris's *The Hard Nut* in Berkeley—A.C.T.'s leadership deemed the summer of 2005 the perfect moment to breathe new life and spirit into the company's ever-popular holiday theatrical tradition.

“We went through incredible institutional soul-searching as we discussed *Carol*'s continuing significance to A.C.T.'s artists and audiences,” says Artistic Director Carey Perloff, who ultimately decided to develop a new adaptation of Dickens's text herself, in collabo-



Costume sketch for the Ghost of Christmas Past

ration with dramaturg Paul Walsh. “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 those reasons is the multi-generational aspect of the production. Featuring in each season’s cast the entire third-year class of A.C.T.’s top-ranked Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) Program, as well as almost two dozen students from the Young Conservatory (YC), A.C.T.’s acclaimed program for actors aged 8 to 19), *A Christmas Carol* has played a critical role in A.C.T.’s actor training curriculum, a role also central to the development of the new production.

Relationships among the cast of each year’s *Carol* are fostered by a mentoring program, in which each professional actor mentors an M.F.A. Program cast member, who in turn mentors a YC student; thus each generation helps usher the succeeding one into the life of the working theater artist. “This production announces to the world that young people are central to A.C.T.’s aesthetic experience,” adds Perloff. “Our M.F.A. Program, led by Melissa Smith, and our Young Conservatory, led by Craig Slight, are incredible, and here is our chance to really celebrate them and say, ‘Look what this institution can do.’”

Despite the stiff new competition looming literally around the corner last winter, audiences continued to flock to *Carol*, and it became evident that the A.C.T. production has become a vital part of the wider Bay Area community’s holiday experience. “We discovered just how passionate people are about *A Christmas Carol*,” says Perloff. “Dramatizations of this story seem to have become an important ecumenical American ritual at holiday time,

regardless of individual religious background or faith. Seeing *Carol* is an experience that people yearn to have, year after year. It is a remarkable story, a secular tale about transformation and the imagination.

“I also think we have to remember the number of people who are part of this company’s life who came first to A.C.T. to see *A Christmas Carol*, and that every year we have audiences who are seeing theater for the very first time.”

A NEW SCRIPT AND MUSIC

Because her vision for *Carol* at A.C.T. was so particular, and included so many more children and young people than any version she could find, Perloff, a playwright in her own right (*A Colossus of Rhodes*, *Luminescence Dating*), finally sat down with dramaturg Paul Walsh (whose previous translations and adaptations for A.C.T. have included *A Doll’s House*, *Creditors*, and *Edward II*) to begin work on a brand-new adaptation for A.C.T. They immediately went back to Dickens’s original novella.



Sketch of the set for *A Christmas Carol* by John Arnone

Taking advantage of the opportunity to tailor the script to A.C.T.'s needs, Walsh and Perloff set ground rules for the new version. The first rule: No narrator. Dickens himself, a familiar presence in many dramatic interpretations of the tale (including A.C.T.'s previous version), no longer makes an appearance onstage. "We were excited to see whether everything that happened could be dramatized," says Perloff. "There are many 'story theater' versions [of *A Christmas Carol*]. I wanted to see if we could really make this a play."

The second rule: Create two 40-minute acts with an intermission (fidgety children often had a hard time sitting through the previous version's 100-minute playing time).

The third rule was to stay true to the unique rhythms of Dickens's language. "We wanted to see if we could find a language for the script that echoed Dickens's," says Perloff. "His descriptive passages are filled with surprisingly sensual adjectives and active gerunds. I thought it would be wonderful to preserve the kinetic energy of his descriptive prose."

Adds Walsh, "Dickens wrote his stories and novels nearly two centuries ago to be read aloud, so they're already performative, in a sense. They have a cadence that's meant to be heard, and words that, while sometimes unfamiliar, are wonderfully theatrical. So we've held to as much of Dickens's language as is practical within our adaptation, at the same time trying to make sure that everything is crystal clear moment by moment and celebratory of the imaginative possibilities of Dickens's own text."

Music is integral to the development of the new adaptation. Composer Karl Fredrik Lundeberg (who scored Ibsen's *A Doll's House* for A.C.T., as well as numerous projects for film and television) is writing all new music for the production, including several songs and underscoring to provide *Carol*'s dramatic action with narrative continuity and an overall sense of magic and celebration. "When I reread *Carol* after not reading it for 25 years, I was struck by how comical and wry the writing is," says Lundeberg. "It almost reminded me of P. G. Wodehouse. So the lyrics for the songs were already there, in the text. Carey would take the first pass at ordering the words in a musical way, and then I would musicalize it. It's an interesting way to create a book for a musical, because Charles Dickens is the lyricist."

Lundeberg's score draws from a wide variety of traditions, from the folk tunes of his Norwegian family's musical roots to contemporary American gospel. "Subliminally, the music needs to have a lightness to it," he says. "I ended up writing a lot of the melodies in what's called the Lydian mode [in which the fourth note of a major scale is raised a half step], which gives them a sort of a lift. Because this is a piece that's going to be done, hopefully over many years, by people of different ages and levels of training, I didn't want the melodies to be complex, but I did want the harmonies to be interesting, and as they keep shifting beneath the melodies, things move along faster."

FANTASTICAL DESIGN

Also crucial to the collaborative development process has been the involvement of the *Carol* design team, which includes, in addition to Lundeberg, Tony Award–winning scenic designer John Arnone (*Lennon*, *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?*, and *The Full Monty*, among many others, on Broadway), costume designer Beaver Bauer (most recently, *The Gamester* and *The Goat* for A.C.T.), lighting designer Nancy Schertler (*The Real Thing*, *Hilda*, *Levee James*, and *Texts for Nothing* for A.C.T.), sound designer Jake Rodriguez (*The Colossus of Rhodes* for A.C.T.), and San Francisco Ballet choreographer Val Caniparoli (*A Doll's House* for A.C.T.). The team's participation began early in the script writing process, accelerating during workshops of the draft text held at A.C.T.'s studios last summer.

The visual aesthetic of the new production reflects Perloff and Walsh's desire to imagine *Carol* the way Dickens might have if he had created a production today. "I felt the production should be much more dreamlike, like the book, which is very filmic," says Perloff. "It cuts back and forth in time; it's written in this fantastic way. So instead of detailing Scrooge's adventure with the ghosts in a linear structure, we tell his story in a kind of swirling pageant with scenes dotted throughout.

"We also decided that, while we will keep the setting loosely Victorian, we're not going to be a slave to that period. The design is in no way realistic, because this is at its core a piece



A.C.T.'s *A Christmas Carol*, 2009: A reformed Scrooge (James Carpenter, center) celebrates the season with his nephew, Fred (Philip Mills, right), and the Cratchits: Bob (A.C.T. core acting company member Gregory Wallace), Anne (A.C.T. core acting company member René Augesen), and Tiny Tim (Calum John). Photo by Kevin Berne.

about magic and change. Dickens said that, if the ghosts could appeal to the imagination of this man such that he could ultimately believe in them, he would be transformed.”

Known for her inventive designs for the theater, Bauer took to heart her assignment to make the ghosts “scary and surprising.” Representing the combination of gorgeous costuming and ingenious stagecraft, they embody Dickens’s descriptions in his original text: Christmas Past is a candle, lit from within, who descends on a swing; Present is a Bacchic spirit of fecundity and abundance who sings a full-voiced gospel-like tune; Future is a gigantic puppet that flies across the stage on tie-lines. “The ghosts are intentionally androgynous,” says Perloff. “The point is that they are otherworldly, filled with light and unlike ordinary humans; they swing in from the rafters, they rise up from the depths below the stage on elevators. They hang above like specters. They transport.”

SCROOGE’S JOURNEY BACK TO COMMUNITY

Perloff and Walsh were particularly interested in the inherently theatrical possibilities of the ghost story that lies at the heart of Dickens’s tale. “I think, for Laird [Williamson] and Dennis [Powers], *A Christmas Carol* was a piece about the Solstice, very much about darkness and light,” says Perloff. “For me, it’s also about the imagination. Dickens had a profound belief in fantastical storytelling. He told this particular ghost story in the belief that, if you could trigger a person’s imagination, you could trigger their humanity. I believe that’s really what he was trying to do with this story.”

“In rereading a classic text like *A Christmas Carol*,” adds Walsh, “we always read from where we are today. Reading *Carol* this time, what we found was that Dickens in fact chose to write a ghost story. It’s not a story about the trials and travails of Victorian England, or about child labor and the abuse of children; he wrote many books about that. This is a much simpler story, about a man who has allowed himself to be separated from community and then is called back to community. He eventually finds his way back into the fold, because he’s been changed by the telling of the story.

“*A Christmas Carol* celebrates the possibility of theater to evoke and maybe even effect change on behalf of community, because we watch theater as a community. Theater celebrates that sense not of the individual, but of the individual in society, in community, and that’s the story that *A Christmas Carol* tells.”

Fundamentally, A.C.T.’s new *Carol* is a gift to the entire Bay Area community of theater artists and audiences. “One of the reasons this has been a very challenging process,” says Perloff, “is that we’re trying to do all this as imaginatively and efficiently as possible, so we don’t have to charge high ticket prices. We want this show to be affordable to the widest possible audience. This story is for all of us.”