

SC Touring Christmas Carol Pontifications

By George Younts

As I write this in December 2012 there have been over 70 performances with the completion of tour number five, so I figured that was worthy of at least four pages of thoughts and reflections.

A Christmas Carol in my Life.

1970 contained my first memory of *A Christmas Carol*. I was 3 years old and saw *Scrooge*, the musical film version starring *Albert Finney* in Clinton, Iowa (Mississippi river town near Mt. Carroll, Illinois where my family lived) on a very cold snowy December night. Finney's performance was my first experience of watching an actor, I can recall, along with being totally terrified by that Third Ghost. Eventually my family got the cast album, which I listened to a lot as a little tyke and later sang the *Thank You Very Much* song from the movie as part of my comedian act in the annual Pleviak Elementary School PTO Talent Show.

Then through the rest of my formative years there were the random holiday season television viewings. *Reginald Owen* in the 1930s Hollywood production. *Albert Finney* in the version, I mentioned above. *George C. Scott* in the role. Or *Alistair Sims* in the 1950s British production considered by many to be the best. Though, I'm not too keen on that one.

Jump forward to mid 20s where I wrote and directed an adaptation called *Citizen Scrooge* in Athens, GA for *Playmakers Improv* (a theatre troupe that I had founded). In this version *Ebenezer* owned a security systems business with music of *Queen* and the *Rolling Stones* serving as the soundtrack.

In my production research I bought and read the original story for the first time. Wow! *Charles Dickens* is a great writer. Did not really know this. Through middle and high school I had agonized through *Great Expectations* and *Oliver Twist* reading assignments because, well it was middle school and high school. Time got me ready this discovery.

Anyway, 3 years later in 97' I did a sound design and help build a set for a *BAK Middle School of the Arts* production in West Palm Beach, FL in my first year as a full time teacher.

Then in 00' at 33 (Finney's age when he did *Scrooge*), I played *Ebenezer* for the annual *Charleston Stage Company's* production in Charleston, SC.

Six years later I attempted a two act one-man version of it called *Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol*, at the *Village Playhouse* in Mt. Pleasant, SC. The process for that began with previews in July for the Holiday performances.

A year later, after mulling over that production's obstacles and outcomes, I decided to create a one-hour touring version based off the original source and *Dickens'* reading manuscript. It debut in 08'.

I do wonder, at times, how long I'll keep touring it. It treats me well, though. Being a literary classic you are always discovering, learning, growing from it and it has turned me into a burgeoning *Dickensian*. It has become, in a pleasant way, a really fulfilling and warm, old Humbugging type of friend to me.

Doing One-Man Shows.

The *SC Touring Christmas Carol* is the third one-man show that I have done if you disregard youthful aspirations as an amateur magician and three times as a comedian in the annual Pleviak Elementary School PTO Talent Shows in Lake Villa, Illinois.

The first in 2006 was *Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol*. A show of two fifty-minute acts where I learned a lot. However, I really had bitten off too much in my first time out. Then about a year later I created another one-man show with 35 minutes of poetry called *A Box of Rhymes*, which toured to schools during my planning period for three years to great success and in it began to hone my sense of what the genre requires.

I enjoy the format. I'm actually working on another new one-person show about *Dr. Seuss* to do in schools and libraries. So if you were interested in doing a one-man show? My unsolicited thoughts on the matter would be the following:

- Nowhere else will you find so much power, humility and lively connection to an audience in the same vehicle. However, it can be very lonely at times through the whole process but it's always a really cheap cast party.
- When you go onstage with other actors after doing a one-man show you will find that you are happier to be and work with them then you were before doing a one-man show. You appreciate them more.
- One-man shows allow you to become a geek for what you are performing. You are the maven for your subject material. It allows you to have more personal purpose and investment in what you are doing. The successes are all yours. And the failures too.
- Don't attempt the one-man show if you aren't willing to put in a lot of rehearsal time by yourself. It requires a lot of guts and commitment on your part. There will periods of extreme self-doubt where you think that you will never pull it off followed by moments of private personal back slapping success. Then that little nagging voice will come back to you of "Don't get too cocky there now. Pride goes before the fall! You really think that was good?" But the great thing is, is that the more you continue to

do it in performance then more the those voices become quieter and quieter. Your work just becomes what it is. Experience takes over. No major evaluating or analyzing after a while which sounds strange. I know. But it does happen if you stick with it over an extended period of time. You have live with it long enough that you've got it covered. It really has become your show. It is part of you,

- During the rehearsal process get people with artistic sensibilities and educated opinions you trust to preview you and not just your director, if you have one. This will be needed because, again, it is a lonely and isolated activity.
- You'll find out how good your acting endurance and vocal techniques are doing a one-man show along with what it means to take care of your energy and health during the run of the show.
- One of the benefits of doing a one-man show is audiences recognize you are doing it all. So they tend to give more imagination and benevolence into their relationship with you. In fact, you really begin to look forward to them immensely because they are the other cast members. And this especially goes double if there is a storytelling style to the production. But not always. They can look at you like circling sharks. Waiting to bite at any time.

For the Cause.

Growing up as a pastor's kid I witnessed the problem of *Building Centric Thinking* among churchgoers. More stunning and inspiring is a Cathedral as a house of worship than a little clapboard country church. However, the Bible reminds believers that God is present in both places if you are gathered there for him.

This fallacy is also found in theater communities where the viewpoint of a higher quality theatre always exists in higher quality performing spaces. *Building Centric Thinking* takes over again with the folks who do, and view, the theatre product and experience. *Peter Brooks'* inspirational book *An Empty Space* (1968) serves as antidote to these surface values when he reminds us of the necessary elements for theatre to exist:

"I can take an empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across the empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. Whenever one person performs and another watches in the same location, theatre is created. Lots of other things might be present: lights, costumes, scenery, makeup, seats, a raised platform, music, predetermined words; the event could incorporate hundreds of actors, thousands of spectators, and millions of dollars. But the basis of theatre, the essence of the event, is a theatrical collaboration: one person "acting," one person "auding" (listening and/or watching), in the same space at the same time.

This has always inspired me. Theatre can happen anywhere regardless of space, amenities, audience type, technical support or cost. This is why the touring of *The Carol* (as *Charles Dickens* use to call it in his reading tours) through SC annually is important.

The Carol continues to challenge me every year that I do it. A show in a prison, shelter or gymnasium demands another level of actor's commitment, performance skills, energy and risk taking. Performing in the spaces that it tours to can present many unforeseen obstacles, which you have to have the malleability to overcome. Plus, you are performing for those who have not paid for the show. So why should they care? They don't know you. You are asking them to watch and listen to only you! I mean really, why should they care? Who do you think you are? Thus, their response to you is different every time you perform along with how you bring those audiences into *The Carol's* theatrical world every time.

In addition, *The Carol's* message speaks to these audiences' lives more potently where hope and optimism for the future is desired and needed. A shelter, prison or retirement home audience requires you to be more honest, flexible, authentic and humble in performance and passion for the show. It keeps you more human in what you are doing. This is a good thing.

A Little Story.

The 2nd year touring had a performance in a public housing's activity room where there were just 2 old ladies in wheel chairs in the front for the audience. Ten minutes into it another wheel chair arrived with a cranky geezer who became crankier because I was in front of the room's only working electrical outlet where he charged his cell phone in the evening.

What to do? Stop. Plug it in and continue. While waiting his senility prompted more interruptions with "Where's your guitar?" What to do? After the third time stopped and asked, "What do you mean?" "Well this is a Christmas Carol isn't it? Aren't you gonna sing?" "Yes." I said and continued on to the *Ghost of Christmas Present*.

Then the 3 audience members grew to 12 and an argument erupted in the back during the *Ghost of Christmas Past*. Somebody was missing a blanket. Accusations were flying. I played mediator. After this commotion dissipated the room quickly cleared out. I continued on to Scrooge's gravesite with just the 2 ladies who began the evening. It finished up with "God bless us, everyone!" at a 75 minute running time for a 65 minute show.

And as for those 2 old ladies? After watching me pack up to leave they wheeled on over. I began a conversation only to realize they both were probably suffering from the effects of a stroke and did not have the communication skills that they use to have. So I smiled at them. They smiled back at me. Patted me on the hand and wheeled away.

For many of us, life is really not that hard.