Updating The Classics: An Actor's Approach To Portraying Dickensian Characters In A Modern Script

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UPDATING THE CLASSICS: AN ACTOR’S APPROACH TO PORTRAYING DICKENSIAN CHARACTERS IN A MODERN SCRIPT

by

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B.A. Louisiana State University, 2006

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Theatre in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this thesis is my performance in the play *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* by Mark Brown. I will research and perform the role of The Ghost of Christmas Past, a role which also plays the parts of Fan and Belle from Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. I shall perform in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* at the Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, in Partnership with UCF in December 2008 as a part of their 2008-2009 Signature Series season.

The main focus of this thesis is the exploration of how to create a performance of a classical character for a modern audience. I hope to maintain the integrity of Dickens’s characters written in 1843, while performing in a contemporary script written by Mark Brown in 2004. My performance and research question is how to successfully communicate Brown’s version of the story and still keep the spirit of the Dickensian characters as they were first written. I aim to discover and address the problems that may arise in combining the two versions of the characters. I will begin with my belief that contemporary humor and storytelling balanced with the essence of the classic characters that audiences may remember from the novel or other versions of this story will give the most effective, rich performance. Playwright Mark Brown strives for this balance in his script and my research for the role will focus on finding elements in my performance that satisfy both elements.

My research will include deep examination of Fan, Belle, and the Ghost of Christmas Past, as they appear in both Dickens’ novel *A Christmas Carol* and in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*. I will look at different interpretations of the characters in the many stage and film versions of this story that have been created since the original to investigate how others have attempted to update or recreate the roles for their audiences. My research will also include an
interview with the playwright for insight about his process of integrating old with new. My written thesis will include the findings of my research and preparation, a detailed rehearsal and performance journal, and extensive analysis of my discoveries, all of which will hopefully lead to a conclusive and useful approach for portraying contemporary characters derived from classical literature.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The contemporary performer cannot ignore the overwhelming presence of the Classics on our modern stage. William Shakespeare, who died over 400 years ago, is one of the most performed playwrights in the world. Countless colleges, regional theaters, and even Broadway venues continue to stage the same ancient Greek texts. Even famous novels of centuries past are converted into stage plays so that contemporary audiences may watch actors and actresses become their favorite characters. These stories are important to us, sacred even, and have become an inextricable part of Western culture and folklore.

Perhaps one of the best loved and most performed of all is Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. This magical fable of the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge and the spirits that lead him to redemption has become a holiday tradition and icon. Hundreds of stage and radio plays and films have been created out of the novel since its publication in 1843. Rare is the American who has never seen some version or other of the tale, whether on film, television, or stage.

One recent version is Mark Brown’s stage play *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*, which premiered at the Orlando Shakespeare Theater in Partnership with UCF in 2004 and was revived at the same theater in 2008. This play serves as a comedic sequel to the original tale, in which Ebenezer Scrooge takes The Ghosts of Christmas and Jacob Marley to trial exactly one year after the events of *A Christmas Carol* for harassing and kidnapping him. Rearranging much of the original text to suit a court case, Brown creates a new way to tell the story: through witnesses answering a lawyer’s questions. All of the familiar characters from *A Christmas Carol* appear to give testimony, retelling the events of the previous year, but in a completely new setting. The
effect is both compelling and comedic, and in both of OST’s productions of the play audiences have responded favorably.

The challenge for the actor portraying one of these established characters in a different setting lies in finding a balance between old and new. The responsible actor will strive to find a way to honor and maintain the qualities of the classical character while layering into the performance the new circumstances and character traits created by the contemporary playwright. Understanding how audience members may be familiar with the character, through the original novel as well as other adaptations, will help the actor create a character that is recognizable to the audience. Exploring the circumstances of the contemporary adaptation, by examination of the text and through experiment in rehearsal, may reveal new layers of the character to the actor, whose performance may communicate them to the audience.

That is the process with which I approached the characters of The Ghost of Christmas Past, Fan, and Belle in OST’s 2008 production of The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge. Faced with the challenge of playing a classical character in a new script, I studied Charles Dickens’s A Christmas Carol, various other modern adaptations of stage and screen, and in rehearsal the text and circumstances of Mark Brown’s play. By closely examining the characters of The Ghost of Christmas Past, Fan, and Belle in all of these versions of the story, I hoped to find inspiration for creating a performance that honored Dickens’s original characters, considered other adaptations familiar to contemporary audiences, and offered a new perspective in Brown’s play. In addition to this research, I examined how Dickens created A Christmas Carol and I interviewed Mark Brown about The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge. While in rehearsal and performance of the play I kept a journal of events, challenges and discoveries specific to this production of The Trial of
Ebenezer Scrooge and my performance in it. The chapters which follow chronicle the findings of this process, in hope that this record may assist actors in future productions.
CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND OF A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Charles Dickens published twenty novels in his lifetime, and none of them have ever gone out of print. (Staniford 5) His brilliance and popularity are unquestionable. To this day his works are studied, praised, and recreated on the stage and screen. The beloved A Christmas Carol is no exception.

When A Christmas Carol was published in 1843, the Christmas holiday was not as popular or widely observed as it is today. The holiday, which originated from pagan traditions, had been discouraged by the Puritans. (Staniford 103) Dickens, however, was a great fan of Christmas and its observances. Many biographers and critics consider Fred’s speech to Scrooge about the goodness and joy of Christmas (a speech which Mark Brown includes in The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge) to be a direct lecture from Dickens himself on how he personally felt about the day: (Staniford 89)

I have always thought of Christmas time… as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys…I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it! (Dickens 4)

His enthusiasm for the holiday was so great that after his most famous holiday tome he published four other Christmas novels over the next five years, (Staniford 204) though none have had the staying power of A Christmas Carol.
In an 1836 installment of Dickens’s work *The Pickwick Papers*, there is a precursor to the character of Scrooge and the possibility of redemption during the Christmas season. “The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton” features a particularly Scrooge-like gravedigger who dislikes Christmas and has a biting, sarcastic sense of humor. This character, called Grub, is kidnapped and redeemed by a pack of Goblins, just as Scrooge is taken away and taught by three spirits. (Staniford 91) This early incarnation of Scrooge may be a clue that *A Christmas Carol* formed in Dickens’s mind for quite some time before he wrote it.

He began writing *A Christmas Carol* after making a public speech one evening in October of 1843. There was a rally to save the Manchester Athenaeum, which provided the working class access to arts and education, a cause Dickens strongly supported. He agreed to speak at the event about education at the suggestion of his sister, Fanny, whose name he gave to a character in his Christmas tale. (Staniford 48) That same night he roamed the streets of Manchester, mulling over the story taking shape in his mind. “He wept over it, laughed, and then wept again, as bits and pieces swam up before him.” (Staniford 70) After returning to London, he continued these late night walks while he wrote the story in his head. Dickens loved long, brisk walks and often needed to take them before writing. (Epstein 258)

Dickens sat down to write *A Christmas Carol* for a number of reasons. His most recent novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, had received very poor reviews and Dickens felt the need to prove himself as a praiseworthy writer. More urgently, he found himself in debt and quickly turned out the book in hopes of making a large profit. (Staniford 126) This detail is rather ironic, considering that this book is a cautionary tale against greed and love of wealth. On a more idealistic level, Dickens had a lesson to teach his readers, and he wanted to make his point
“without browbeating or scolding, or mounting a soapbox. Perhaps he could get them without their knowing they were got.” (Staniford 70)

A Christmas Carol was written in six short weeks, just in time for the Christmas season. The little book was written and published all at once, unlike his previous novels, which were published in installments. (Staniford 86) Because of recent low sales of Dickens’s works, his publishers were unwilling to take a financial risk in funding the new book. Dickens decided to pay for the publishing himself, and on December 19, 1843, six-thousand copies were available for purchase. (Staniford 77) These sold out in four days, another printing was immediately ordered, and a third before January first of the new year. (Staniford 132-4)

A Christmas Carol was an immediate sensation with readers and critics alike. Due to publishing expenses, however, Dickens’s profits were not what he had hoped. He also faced copyright battles and pirated versions of his work in the United States. But he unquestionably regained the attention of his fans and contemporaries. Famed Scottish poet and journalist Charles Mackay said in London’s popular Morning Chronicle “We heartily recommend this little volume…to all who would enjoy in truth and spirit ‘A merry Christmas and a happy New Year.’” (Staniford 131) Another favorable review in the Atlas claimed that anyone “who perhaps took it up in the expectation of finding some careless trifle thrown off for the occasion…will find himself agreeably mistaken.” (Staniford 131) Finally Athenaeum praised it as a “tale to make the reader laugh and cry—open his hands, and open his heart to charity even towards the uncharitable.” (Staniford 131-2)

In addition to its success with literary critics, A Christmas Carol was enormously popular with the general public. Readers adored the book and found it inspirational. Total strangers
would strike up discussions about the book as they strolled along the streets. Dickens received countless letters from fans, many of whom described reading the novel out loud to their families as a new Christmas ritual. (Staniford 136-8) In 1844 alone, sixteen different stage adaptations were produced. Many of these were unlicensed, but Dickens let them go, regarding them as free advertising for his book. (Staniford 169)

The book remained one of the most popular of his career and in 1855 Dickens began giving public readings of *A Christmas Carol*, a practice he continued until the end of his life. Dickens, who always loved theatre and at one time wanted to be an actor, relished giving these readings and was described as expressive and impassioned. (Staniford 220) Audiences flocked to these performances and were emotionally and morally moved. One attendee, upon hearing of Scrooge’s gift of a turkey to Bob Cratchit, immediately bought Christmas turkeys for all of his employees. A factory owner, after hearing Dickens’s reading, decided to give all his employees every Christmas Day off henceforth. (Staniford 224)

Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* to restore the giving spirit of Christmas without being too heavy-handed. A great accomplishment of the writing is “his use of a deceptively innocent form to do such great work.” (Staniford 179) Using an entertaining medium, he teaches the reader without boring him. “*A Christmas Carol* is designed not to make us think or see or know but to make us feel. For Dickens, the power of the imagination expressed through fiction is, like the ghosts, an agent of regeneration.” (Epstein 174)

Dickens and his famous Christmas story made an impact on Western culture that remains strongly evident to this day. The novel even gave new words to our vocabulary such as “Bah Humbug” as an exclamation of dismissal and “Scrooge” as a term for a miserly, mean person. A
Christmas Carol is responsible for the spread of certain holiday traditions. Before the book’s publication, goose was the traditional Christmas meal. Turkey became the popular choice in England and the United States specifically because of the large turkey Scrooge gives to the Cratchit family. The lavish, joyful parties described in A Christmas Carol became an example for Christmas celebrations with greater mirth and circumstance. (Staniford 184-6) Indeed the book generally promoted and spread goodwill, joy, pleasure, and charity at Christmastime, and “Charles Dickens…played a major role in transforming a celebration…revitalizing forgotten customs and introducing new ones that now define the holiday…If Dickens did not invent Christmas, he certainly re-invented it.” (Staniford 193)

The story itself is a large part of our current holiday traditions. Folktales are usually passed down from oral traditions to eventual written versions of an old tale. A Christmas Carol has become the reverse of that process. What began as a complete written piece of literature has become an integral part of popular folklore through “Its hundreds and thousands of adaptations and productions…[which] have transformed a work of literature into part of the DNA of Western Culture.” (Staniford 196)

A Christmas Carol has been staged, restaged, rewritten, filmed, set to music, choreographed, and parodied numerous times. There are two operas of the story, a Broadway one-man show, and over 225 adaptations in stage, film, television and radio since 1950. (Staniford 174) The many stage plays, some of which I examine in further detail in the chapters that follow, range from strictly traditional to completely absurd, from one-man shows to large casts of over thirty (plus choirs and dancers), from touching and sentimental to dark and irreverent. There is no question that this story still speaks to audiences today, and “it is a mark of
Dickens’s genius that we return eagerly to this hopeful vision—millions of us now—year after year. And vow to do the best we can.” (Staniford 226)
CHAPTER THREE: INTERVIEW WITH PLAYWRIGHT MARK BROWN

On December 20, 2008 I met with playwright of *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* Mark Brown for an interview. Brown was also an actor in this production and played defense attorney Solomon Rothschild. We talked about his career, the writing and purpose of *Trial* and his new interpretations of the characters The Ghost of Christmas Past, Fan, and Belle. We met in the greenroom of the Orlando Shakespeare Theater in Partnership with UCF. I recorded the interview and transcribed it here for reference.

BACALA: Before we talk about the play, I’d like to talk a little bit about you as a theatre artist/playwright. I understand that you started as an actor. Is that correct?

BROWN: Yes, that’s correct. Yes, I was an actor, and I danced in three dance companies.

BACALA: Wow, I didn’t know that.

BROWN: Between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five. I started at the McCarter Theatre when I was nineteen, and I became a member of their resident company then. I worked there for five seasons. I went to American Conservatory Theater for my training. Then I worked around the country, started a theatre company in Chicago with a friend of mine from the McCarter: Jeff Leiber, who co-founded *Lost*...and then I lived here for a while, in Orlando, and worked here. Then I moved to L.A., did a lot of film and TV work with great people: Tom Hanks, George Clooney, Jeff Goldblum, the rally monkey. That’s the same monkey from *Friends* and from *Outbreak*, too.

BACALA: That’s a very talented monkey.
BROWN: Very talented monkey. Between acting jobs I would write. I wrote an adaptation of

The Little Prince for Orlando Theatre Project, which went very well. And then I co-wrote

Poe: Deep into That Darkness Peering, which they did here [Orlando Shakespeare
Theatre in Partnership with UCF]. And then I wrote Around the World in 80 Days, and
then that took off. Then I wrote this show [The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge]. Then I
auctioned a show, a TV series that never got made. … Then [China, the Whole]

Enchilada, and I’ve got a bunch of things that are almost done. Yeah, three dance
companies—two modern dance companies and a ballet company—and then acting a lot.

That’s pretty much it.

BACALA: Great. Now, from this [Trial] and Around the World in 80 Days, you seem to be

interested in classics, pieces of literature that exist. Can you say something about what
draws you to that sort of thing?

BROWN: Well, you’ve got great stories to begin with. Around the World in 80 Days—you
know, right away there’s the title, so there’s sort of an easier sell than “Bob Stagger
Makes Ham” or something like that. And if you start with a good story—with this, I
think, most people know A Christmas Carol, and then if you’re tired of A Christmas
Carol, you may do it. But there’s sort of a draw, and they’re such great stories to begin
with.

BACALA: Let’s talk more specifically about The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge. I know you’ve had
this question before, I’ve heard you talk a little bit about it, but can you tell me something
about why you wrote this play? How you started on this project?
BROWN: Yes. I remember sitting at home, reading the book one day, and I started giggling because it was reading like court transcripts to me. Jacob Marley and everything…

BACALA: “Are you sure that Marley was dead?”

BROWN: Yeah. “Are you sure that Marley was dead? Positive?” And I couldn’t help but just keep laughing while I was reading because I had that image in my head; I just laughed through the whole thing. So I sort of always wanted to do it. I mean I had another straight adaptation of this play, but I wanted something different so I started to write this as a courtroom trial.

But, like you heard me say the other day, it became gimmicky after a while. It’s the same story, but it’s told in a courtroom, and there’s only so far we’ll go with that. It didn’t seem to bring anything new to the table. And there are eight-million adaptations of this play, of this book. So I put it away for a long time.

And it was, I guess after, months after 9/11, when I really longed for those days after—those few weeks after, because it was just—I mean, we were in New York shortly after. The city was quiet, nobody honked at anybody, people were just really, really nice. I mean, there’s all the tragic stuff as well, but it just seemed to be a really lovely time—in my lifetime. And you saw the entire world sort of come out. We, of course, blew that pretty quickly. But it was a really, really wonderful time. It sort of hit me, that “Why do we need to wait for tragedies?” And it was exactly a month after 9/11 that one of my wife’s best friends died. And her friends got together and said “Oh, we haven’t seen each other in so long.” We wait for funerals, tragic events.
So I went back to writing that we should be caring and giving *all* the time. And I wanted to take out that just Christians get that caring and giving time. It really transcends everything, it doesn’t matter who you are. But you should be caring and giving all year long. I sort of imagine Scrooge around March, going “What the hell? I’ve been really nice, and now everyone has gone back to—nobody gives to the poor, Fred never stopped by. Where the hell is everybody?” So I went back and then it brought something new to the table.

BACALA: And now you have something to teach.

BROWN: Yeah. And then you have a new play. You’ve got *Christmas Carol*, but you also—on one hand, it’s an adaptation, on the other hand it’s a sequel. It’s a whole new thing.

You’re not going to see *A Christmas Carol*.

BACALA: We’re seeing *A Christmas Carol*—

BROWN: You’re seeing *A Christmas Carol*—

BACALA: But we’re seeing some other layer to it as well.

BROWN: Yeah. Like I said the other night, you’re looking through a different window. And you see the story, but you also see new things along the way. And there’s a new ending.

BACALA: Can you tell me a little bit about the process of writing this play? There were workshops, different versions?

BROWN: There were. We did a reading of it here [Orlando Shakespeare Theater] and it went pretty well. They videotaped it for me. It was out of that reading came the whole “Blind Man’s Bluff/Buff” thing. Because there were audience members insisting that it was
“Blind Man’s Bluff,” and that I was incorrect. That’s the only reason that little exchange is in there. “I always thought it was ‘bluff.’” Strictly out of that.

Then I came and did—we did a workshop of it. J.D. [Sutton] was in it. J.D.’s been in it the whole time. So that was two weeks. And I rewrote a lot, and I still didn’t have the ending that I wanted. I can’t even remember which ending I had here. But I had to put an ending on. Because people were coming and they were paying five bucks to get in. I didn’t want it just to end. So I put some sort of ending on it, knowing that it wasn’t going to be the ending.

Then they decided to do the world premiere of it. It’s all in the contracts, they get so many days after the workshop to decide. So I did a world premiere. And I rewrote then. Not a whole lot, but I know the whole part with the body, “Look there!” and all that; I was writing that stuff while they were on stage, trying to get it right.

BACALA: So you were here for the rehearsal process of that production?

BROWN: Yeah, the whole time. And then Jim [Helsinger] had to take over directing for a little bit because the director’s mom passed away. But yeah, it just sort of became “Oh I know what I want!” but I just couldn’t get it there.

And then we actually cut a lot of—there were more interjections in the Belle scene. A lot more. In my head I just wanted to see it sort of spiral.

BACALA: Build that chaos?

BROWN: Yeah. That it was just frenetic in the courtroom. Everybody sort of yelling at each other. But it just became too confusing so we cut most of it.
Yeah and then it was pretty well set and then it opened. I did some rewriting for this one but I think it was mostly the past, when we go into the past. So I rewrote some.

BACALA: Do you think there are any other versions, films, stage adaptations—somebody brought up the Alastair Sim version of *Christmas Carol*. Do you think that there are any of those that influenced your writing of this play? Images? Ideas?

BROWN: Well, I love the George C. Scott version. I think he’s pretty mean in that one. He’s nice and mean, he’s not that cartoon-y mean, which we talked about in rehearsals. I picture him a lot in there. I picture what’s-his-face who played Fred in it. I can’t remember his name, but I picture him a lot as Fred. I love that one, and I love the Muppet one. Michael Caine in that one is fantastic. He plays it so seriously. But then they’re all “Oh, mister hoity-toity omniscient.” So those are the two. And I love the Albert Finney musical version. I think he really hits the stuff with Belle really well. There’s a lovely little song that they sing and then there’s a heartbreaking reprise of it. I think those are my three favorite ones. I have those images in my head.

BACALA: What do you think is your target audience with this play?

BROWN: Anyone who wants to come. It’s a family show, and I think there are different levels to it. Not that it’s nearly as good as a Looney Tunes cartoon, but like those Bugs Bunny Looney Tunes cartoons, kids could get one level, parents got another. But it’s so fun when people come in who know *Christmas Carol*. Especially if actors come in and have done it. You can hear people laughing at certain lines, going “oh my god.”

BACALA: Because the actors know the lines more than anyone.
BROWN: They know the lines, and when you hear them in different places, it’s funny. But it really is for family.

BACALA: Yeah, I’ve been noticing and taking stock of audience reactions and it’s been really interesting—especially since we have senior matinees and student matinees—to hear the students laugh at the sort of low-brow comedy and then the older audiences that have seen Christmas Carol for years and years understand more.

BROWN: And there’s references, like that Gene Pitney song “Town without Pity” reference. A certain age is not going to get it. But then when you have an older crowd—I think last night’s crowd laughed pretty hard at the “It isn’t pretty what a world without pity can do.” But with student matinees I go “Ugh. No one’s gonna get this. It’s gonna be flat.”

BACALA: It’s OK. They don’t even know that they’re supposed to be getting it.

BROWN: Exactly. Just me. It’s just me crumbling inside. Why didn’t I pick a Jonas Brothers’ song?

BACALA: Oh, man. Now I want to talk a little more specifically about Christmas Past—the three women that come about.

BROWN: Yes!

BACALA: The first thing I notice about our Christmas Past—and I don’t think it’s just the way we’ve done it in rehearsal, I think that it’s somewhat inherent in the script—is that it’s very different. I mean, the essence is still there of Christmas Past from the Dickens Christmas Carol, but it’s a different representation. When you wrote this character of Christmas Past, how did you see her/it? What was the image of that?
BROWN: Very feminine. Definitely a woman. In the productions of *Christmas Carol* that I did at the McCarter, it was always a woman. That sort of always stuck in my head.

BACALA: I think it’s in most stage performances, even in films, it’s traditionally this—feminine—

BROWN: Yeah. I’ve seen it done—I saw at South Coast Rep Theater they used a man, he’s dressed like Revolutionary War or something. For me, it doesn’t work as well. There’s not as—there’s something about the feminine, mothery—

BACALA: Caring.

BROWN: Caring part of the past that—the longing for your mother—there’s that feeling to it. So I definitely wanted her to be a woman. And we played around with it. She was sort of played as like a vamp in some incarnation of it and it just wasn’t—

BACALA: Well the costume is sexy.

BROWN: It is, it is.

BACALA: And it’s extremely feminine. So I think that the designer must have picked that up.

BROWN: Yeah. But it’s definitely not like Mae West coming out like “Hey, come up and see me sometime.” But there is something about that caring, soft— you go to the past and it’s sort of sepia-toned. You know, rose-colored glasses.

BACALA: Also Fan and Belle are the characters we remember but they’re new, I guess older versions of those women. Obviously Fan, we never see her as an adult in *Christmas Carol*.

BROWN: Fan you really don’t. No, you don’t and I think the Fan we have here [in *Trial*] is still sort of that—still young. You know, she’s certainly not an old woman.
BACALA: Well she died young, so she couldn’t—

BROWN: Died very young. So she’s sort of that age. But it’s more the Belle. It’s basically the same scene from *A Christmas Carol*.

BACALA: It’s most of the same lines.

BROWN: Most of the same lines. But it’s now near the end of their lives, as opposed to the beginning of their lives. In *A Christmas Carol* Scrooge looks back on it. You know, “I made a mistake.” But now he has to deal with it head on. They’re both near the end of their lives. I think it makes it more immediate. It takes on more weight. Instead of just looking back, you look at it right now AND look back and go “Wow, we missed it. We could have had a life together.” One of the reasons I wanted that in there, for one it takes the play out of just being sort of a—skit. I feel it makes it—gives it a little more gravity to it. It’s one of my favorite scenes in the whole thing. Because Scrooge really has to deal with it. They both have to sort of deal with it but more Scrooge. Because he just gets hammered by her. So it’s “No more questions!”

BACALA: And I think Belle is often, in *Christmas Carol*, represented as very sweet and almost like a victim. But she’s much stronger in your script.

BROWN: Yeah, she is. We do see her a lot as a victim. But she takes control when she says “I’m gonna give back your ring, and I’m gonna leave.” And I think there’s something very interesting—to see them meet again for the first time after forty years or so, and realize that they still have very strong feelings. Probably a day doesn’t go by when they don’t think of each other.
BACALA: Yeah, I remember in rehearsal it was tossed around that Belle does not want to be here, she does not want to deal with this. But sometimes I think, hasn’t she been waiting for the opportunity to say these things?

BROWN: She probably has. I think she has. It’s like, “Finally. I get to—” and she hammers away at him. She doesn’t let up. And drives home that she’s no longer Miss Campbell. “Mrs. Worthington.” Actually Diana Brune, who played Anne Hering’s part last time, was thanking me for this scene. She just loved it.

It’s odd to end sort of a comedy—the intermission on that note. But I love surprising. You know, it doesn’t follow that formula. You know “Oh, it’s not really—it’s not what we expected.” And then at the end of the play you go “Well, I didn’t expect that.”

BACALA: Yeah, sometimes I can feel that the audience is kind of stunned. To where they don’t—you know that “Oh, the act is over now? What happened?”

BROWN: “Wow, that was—weird, heavy, and emotional.” I know Jim doesn’t want a long pause after my questioning in that but there is—you can usually hear a pin drop after. But it was interesting, more people laughed last night on “How did that make you feel?”

BACALA: Yes! It started with that one woman that laughed that time and—

BROWN: Last night it was more. It sort of is that “You jerk. How do you think it made her feel?” But it’s fun to hear that. Because they’re really following and going on sort of a journey.

BACALA: It tells us that they remember Belle. Fan—maybe some of them don’t remember as much. If they’re really familiar with A Christmas Carol they’ll remember it.
BROWN: But then Belle. And I think it’s painful for Belle to say those things. But not as painful as Scrooge to hear them. And that’s why Rothschild asks those. It’s not to torture Belle. It’s to really torture Scrooge.

BACALA: To break him down. In that sense Rothschild is kind of playing the role of the new Marley, and the new Ghost of Past to try and change Scrooge.

BROWN: Yeah. And that’s one of the reasons why I didn’t have—the judge never says “You may call your next witness.” There’s no interjection after Scrooge says “I have no questions.” Rothschild senses the kill. So he immediately leaps up and says “I want Belinda Worthington.” Because he sees Scrooge go for the hand, starting to break down, he’s not so tough now, he’s very vulnerable. “I’m gonna break him. I’m gonna bring in Belle”

BACALA: I think it’s a very well crafted sequence. I have come to think of—not just because it’s the only time I’m on stage—that three-woman section as its own little play.

BROWN: It really is, yeah.

BACALA: You know, Past comes in and she charms the audience. And so you’re ready to go with her. And then she reminds Scrooge of his lonely childhood so we start to feel. You know, he longs for his friends, we feel a little warm and fuzzy. And then there’s Fan and because we’re with it we go along with Fan and she just breaks our hearts. You know, it’s so warm and everyone misses their home. And then they’re ready for that 180 with Belle.

BROWN: Yeah, it really is its own little—

BACALA: You take the audience on this emotional journey.
BROWN: And I’ve always felt in the book that—in adaptations of it—it’s hard for the play not to end after Past. In my mind. I think it’s hard for someone playing Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* to still need the other two ghosts. You cannot break down completely. He still needs changing. So I’ve always thought that Past—it’s the biggest punch, I think. I think it’s even more so than Future with the tombstone. By that point he says “Lead me on, I know there’s stuff I need to learn.” He goes willingly. So he’s already really changed. So I think Past is that first punch, the biggest punch. But it can’t knock him out.

BACALA: Yes, and I’ve considered that too: what does each ghost do to him? How does Past prepare him for Present, prepare him for Future?

BROWN: I’ve always thought it’s the biggest punch. And it really whomps in this one. You know it almost throws his surprise off. For him [Scrooge]—to get to the ending, he has to make it through this. You know, it’s hard for him. It’s not just an easy cake walk to—“I’m gonna slam all the ghosts and Fred and the solicitor.” He has to go through this and not completely break down, and he almost does. He comes very close to it. So it’s hard not to give away the “I am not the man I was! Let’s go have coffee!”

BACALA: “We can work this out!” That raises an interesting question. We’re watching Scrooge and we think we’re watching the old Scrooge. And we think that we’re gonna see him change, when in fact, he’s not that old Scrooge. So the change that we see is something else. How do you think Scrooge changes in *this* play? Or does he?

BROWN: I don’t think he really changes. We see a reveal. But we don’t see—he doesn’t really change that much. It’s just a complete surprise. I hope it’s a surprise.

BACALA: It certainly was to me the first time I read it. I didn’t know.
BROWN: Yeah, it’s more of just that reveal of “Oh! OH! Oh, that’s why he did it!” I think the change hopefully is in the audience. I know that’s sort of goofy, but to look at it—“Oh, that sort of makes sense.” So the lesson is the big change. Hopefully. And, I’ve tried to make Rothschild change a little bit. For a while it’s just the theatrics. And then it’s hard with Dilber, because he gets really invested in it. And so it’s not just another trial, but sort of a tough one. He doesn’t want to ask those questions.

BACALA: Do you think that maybe—obviously Judge Pearson is our Scrooge figure—do you think that maybe there’s a little bit of that in Rothschild too? And that he learns something from this trial?

BROWN: Yeah, I think he does. And it was interesting that I kept picking up on that Scrooge thing. The Judge being Scrooge and the Bailiff being Cratchit.

BACALA: That’s a fun little turn there.

BROWN: And we see it continuing through the ages. We find out that Scrooge’s father went through it and Scrooge went through it and the Judge is going to go through it. People need a little kick in the pants every now and then. I don’t think Scrooge really changes. We see at the end that he has changed. The mask comes off. And hopefully it’s a surprise. Hopefully.

BACALA: I think it is. Unless you’ve seen it before. But even if you’ve seen it before, I think it’s still compelling because you’re in on the joke. And you can watch him do those things. Having sat through this play many, many times, I’ve learned that he’s teaching every person that’s on the stand. When you watch it for the first time you think that he’s just being a bastard, getting them, outsmarting them, winning. But once you learn the
reveal it’s that he’s really teaching all of them. He’s giving them that gift of “Think about this.”

BROWN: “Think about that you never show up.” Yeah. With Fred it’s “Think about it, high and mighty Fred. You never show up any other time.” And you know, the solicitors. There are people hungry and starving and cold in April. “Where are you then?” Yeah, you’re right. He does teach everyone a little lesson.

BACALA: And I think that we learn something new about every character. Whether that be something that is thought-provoking and profound or just hilarious and delightful, it’s always interesting.

BROWN: Yeah. We learn that Christmas Future’s just a complainer. He’s Woody Allen with a shroud on. “I’m cold. I have diabetes.” That was the original: “I’m hot, I’m thirsty, I have diabetes.” That’s the original joke. I changed it to cholera. There’s an outbreak of cholera right now but cholera had an outbreak at about the same time in London as this. I just loved it, you know, scary monster—scary ghost just cold and hot and can’t see at night.

BACALA: Complaining. Terrifying, but he’s actually just a mess.

BROWN: Yeah, taking pills. I think I had some of that in there too. I think. I’d have to find an older version. It just went on forever, him just complaining. About everything. Something about he couldn’t see through the shroud or something.

BACALA: For me, the funniest thing about the show is that order meets chaos. There are these characters that are ghosts and magical beings who operate under a completely different set of rules. And you put them in a courtroom which has a very rigid set of rules that they don’t understand and they really don’t have any respect for. Like, Christmas Past is here
to have fun. Christmas Future, I’m sure, doesn’t want to be there. And when those things collide and we watch each side react to it, it’s very, very funny.

BROWN: I think it’s fun. I had lawyers in workshops saying “Well, this really isn’t the way it would happen in a courtroom.” I said “OK, but on the other hand, I have ghosts on the witness stand. So I can sort of create my own world.” It’s fun to have that rigidity though. It’s fun to have a lot of what you would see in it but come on, people: ghosts—witness stand—a translator for ghosts—work with me. It’s comedy, work with me a little bit here. It’s extraordinary circumstances...

BACALA: I’m writing about this process as an actor, which I think you’ve done as a playwright, which is: How do I play a character from a classic in a new, sort of updated script? What is going to give the best performance? Finding the balance of the essence of the original character that people know and love, and then let’s do something new.

BROWN: Yeah. I mean, it’s fun to see Marley—Marley was the first scene I wrote, I think, because it made me laugh the most—see that iconic character in a courtroom. Using a lot of those lines, but also getting called on a lot of that stuff. Sort of calling Dickens on it. You know, being in a doorknocker. When you sort of think about it, for me it’s “Why didn’t he talk to him then?” Why is it “Ooooooooh! Ebenezer!” instead of just going “Hey, it’s me, Marley”?

BACALA: It’s great because people who both love Christmas Carol and hate Christmas Carol can enjoy this show.

BROWN: Exactly. And in the book it says he sat beside him many and many a day, but he’s also doomed to travel the world. Which is it, you know?
BACALA: Which is it, Dickens?

BROWN: Yeah, Dickens, which is it, hm? It’s just fun to see that. For me, I think it’s fun to see those characters in a different light. I just love hearing Marley say “Maybe—”

BACALA: Me too. And J.D. is so funny.

BROWN: He is funny. He’s very good. He’s sort of the classic Marley. He’s shameless.

BACALA: I love that in actors.

BROWN: It’s funny because you see him back here [in the greenroom] and he’s just very nice, and you don’t think he’s gonna be like that on stage. But he gets out there and he does---

   every now and then, he doesn’t do it every show—but he gives this little wave. And it just cracks me up. You sort of don’t think, at least for me, seeing him backstage, just knowing him, that he’s not gonna do a lot of that. But he’s just shameless…

BACALA: Well, thank you so much for this. This is very helpful.

BROWN: You’re welcome, dear.

This interview gives me further insight into the purpose of the play and the roles of my characters within the story. I gain from it an understanding of the importance of Belle as a character, both to Scrooge, whom she affects deeply, and in the impact she makes upon the audience. The entire sequence of Past to Fan to Belle shows the audience that the play is more than a parody. These women convey the heart and compassion of A Christmas Carol, which shine through this comedy and hopefully leave a lasting impact on the audience.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST

This chapter includes character research and analysis of The Ghost of Christmas Past. I examine the Ghost as it appears in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, look at how various stage and film adaptations have represented the character, and finally interpret the Ghost of Christmas Past as she appears in Mark Brown’s *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*. My aim is to find clues and details in order to create a rich, effective performance of the spirit.

In Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, The Ghost of Christmas Past—or Past, as I shall call it hereafter—is the first of three spirits to visit Ebenezer Scrooge as foretold by the ghost of Jacob Marley. Dickens is credited as the first to take the popular convention of the ghost story and combine it with a Christmas parable. He wanted “not to merely frighten [his] audience but to scare them into virtue.” (Epstein 185)

The three ghosts, of Christmases Past, Present, and Yet to Come, are original creations of Dickens’s imagination. Though they have become mythological figures since their creation, they do not originate from any existing myths. (Staniford 101) Dickens creates his own folklore. Past has been compared to Christkindl, a young girl spirit from German folklore who comes as a messenger to announce the birth of Christ. According to Hearn, this spirit, like Past, wears a white gown and a wreath of glowing candles on her head. (Hearn 51-2) Dickens may have been inspired by the image of the Christkindl (if he was aware of it), but the two figures represent different ideas. Past never mentions Christ, but rather focuses on Scrooge’s life.

In the original story, right before Past arrives, time seems to warp and move very quickly and then slowly, backward and forwards, as if the spirit’s approach alters the space-time continuum. Scrooge feels the shockwaves of Past’s time-travelling. There is a flash of light and
then Scrooge’s bed curtains are “drawn aside, I tell you, by a hand.” (Dickens 18) Dickens does not fully describe how Past enters the room, nor does Scrooge see exactly how it happens. He only understands that there is a flash of light and then an “unearthly visitor” (Dickens 18) opens his bed curtains. Scrooge is faced with a strange being which Dickens describes in detail, but which John Leech, original illustrator for the book, never attempts to draw:

> It was a strange figure—like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man, viewed through some supernatural medium, which gave him the appearance of having receded from the view, and being diminished to a child's proportions. Its hair, which hung about its neck and down its back, was white as if with age; and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin. The arms were very long and muscular; the hands the same, as if its hold were of uncommon strength. Its legs and feet, most delicately formed, were, like those upper members, bare. It wore a tunic of the purest white, and round its waist was bound a lustrous belt, the sheen of which was beautiful. It held a branch of fresh green holly in its hand; and, in singular contradiction of that wintry emblem, had its dress trimmed with summer flowers. (Dickens 18)

This description immediately presents Past as ambiguous and contradictory in appearance. Past appears old and young, wise and innocent, strong and delicate, kind and cruel, serious and playful. The metaphoric spirit is “both fresh and ancient—a reflection of a past event that returns to the present reinvigorated.” (Epstein 178) Scrooge’s past is old indeed, but may return to him and seem as fresh as when he was a boy.
Past is also ambiguous in gender. Dickens describes it as sometimes appearing as an “old man,” but also as having a touch “as gentle as a woman’s hand.” (Dickens 20) Past is never referred to as “he” nor “she” but always “it.” In Dickens’s Carol, Past is neither male nor female but a genderless, even sexless spirit from beyond this world.

Dickens describes Past as a shining light, a candle: “The strangest thing about it was, that from the crown of its head there sprung a bright clear jet of light, by which all this was visible…a great extinguisher for a cap, which it now held under its arm.” (Dickens 18-9)

The bright light coming out of the top of its head can be taken for a flickering flame. Its hat, a large candle snuffer, has the power to put out the light of the past. Past’s slender body and white garments are like the white tallow shaft of the candle. As a candle burns, its wax melts and drips, changing the shape of the candle, just as Past mutates shape in the flickering light:

…what was light one instant, at another time was dark, so the figure itself fluctuated in its distinctness: being now a thing with one arm, now with one leg, now with twenty legs, now a pair of legs without a head, now a head without a body: of which dissolving parts, no outline would be visible in the dense gloom wherein they melted away. And in the very wonder of this, it would be itself again; distinct and clear as ever. (Dickens 19)

Past is a very powerful ghost. Besides having the abilities to change shape and time-travel it can also teleport itself and others to far places at the touch of a hand. It can transcend walls and other solid obstacles. Past has an irresistible power of persuasion, with a “grasp though gentle as a woman’s touch, [is] not to be resisted.” (Dickens 20) It can hear Scrooge’s thoughts,
pulling answers out of his head before he can speak them. Past also has the power of sense manipulation, causing Scrooge to perceive “a thousand odours floating in the air.” (Dickens 20)

Past uses its great powers to help and teach Scrooge. It takes him to see his desolate childhood past, the raucous celebrations of his former employer Fezziwig, and the heartbreaking loss of his former fiancée. The possibility that Past merely conjures Scrooge’s memories is eliminated by the scene in which Scrooge sees Belle with her husband and happy family. Scrooge never witnessed that episode in his life, therefore it could not be memory. Past physically transports him into the past, where they are invisible observers of events Scrooge can no longer change.

Past does not show Scrooge a mere visual recording of things that have been. The spirit makes Scrooge actually re-experience the feelings he had as a young man and as a child. Dickens strongly believed that adults must retain their childhood feelings and innocence. Scrooge’s greatest crime is to forget how he was as a child. (Epstein 179) With a “soft and gentle” (Dickens 18) voice, Past teaches and guides Scrooge through this most difficult of emotional journeys. It says to him “You recollect the way…Strange to have forgotten it for so many years!” (Dickens 20), meaning both the road to his childhood home and the path to redemption and goodness. Past cleverly implies that the answers already lie within Scrooge and his childhood innocence.

The Ghost of Christmas Past represents an idea, an essence of Christmas. It also plainly presents the past, and the emotions that it causes are both joyful and painful. The visions of things that have been are at times intensely agonizing to Scrooge. But Past is no sadist. It does not show Scrooge these events merely to torture or punish him. Rather, with a Zen-like calmness it gently guides Scrooge through the visions, teaching him and letting him find the answers in the
past. This spirit exists only to serve. The best way to serve Scrooge is to save him from himself, and if he is to change his ways he must first understand why he has become so cold. If Past has an attitude at all toward Scrooge or the things that they see, these feelings are unrevealed. The spirit must seem objective, even aloof, so that Scrooge can learn for himself.

There are some behavioral clues in the text. Past frequently commands Scrooge with a gentle firmness, and asks poignant, didactic questions under the guise of innocent wonder. Past can also be forceful, as when it “pinion[s] him in both his arms, and force[s] him to observe what happen[s] next.” (Dickens 28) When Scrooge expresses a desire to be a kinder person, Past “smile[s] thoughtfully,” (Dickens 22) and this may reveal a sense of humor in the spirit. This smile could also be a private celebration at success in converting Scrooge, or perhaps a reward to Scrooge, an encouragement for good behavior.

There is one more interesting aspect of Past to note. When the visions of Belle become unbearable to Scrooge and he begs for them to stop, Past replies “I told you these were the shadows of the things that have been…That they are what they are, do not blame me!” (Dickens 30) Past refuses to accept blame for Scrooge’s torment. Later in the novel, The Ghost of Christmas Present also declares his innocence. Dickens possibly wanted his readers to agree with the spirits in their claim of innocence. Scrooge creates his own misery, and the spirits are attempting to save him from it. Brown adopted the idea that Scrooge is responsible for his own fate. In The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge both of these spirits also proclaim they are innocent of kidnapping and torturing Scrooge.

The original Ghost of Christmas Past as written by Dickens is so ambiguous that it is no wonder that interpretations of the ghost are so diverse. Sometimes the character is portrayed as
male, sometimes female. Often it is human in shape, but in some films it takes other, more vague forms. Sometimes the actor playing the spirit is old, sometimes young. In a few interpretations Past is left out as a character entirely. This happens frequently in silent films which skip over Past and go right to Present. (Guida 83) In some plays and films Marley acts as all three ghosts and shows Scrooge the visions himself. It is impossible to look at all possible interpretations of Past, but here I examine some selected representative works for further insight into the character. I will begin with some of the more conventional retellings of the tale.

In Paul Sills’s 2001 stage adaptation *A Christmas Carol*, Past is played by a man and narrates, as all of the characters do, in past tense and third person directly from the novel. As he narrates what Past is doing, he also speaks and acts in present tense as the character. In this example, Scrooge and Past share a line to describe Christmas Past:

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SPIRIT. like a child:
SCROOGE. yet not so like a child
SPIRIT. as like an old man.
SCROOGE. Its hair was white as if with age
SPIRIT. and yet the face had not a wrinkle in it, and the tenderest bloom was on the skin. (Sills 15)
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This kind of story theatre, where the characters also step forward and act as narrators, is common in stagings of *A Christmas Carol*.

Sills’s adaptation is grandiose, with a large cast and special effects. Past’s sequence alone calls for lighting effects, snow, horses, children, and an over-the-top Fezziwig party with lavish decorations and musicians. In the stage directions, Sills suggests that the actor playing Past
demonstrate the strange warping of limbs and changing form described in Dickens (Sills 16). This feat seems difficult to achieve, but it is clear that this play, and many other adaptations like it, is filled with spectacle and magic.

In contrast, some stage productions, like Christopher Schario’s *A Christmas Carol* are much simpler and smaller. Schario’s version calls for only six actors and one musician, and in his notes the playwright requests that the magic be left to the imaginations of the audience rather than demonstrated by special effects. (Schario 6) In this play, Past is played by an actress, who also portrays Mrs. Cratchit and several other small characters. The lines spoken by Past and the other characters come almost entirely from Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. Most playwrights, unless converting the story into a very different reality, adhere closely to Dickens’s language. Schario’s Past creates magic through description rather than relying on technical elements. Schario also adds a humorous moment in the Fezziwig party scene when Past joins in the dancing and a confused Mrs. Fezziwig comments “Do we know her?” (Schario 22) This gives Past a mischievous, impish quality.

Role doubling is frequent in various stage plays of *A Christmas Carol*. In Israel Horovitz’s adaptation, Past is played by an older actor who also plays Old Joe. This production is very traditional and quotes the novel almost verbatim, especially in Past’s scenes. Some productions are more liberal with the lines and interpretive in descriptions of the characters, as in John Jakes’s *A Christmas Carol*. In this version Past, played by a female, is described in the stage directions as “a strange, gentle, almost genderless ghost with long white hair and smooth skin...[it] wears a tunic costume of purest white...The GHOST stands silent, unthreatening.”
Jakes’s Past transports Scrooge by touching his hand rather than his heart, a change which costs the loss of a sentimental but effective metaphor.

Some adaptations take a more creative approach to portraying Christmas Past. Paul Willmott’s adaptation, called *Uncle Ebenezer: A Christmas Carol*, uses a sort of puppet for the character:

[NARRATOR]:…suddenly a shaft of cold moonlight penetrated the gloom through the tiny window above and through that same appeared a strange apparition.

(From above the Puppet of the Ghost of CHRISTMAS PAST flies in. It is a doll about the size of a ten-year-old child. As it descends, spinning through glitter and smoke, PUPPETEERS come forward to unhook it from its wire and manipulate it. It always floats in the air as if weightless. When it speaks it has a light female voice.) (Willmott 29)

Using a puppet that can fly and move in unique ways is one way to achieve Past’s “unearthly” quality.

*A Christmas Carol* on film offers many opportunities for creating magic through special effects. In the 1951 film *Scrooge*, directed by Brian Desmond Hurst and starring Alastair Sim, Christmas Past appears to materialize out of the air, and his entire body is translucent, creating a very ghostly effect. This elderly, male Past has a soothing, deep voice that echoes mysteriously and is underscored by peaceful music. He has a very simple, matter of fact delivery of his lines. This interpretation emphasizes the calmness of Past, and the steady but soothing stoicism that Dickens intimates.
In Edwin L. Marin’s 1938 film *A Christmas Carol*, Past is a beautiful young woman with curly blond hair and an iridescent gown. She materializes out of a fog and there is a glowing star on top of her head. This silhouette creates a slight resemblance to a Christmas tree. She is gentle, sweet, and smooth in her speech and movements. She captures the precious and lovely innocence of Past.

Many of the films attempt to follow Dickens’s description of Past closely. Clive Donner’s 1984 *A Christmas Carol* offers a Past that has the traditional low voice, white tunic, holly branch, and old appearance. But Angela Pleasance as this Past is much sterner than most others. There is great strength and stillness in her Past. While she effectively plays the gravity and importance of Past’s mission, she is missing the joy and subtle playfulness that appear in many other interpretations.

There is great variety in the portrayal of the Ghost of Christmas Past among these films. In the 1970 musical *Scrooge*, Past is an old woman in Victorian red dress and frilly hat and muff. This Past has a high voice and is very snobby and strict, making her seem like an upper class prude. There are no magical effects around this Christmas Past. A female Christmas Past appearing in Scrooge’s bedroom seems much less threatening than a male. For example the Past in Henry Edwards’s 1935 *Scrooge* is a male silhouette lit from behind with a deep voice. The effect is actually frightening and very different from a charming, high-voiced woman.

Joel Gray plays Past in a 1999 version directed by David Hugh Jones. He achieves both androgyny and charm as Christmas Past. He always has a slight smile at the corners of his mouth and seems both innocent and mischievous at the same time. The most effective parts of Gray’s performance are his simultaneous airs of wisdom and whimsy.
Some films take a comic approach to Christmas Past. A 1947 Spanish version called *Leyenda de Navidad* depicts Past as “a well dressed gentleman of about Scrooge’s own age…[who] climbs up the face of Scrooge’s building (and not without a struggle) and enters through the bedroom window.” (Guida 100) This kind of humor at the expense of the Ghost appears more frequently in the more modern interpretations of *A Christmas Carol*, which “update” and sometimes parody the classic tale. In a 1994 episode of the television show *Northern Exposure*, the “Spirit of Yom Kippur Past” uses Joel’s VCR and television to show him some of his past transgressions.” (Guida 224) In a more serious but equally non-traditional made-for-TV movie called *Ebenezer*, the entire story takes place in an American Western setting and Past is a Native American woman. (Guida 230) In the goofball comedy *An American Carol*, directed by David Zucker, Christmas Past takes the form of General Patton, who visits an unpatriotic filmmaker to remind him of the importance of Independence Day.

Perhaps one of the most popular “updated” versions of *A Christmas Carol* is the film *Scrooged*, starring Bill Murray. In this comedy Christmas Past is a gruff, grimy, reckless cab driver who transports the miser in his time-travelling taxi cab. He smokes a cigar and cackles loudly and frequently. This Past achieves the balance between wisdom and frivolity. He seems very cynical, but still manages to have a good time. Like Past in Dickens’s novel, this Past refuses the blame and lets the Scrooge-figure find his own way.

These parodies and creative interpretations of *A Christmas Carol* occur in theatre as well. *Jacob Marley’s Christmas Carol*, a one-man show by Tom Mula, takes the familiar story and looks at it from a different perspective. Jacob Marley is the central character, and the play chronicles his struggle to save Scrooge’s soul. In this play, Christmas Past is actually Marley in...
disguise, who also becomes Christmas Present. Mula describes Marley’s Ghost of Christmas Past as “the artful Dodger—obnoxious” (Mula 10) and later as “a ragamuffin street-rat; a cockney boy, filthy, tattered, liberally freckled and missing a tooth. A shock of red hair hung down over one eye, and his grin was irresistible.” (Mula 33) He is cheeky, torturing Scrooge with aerial acrobatics as he transports him and calls him an “old fart.” (Mula 34)

Christopher Durang creates a very dark, irreverent retelling of *A Christmas Carol* in *Mrs. Bob Cratchit’s Wild Christmas Binge*. In this play, “a striking, theatrical black woman” (Durang 73) serves as Past, Present, Future, and the narrator. Not only does she talk to the audience but claims to transport them back and forth in time to show Scrooge at different ages. When she takes the form of Christmas Past, she is dressed a UPS deliveryman with a Christmas present for Scrooge. She wields an electric zapper which she uses to torture and control him. She is meta-theatrical, and says to Scrooge when she transports him, “Come touch my arm and the set shall change around us.” (Durang 90) She then fails at showing Scrooge the correct “pasts” and causes changes in the course of events, involving Mrs. Cratchit and disrupting the story of *A Christmas Carol* irreparably. This bizarre but hilarious parody mocks the sentimentality of the many so-called traditional staging of the original tale.

*The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* by Mark Brown is another retelling of *A Christmas Carol* which uses comedy to capture a modern audience. In this play, The Ghost of Christmas Past, along with Marley and the other ghosts of Christmas, is brought to court by Ebenezer Scrooge one year after the events of *A Christmas Carol* on charges of “attempted murder, kidnapping, breaking and entering, trespassing, stalking, slander, theft, pain and suffering and intentional infliction of emotional distress.” (Brown 3) All of the ghosts’ efforts to redeem and help Scrooge
change his ways seem to have been in vain, and he is again as miserly and mean as ever. Scrooge opts to represent himself in the trial, and Past and her fellow ghosts are represented by the silver-tongued Jewish lawyer Solomon Rothschild. One by one, the familiar characters are called to the stand, retelling the story of *A Christmas Carol* for the court.

When Past is finally called to the stand, Brown offers little description in his stage directions. All that is said of her is “The GHOST OF CHRISTMAS PAST makes some sort of magical entrance...She carries a hat.” (Brown 35) The character clues must be found in what is already established about Past from Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* and the various adaptations that exist, as well as behavioral clues in the text.

In *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*, when Scrooge begins to question Past, she immediately recreates the scene from the previous Christmas Eve in *Christmas Carol*:

PAST. I am the Ghost of Christmas Past.

SCROOGE. Long past?

PAST. No. Your Past. (Brown 35)

This familiar exchange continues, with some of Scrooge’s questions altered to suit the trial and several objections from Rothschild. Past seems oblivious to the proceedings of the court. She simply answers a question when asked and remains concerned for Scrooge’s well-being. It seems that Past has a sort of script that she follows when reclaiming a lost soul. Marley mentions earlier in the play that the spirits work to save many “Scrooges” year after year. She cannot break out of being Christmas Past, nor can she see things from any other point of view.

There is no touch of anger or resentment in Past at being called to court. She may not even understand what that means, or she may not care. Whenever Past is summoned, she knows
that she has a singular purpose. She has a one-track mind, and her objective is to save Scrooge’s soul. The obstacles to her objective are Scrooge’s surly attitude and the strange world of the courtroom she finds herself in with its foreign rules. Her old tactics of reminding Scrooge of the past and gently charming him are rebuffed by accusations and objections. Instead of giving up the pursuit, she continues on the same path she took in Carol, and with the leading questions of Rothschild the childhood visions begin to affect Scrooge emotionally once more.

This Christmas Past remains faithful to Dickens’s spirit in her delightful innocence. She answers questions simply and honestly. This humorous exchange between Past and Rothschild exemplifies her good-heartedness and lack of guile:

ROTHSCHILD. Let’s say you did kidnap Mr. Scrooge.

PAST. But I didn’t.

ROTHSCHILD. I know.

PAST. Why did you say I did?

ROTHSCHILD. For the sake of argument.

PAST. I’d rather not argue.

ROTHSCHILD. I’m just trying to make a point.

PAST. Oh. Right. Go on. (Brown 37-8)

This passage illustrates how this spirit reacts in a courtroom situation. She may not understand what is happening, but she answers simply and honestly, just as she answers Scrooge’s questions in Carol. Despite her general lightness in this play she still makes a few poignant remarks in order to teach Scrooge: “Too often we forget the past and who we truly are.” (Brown 41)
One clear divergence from Dickens’s Christmas Past in Brown’s script, and certainly in Orlando Shakespeare Theater’s production of the play, is the choice to make her decidedly feminine. Dickens and several of his adapters characterize Past as androgynous. But Past is also described as having the ability to change shape. Perhaps this feminine form is just one of her many shapes. Perhaps she wisely chose to appear feminine as an advantage in a courtroom full of men. Past as a feminine form makes her very gentle and approachable, which is certainly how Dickens characterized the ghost. This also suggests that memories, especially memories of home and childhood, are strongly associated with women.

Another interesting conceit about Brown’s Past is that she magically morphs into the women from Scrooge’s past before his (and the audience’s) eyes. This is the most likely reason for a female Past; the key players in Scrooge’s past are female. This may suggest that Past creates the visions out of her own powers of illusion, rather than physically transporting Scrooge to the past. Perhaps she is merely a vessel for the spirits of these women to come to the present. In Dickens’s *Carol*, Scrooge looks at Past’s face and sees “in which, in some strange way there were fragments of all the faces it had shown them.” (Dickens 30) Scrooge then fights the spirit until it vanishes under its hat. Similarly, Brown’s Scrooge sees Past take on the appearance of his sister Fan and his former fiancée, Belle, whom he ultimately fights with until the act ends abruptly.

Though the many adaptations of The Ghost of Christmas Past are vastly different, most of them do share common threads and traits. All of them possess powerful magical abilities, which they almost always use for good. Past remains gentle but wise in all representations. These
common traits, along with other, more unique choices for the character, present many options and inspirations for the actor portraying Past to experiment with in rehearsal and performance.

This research gave me an overall impression and initial image of The Ghost of Christmas Past as I explored my own interpretation of the character. Words to characterize The Ghost of Christmas Past are ethereal, strange, gentle, calm, intelligent, clever, mysterious, wise, and elusive. Specifically from the Dickensian novel, I borrowed the image of a flickering candle, and tried to find a way to physically convey that image. I also especially liked the unearthly, magical qualities of the character in the films I have seen. In my performance, I wanted to find a way to appear magical and ethereal through movement and voice. This lead to a floating, flickering movement of my arms. The power in Past’s hands described by Dickens inspired me to focus on my hands. I also borrowed specific ideas from other adaptations. I liked the beauty and femininity of Past in Marin’s 1938 film. I also wanted to find a playful sense of humor, like the Ghosts of Christmas Past I saw in Durang’s and Mula’s plays and in the film Scrooged. Perhaps the greatest gift this research gave me was a freedom to create my own Christmas Past. I learned that the character, both in Dickens’s novel and in adaptations, is elusive in form and ever-changing, and that nearly any new interpretation would continue that tradition. The development of my Christmas Past is described in greater detail in chapter seven.
CHAPTER FIVE: FAN

This chapter examines the character of Fan, Ebenezer Scrooge’s younger sister. As Chapter Four does with The Ghost of Christmas Past, this section includes research on Fan as she appears in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, in various other interpretations of the story, and specifically in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*. This research hopefully provides insight into the character to the actor preparing for the role.

Fan is based on Charles Dickens’s own sister, Frances Dickens, called Fanny by her family. Fanny is described as a tender-hearted girl, who once “wept over [her brother’s] black eye…[and] consoled him on those Sunday walks to and from the Marshalsea,” (Slater 34) where their father was imprisoned for much of their childhoods. Dickens perhaps watched his sister Fanny helping his mother with the other children and household chores, and out of this image created Fan, who though younger than Scrooge serves as a nurturer to him. Dickens was very close to his sister, and Fan in *A Christmas Carol* is a fond, sentimental tribute to her. (Slater 34)

Fan appears only briefly in Dickens’s novel, as one of the visions shown to Scrooge by The Ghost of Christmas Past. Scrooge observes Fan come to visit his lonely, younger self at the boarding school to bring him home for the Christmas holidays. At once she is characterized as energetic, joyful, pure, and extremely loving: “[A] little girl…came darting in, and putting her arms about his neck, and often kissing him, addressed him as her ‘Dear Dear brother.’” (Dickens 22) She innocently and joyfully proclaims that their father will allow Scrooge to return home, and then as if in delight and surprise at her own news “She clap[s] her hands, and laugh[s]…then she [begins] to drag him, in her childish eagerness, towards the door.” (Dickens 23)
The Ghost of Christmas Past describes Fan as “a delicate creature, whom a breath might have withered… but she had a large heart!” (Dickens 23), and then reminds Scrooge of her death. The reader also learns that Fan is the mother of Fred, who seems to inherit her good-hearted mirth. Fan dies a young woman, and the loss of such a joyous, youthful spirit is tragic to Scrooge.

Dickens describes Fan as “brimful of glee,” (Dickens 23) and there shows in her no trace of malice, anger, sadness, or even fear. She is pure, simple, and good. Because she dies young, Scrooge’s image of her never grows old or changes. She is iconic, almost one-dimensional as a representation of the goodness and light of home and family. She says the word “home” eight times in just a few lines in the text. (Dickens 23) She seems more of an idealized fantasy than a real person.

Fan maintains her purity in nearly all adaptations of A Christmas Carol. Though she may vary in age and energy level, her innocence and goodness are constant among the different representations. She is usually omitted from versions that grossly parody the tale. Her simple sweetness and tragic death are difficult to ridicule. Most productions use a child to play the role, and her lines are usually quoted directly from the original text. Some exceptions and interesting choices are worth noting.

In Hurst’s 1951 film Scrooge, Fan comes to fetch Scrooge from school as a teenage girl rather than small child. This emphasizes the idea of Fan as a “surrogate mother” (Davis 191) to Scrooge. In John Jakes’s stage play A Christmas Carol, though Fan is played by a child, Scrooge describes her as “always my strong anchor. She was my pole star. After our mother died, she took that role, and cared for me.” (Jakes 33) Both the 1951 film and Jakes’s play include added
scenes in which Scrooge sees his younger sister die from childbirth complications. These versions of the story emphasize the motherly aspect of Fan, and connect Scrooge’s resentment toward his nephew to the death of his beloved sister. Jakes even attributes Scrooge’s downfall into miserliness to this loss. (Jakes 41)

In another stage adaptation by Barbara Fields, Fan and her son Fred are connected by a prop. When Fred asks Scrooge to Christmas dinner, Scrooge angrily hurls a paperweight at his nephew. Later in the play, when Past takes Scrooge to see his sister, Fan gives him as a Christmas gift the same paperweight he later uses against his nephew. (Guida 101) Some productions, like this one, take measures to strengthen the connection between Fred and Fan.

In The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge Fan maintains the kindness and purity from Dickens’s A Christmas Carol, but in this version she is not a small child. Because Fan is played by the same actress as Past and Belle, she must be played by an adult. The manner in which she refers to her childhood as a past event also suggests that she is now an adult. She is a shadow of the past, but a different, later vision than the young girl Dickens describes.

Brown’s Fan is called to the witness stand and Past magically morphs into her, as if she comes from the past using the Ghost as a vessel. She does not express any confusion at her surroundings but answers questions about Scrooge’s childhood simply and straightforwardly. When Rothschild is finished questioning Fan she vanishes in the way that she came, and Past then morphs into another character.

The most notable difference between Fan in A Christmas Carol and Fan in The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge is that Fan in Brown’s play must deal with the dark, unpleasant nature of her childhood. Dickens’s version of Fan expresses only optimism, joy, and unconditional love. Fan
in *Trial*, as an adult woman, looks back on her childhood with pain. Brown interprets Fan and Ebenezer’s father as abusive, as Fan describes here:

FAN. When mother died, father became awful to live with. Always angry and unreasonable. He sent Ebenezer away to school and would have sent me as well, I’m sure, but father needed someone to do the cooking and cleaning.

SOLOMON ROTHSCILD. Did you ever ask your father if Ebenezer could come home?

FAN. Every Christmas. And each time he would yell and say no. (Brown 46)

Fan then describes a sudden change in her father. She recounts how he repents after one of his violent outbursts: “next morning he came into my room and spoke so gently. He kissed me on the forehead and said they had done it all in one night.” (Brown 46) “They had done it all in one night” are the very words Scrooge uses in Dickens’s novel in his astonishment at the spirits’ fast work. With this reference Brown implies that Ebenezer Scrooge’s cruel father was also once visited by the Ghosts of Christmas to save his soul, and that this was the reason Ebenezer was suddenly allowed to go home. Scrooge, touched by this revelation, shares a loving moment with his long-lost sister before she vanishes from the courtroom.

While there are some small variations on the character of Fan, she always has a childlike innocence and sweet simplicity. Even in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*, when she describes the cruelty of her father, she reverts quickly back to optimism and love. Fan’s primary objective is to help and soothe her brother. In both Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* and in this play, Fan serves as a sentimental reminder to Scrooge of the difficulty of his childhood and the loss of a sister he
loved dearly, both key elements on his path to redemption. The actress playing Fan must seek to discover the most effective way to communicate this idea.

I gained from this research a strong affinity for the character of Fan. In all of the versions of A Christmas Carol I found her absolutely endearing and loveable. I learned that an audience would most likely recognize a Fan that is kind, sweet, and simple and chose to carry those traits into my performance. From the few films that show Fan as an adult I learned the potential tragedy that can surround that character. The most important idea I took from this research is that Fan represents an idea; she is a symbol of home and of unconditional familial love. I held onto this idea very strongly, and my own personal exploration of it is described further in chapter seven.
CHAPTER SIX: BELLE

This chapter examines the character Belle, Ebenezer Scrooge’s former fiancée and lost love. Using Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, several examples of films and plays that have been made out of the story, and Mark Brown’s *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*, I explore the many details and choices that may influence a performance of this character. I research this and the previous characters not to find an absolutely correct or perfect interpretation, but to open possibilities and potential choices for the characters.

Belle in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* may be loosely based on Maria Beadnell, a young woman whom Dickens loved obsessively in his youth. After an amorous courtship of almost four years, Maria’s ultimate rejection of Dickens left a great impression on him and his works. Maria Beadnell rejected Dickens because he was not wealthy enough, while Belle rejects Scrooge for his obsession with wealth. Despite this difference, some scholars speculate that Belle is an abbreviation for Beadnell. (Hearn 66)

In *A Christmas Carol*, Belle appears only in the past that the Ghost shows to Scrooge. Past shows Scrooge a scene in which his younger self sits beside his fiancée, Belle. Dickens describes Belle as a “fair young girl in mourning dress: in whose eyes there were tears.” (Dickens 27) In one draft of the novel, Belle refers to herself as an orphan. This detail is omitted from the final published edition, but if Belle is an orphan the mourning dress she wears may be for her recently deceased parents. (Hearn75)

Belle’s voice is soft and gentle as she tells Scrooge that she is leaving him. This gentle benevolence eliminates the notion that she is attacking or even punishing Scrooge. Because she loves him, Belle believes she is giving her fiancée what he truly desires: the freedom to pursue
wealth as a single purpose. She recognizes that she and Scrooge now have different goals in life. Belle chooses the word “release” (Dickens 27) rather than reject, as if her love holds him back from his obsession with money. She seems to think she is giving him a gift in doing this, as she says “May you be happy in the life you have chosen.” (Dickens 28) Though she is greatly hurt by the change in Scrooge and his preference of wealth over love, she shows no ill will toward him. She even claims to save him from “repentance and regret” (Dickens 28) by not marrying him. Belle does this “for the love of the man [he] once [was].” (Dickens 28)

Belle at once seems wise, benevolent, and strong. She is wise in recognizing the change in Scrooge, benevolent in the gentle way she releases him, and strong for doing this with resolution and calmness. From the tears in her eyes she reveals that she truly loves Scrooge and does not wish to leave him, but she still does so with finality. When Past shows this to Scrooge he writhes from the torture and begs to go home.

Next, Past takes him to a more recent past, seven years before the present, to show him what became of Belle after she left him. Scrooge sees an older Belle who is married with many children. The picture also shows the children playing happily around Belle and their father. Her husband mentions running into Scrooge in the street, and at the mention of her former love Belle laughs. From this episode it is very clear that Belle has moved on to a new, happy life without Scrooge.

Belle is occasionally omitted from films and plays of A Christmas Carol, but most include the scene in which Scrooge loses the woman he loved. The zaniest of parodies either omit the fiancée figure or refrain from ridiculing her. The emotional scene between the lovers appears to be pivotal in the development of Scrooge as a character and in his path to redemption.
Some versions change her name or a few minor details, but the essential idea of Belle remains the same. She represents a lost opportunity, a failed chance at true happiness in the form of a heartbroken girl driven away by the man she loves.

Many versions of the story introduce Belle at Fezziwig’s party, though in Dickens’s novel she does not appear in that passage. John Jakes’s play *A Christmas Carol*, for instance, shows Belle and Scrooge merrily dancing and sharing a kiss under the mistletoe at Fezziwig’s party. (Jakes 38) This scene not only establishes Belle as a character, it also creates an effective contrast to the next scene, in which Belle is no longer blithe and breaks her engagement with Scrooge. Jakes includes in the script a scene of the older, married Belle. When Belle hears of Scrooge’s loneliness, she says, “How sad…But that is the life he chose.” (Jakes 42) Her attitude in this play is one of pity rather than amusement.

In most traditional productions of *A Christmas Carol*, Belle’s lines are verbatim from Dickens, with some occasional interpretations by the playwright. Israel Horovitz’s stage directions suggest that Belle should speak to Scrooge “with hostility.” (Horovitz 25) Christopher Schario’s play *A Christmas Carol* features the same scene from the book, but instead of watching his younger self Scrooge steps into the scene himself to relive the memory. (Schario 22) In Dennis Powers’s and Laird Williamson’s version Belle suggests that Scrooge’s ambition for wealth stems from a need to prove himself to his father. (Guida 140) In his play *Uncle Ebenezer: A Christmas Carol*, Paul Willmott makes Scrooge’s nephew Fred, who is traditionally the son of sister Fan, the son of Belle and Richard, Scrooge’s resented step-brother. (Willmott 38)

The 1935 film *Scrooge* depicts Belle as blond and pretty, trimmed with furs. In her scene with Scrooge she is tense and angry, and erupts into melodramatic keening as she returns his
engagement ring. An emotional Belle gives the idea that she really believes that the relationship is over. Some of the more passive performances give the impression that Belle is merely testing Scrooge. This film shows the older, married Belle dancing around a Christmas tree with many well-dressed children. She frowns momentarily at her husband’s mention of Scrooge, but then kisses her husband and moves on quickly.

In the 1951 film starring Alastair Sim, Scrooge’s fiancée is called Alice instead of Belle. She is shown in the past in the familiar scene with Scrooge, but she is also shown to Scrooge by The Ghost of Christmas Present. Alice never marries, but is alone and has devoted her life to helping the poor. She is kind, but sad, as if regret haunts her life. This new twist suggests that Scrooge not only ruined his own chance at happiness, but also hers.

Belle takes the name Mary in the 1947 Spanish version Leyenda de Navidad. In the past, Mary leaves Scrooge as she does in A Christmas Carol, and then in the vision of Christmas Future she is revealed mourning over his grave. Scrooge, after seeing her extant love for him, reunites with Mary at the end of the film. Many films suggest that Scrooge’s fiancée has an enduring love for him, even decades after their separation.

Ronald Neame’s 1970 musical film Scrooge calls her Isabel, and actually makes her Fezziwig’s daughter. There is a lovely sequence showing Scrooge and Belle happy together running through woods, riding in a row boat, and taking a carriage ride all while Isabel sings a chipper song about happiness and love. She is lithe, beautiful, and charming, and never stops smiling. This establishes Scrooge as a mismatch for her as he is always scowling, even as a young man. Their farewell scene takes place in his office, and she tries to get his attention while he goes on working, even as she tells him she is leaving. This Belle is very lovable and
sympathetic, but despite her sadness at leaving she gives the impression that she will recover fairly quickly.

In *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*, Mark Brown uses many of the same lines that Belle speaks in Dickens’s original *A Christmas Carol*. When Rothschild and Scrooge ask her questions as a witness, she answers with the same words she spoke to Scrooge when she left him, for example:

ROTHSCHILD. Did Mr. Scrooge always have a love for money?

BELLE. When we were engaged, we were both poor and content to be so. But I watched his nobler aspirations fall off one by one until his passion for me ceased to exist and the Master passion, Gain, engrossed him. (Brown 48)

These lines, with some small changes for logic, come directly from Dickens’s text. Brown uses other quotes throughout this scene and the entire play, but also adds some new, interpreted lines of his own creation.

The Belle that is brought to the courtroom by Past is the older, married Belle with children. Brown even gives her a married name: Mrs. Worthington, a name she repeatedly reminds Scrooge of as he continues to address her by her maiden name. Another difference in Brown’s script is that Belle expresses how she feels about leaving Scrooge. While Dickens’s Belle only expresses concern for Scrooge’s feelings, Brown’s version of the character also expresses her own pain:

BELLE. Knowing that I was no longer loved I released him from our promise to marry.

ROTHSCHILD. And Mr. Scrooge, was he filled with remorse?
BELLE. Hardly.

ROTHSCHILD. No? What was his reaction?

BELLE. Indifference. Relief.

ROTHSCHILD. And how did that make you feel?

BELLE. Brokenhearted. I loved Ebenezer once. (Brown 48)

This Belle has not let go of the pain caused by Scrooge. She still feels strongly enough about it to fight with him in the courtroom. This scene attempts to answer the question of what might happen if Scrooge and Belle were to meet again. In Brown’s script, they blame each other for the loss of their relationship:

SCROOGE. You were going to be my wife. I did not ask for release. You made an assumption and walked out on me.

BELLE. Why didn’t you stop me? If I meant so much to you, why did you let me walk away?

SCROOGE. I don’t know.

BELLE. All these years and you still don’t know? You let me walk away because my heart wouldn’t bring you monetary gain.

SCROOGE. That wasn’t the reason, Belle.

BELLE. You didn’t love me anymore.

SCROOGE. I did love you, Belle. I still do.

BELLE. Why didn’t you say that then?

SCROOGE. I was a fool. (Brown 51-2)
Belle asks Scrooge why he did not stop her from leaving; suggesting that perhaps her dismissal of him was a test of his love, which he failed. This moment implies that Belle and Scrooge misunderstood each other, and that they could have had a life together.

Belle in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* is strong, mature, hurt, and angry. She is seeing Scrooge for the first time since they parted. Her objective in this scene is to prove to Scrooge that he is to blame for their failed relationship. The greatest obstacle for her is the overwhelming emotion that strikes her while reliving her painful separation from Scrooge. As she did so many years before, she attempts to maintain a calm exterior as she addresses him. However this time she falls into a heated argument with the man she once loved.

Belle, throughout the many versions and interpretations, keeps some universal traits. She is consistently young, beautiful, and sad. She always loves Scrooge and she always leaves him. To create a performance as Belle that is recognizable to the audience these things should be remembered. There is also new information about Belle in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* that changes the way an actress might interpret the character. Both of these elements may be considered in the rehearsal process, towards the ultimate goal of a rich performance that honors both the original character and the new script.

For my performance, I considered all of the characteristics that seemed to be universal for Belle. I wanted to maintain the dignity she appeared to have in most versions. However, as a result of this research I chose to react against much of what I observed. Belle’s sweet selflessness in many adaptations makes her seem submissive or weak. I wanted to play a character with more strength, and I was curious about Belle’s anger, if it existed. Dickens’s Belle expresses only sadness, never anger. In rehearsal, I attempted to allow Belle a full range of emotions, and not
limit her to the attractive, acceptable emotions she feels in so many other versions. I felt that Brown’s modern text supported this interpretation of the character. The process with which I developed this performance is chronicled in chapter seven.
CHAPTER SEVEN: REHEARSAL AND PERFORMANCE JOURNAL

This daily rehearsal and performance journal chronicles events in rehearsals and performances, questions and discoveries I made as I worked, notes about my performance from the director, and audience reactions to my performance. This journaling is essential to my understanding and creation of the characters. Because of the personal nature of the journaling process, I adopt a more casual, past-tense voice in the writing.

November 12, 2008

Today was the first of three “pre-rehearsals.” Director Jim Helsinger met with me for an hour to work on character. By his request, I was off-book for this first meeting. We ran and discussed my parts in Act 1.

The first of the three characters to appear was the Ghost of Christmas Past. Past entered “magically” through the coat rack with fog and light effects. The blocking for all three characters was fairly simple, since all three were seated on a witness stand. As we worked, Past became playful and delighted by everything and everyone. She was charming; Jim even described her as “sexy, but innocent.” I used a higher head voice; it was flute-like and musical. I giggled a lot, which seemed to work well. In the script, Past was mostly light and childish, but she had moments of gravity, lines that were filled with lessons and morality and perhaps the true message of the story. For example: “Too often we forget the past and who we truly are.” She was not human, and therefore did not experience the full range of human emotion. She represented an idea: Christmas, specifically in fond, joyful memory. She was so consumed with the thought she
represented that she did not really comprehend any other ideas, such as law, order, and argument. She willingly came to the courtroom to play and to save Scrooge’s soul.

Next we worked on Fan. In this play Past transformed into Fan and then Belle magically on stage. To become Fan I put on a bonnet and shawl through some stylized movement, accompanied by music and some gold fairy dust. Jim asked me to keep any trace of anger away from Fan, and I agreed with that choice. I used a childlike piping voice here that lived in sinus resonance. Some descriptive words that I played with were “loving”, “sweet”, and “open”, “filled with wonder”. Jim gave a great action for me to play which was to show Scrooge that I loved him as often as I could. I tried to radiate the warmth of Home.

Finally we came to Belle. For this one used using a much deeper voice, a chest resonance. As Belle I finished the act and Jim encouraged me to build to a very large emotional climax. Image words for Belle were “dignity”, “heartbreak”, and “passion”. Again I am tried to steer away from anger, if possible. Jim said that if I showed anger, then Scrooge was right to be a miser and a grump. But if I spoke from hurt and love then Scrooge would learn something. One interesting insight that this script gave that was maybe missing from the novel was that Belle broke Scrooge’s heart as much as he broke hers. That was something that I could discover as Belle in the scene. I saw that this role would be the most demanding of the three.

QUESTIONS: Are Belle and Fan manipulated by Past and what she wants us/Scrooge to see? Or does Past give over completely to these women and let them speak for themselves? OR do they exist only in Scrooge’s memory, colored by the way he remembers them? What stages of life are Belle and Fan at?
**CHALLENGES/TO WORK:** Consider the magical transitions between characters.

Besides just changing a hat or a bonnet, what magical movement occurs to transform me? After that, I need to find how these characters are *physically* different, especially in the way that they sit. I have already begun to develop three different voices, now I need to find three different bodies.

**November 14, 2008**

Yesterday’s rehearsal was cancelled. Today the main focus of rehearsal was physicality, especially finding the difference in physicality between characters. We did a lot of movement work. As Past, I moved very lightly and quickly while still being very fluid. I developed a physical vocabulary that was very ethereal and non-human. My arms and hands floated up and around, and my torso followed as if my body could float away. In *A Christmas Carol*, Past’s hands were mentioned so many times, and were described as powerful, yet gentle. For this reason I put the main focus of my movement in my hands and the way that they illustrated things and reached for images and people. My movements were floating, but I also moved with external stimuli, like a flickering candle blown in the wind. I became the light that Dickens mentioned shining out the top of Past’s head. In this physicality, I found myself irresistibly drawn to the humans around me, and I longed to touch and connect with everyone.

In the physical exploration as Fan, I was very young and bouncy, but with a head tilt and clasped hands that felt like shyness. With Past it was hands, and for this character the energy came out of my eyes. This physicality encouraged me to take in and discover everything, especially anything that had to do with Ebenezer. Up to this point I played an ageless “essence”
of Fan. It made me feel very childlike, which did not quite work because I was clearly not a child and it made me too similar to Past. I considered giving myself a definite age and point of view. I decided to play with being about 22, having just learned that I am pregnant.

When exploring Belle I played with a stillness and composure that I found very powerful. My hands were clasped over my stomach, holding a shawl around my shoulders and holding my emotions together. It felt like I was protecting myself. I had a very straight, rigid posture for this character. The energy for this character was in the spine, and I felt it holding me up in the face of anything. I chose to play Belle about thirty-five years old here, old enough to have defenses and regrets.

I decided that Past did not “play” these other women nor manipulate them, but simply brought them forth and showed them as she did in A Christmas Carol. She brought these women back from the past to speak for themselves.

QUESTIONS/CHALLENGES: Fan and Past are too similar. Continue to explore unusual physicality of Past and a bit more age on Fan.

November 17, 2008

Today was our first rehearsal with the full cast. We had a read-through of the play and it was wonderful to hear it with such a talented cast. I started to understand my place in the story. The play for the most part was funny, playful, and raucous with scattered, pointed moments of real depth. My scene at the end of act one was the pain, memory, and emotional heart of Scrooge and this story. Of course Past got to be funny too, but Fan and Belle were so different from the rest of the play.
After the read-through we blocked all of act one. My blocking was fairly simple; all three of my characters were witnesses in a trial, so they sat on the stand. I played with standing and moving a bit as Past, but for the most part I was seated.

I played Fan today as a young woman of about 22 and I was much happier with the result. The voice was much closer to my natural pitch. Making Fan innocent but not necessarily childish worked very well.

We had some difficulty in Belle’s scene. There were pauses that killed the momentum and ultimate climax. Of course, I anticipated that this would become easier when we grew more familiar with the lines. But I saw that it would take a lot of focus and work. There was a charging pace and large build that this scene required. It was, after all, the finale of act one.

**QUESTIONS/PROBLEMS:** What are Past’s relationships with the other characters? She loves and is still trying to save Scrooge, but what about the other men in the courtroom? What is her relationship with The Ghost of Christmas Future? Are they friends?

**November 18, 2008**

Today’s rehearsal began with group dialect work. Most of the characters spoke in Received Pronunciation or “proper British.” I was very comfortable with this dialect and it gave me little difficulty. The dialect work raised questions of class. For example, Mrs. Dilber, played by Anne Hering, was a very low class character and spoke in Cockney dialect. For a very high class character vowels became exaggerated and r’s were tapped or even rolled. Fan and Belle were neither low nor very high class so I used a fairly standard R.P. dialect. But this work did make me stop to consider class and what it meant to these characters. Past was in R.P. as well,
since that was the dialect of those around her. As Past, I could probably speak several languages and in several different ways, and adapt my speech depending on to whom I was speaking.

Later in the afternoon we finished blocking the show. This process moved so quickly. In act two, Past was summoned back into the courtroom as things began to fall apart into pandemonium. Doing this section reminded me how fun this play was. A large part of the comedy of this show was the collision of the fantastic with the everyday. Playwright Mark Brown placed magical creatures and unearthly spirits in a very structured, ordinary setting: a courtroom. These characters, who behaved according to the magical reality that existed in A Christmas Carol, were suddenly expected to behave according to the rigid rules of an English court of law. They often did not comply, and the conflict that this created was both ridiculous and delightful.

November 19, 2008

Today we reviewed blocking for the entire play. We also continued to explore character and relationships. We came up with a very fun conceit about the Ghost of Christmas Past: every human who came within a few feet of her became incredibly warm and happy. She instantly gave them the feeling of Christmas spirit and happiness they remembered from their past, especially childhood. This actually made me dangerous to the people in the room because it became an obstacle to their objectives. So while was questioned on the stand my interrogators frequently lost their composure in my presence. Scrooge was especially wary of my power. As Past I used this to my advantage or sometimes it happened accidentally. The floating, flowing
movements started to become second nature. Even when I was not gesturing my hands floated and flickered about, as if moved by the air currents in the room.

Today I rehearsed for the first time with the shawl, bonnet, and magical hat that were made for the show. These things all gave me trouble. I had to carry all of them on stage in one hand so that I could have one arm floating magically. I thought that the garments would both fit into the magical hat, but only the bonnet fit. For Fan, I needed to tie on the bonnet and tie on the shawl with the flowered side out. Then for Belle I needed to remove the bonnet and turn the shawl so the red side was out. All of this needed to happen gracefully and “magically” with my back to the audience. In this rehearsal I could only focus on getting everything on in time to finish with the music. I wanted it to eventually look seamless and as if there was magic in the costume pieces. Past brought the pieces here as a part of herself.

I had a private dialect coaching session today with fellow cast member Anne Hering. She gave me a few suggestions about tapped r’s here and there in my dialogue. Other than that she only complimented my dialect work. I felt confident in it.

I still struggled with the character of Belle. I did not feel “at home” in her skin at this point. I had trouble identifying with her. Past, while challenging, was very fun and I saw the path to take with her. I was very comfortable with Fan and I hooked into the familial love and warmth she expressed. But I did not hook into Belle and what she felt. I considered that the core of it was a feeling of longing. There was a sense of loss and of missed opportunity, regret even, that I needed to explore. Belle reacted to a great emotional injury at Scrooge’s hands. Some actions I considered were to blame him, punish him, or try to get the old Scrooge back.
QUESTIONS/PROBLEMS: Why is Belle here? What is her attitude about being in this courtroom? What is her current attitude toward Scrooge?

November 20, 2008

Today was our first run-through of the show. It was good to hear the play in its entirety again. We all rehearsed our own scenes separately and it was easy to isolate our own parts and forget the play as a whole. I learned how I fit not only into the story, but into the structure of the play. In *A Christmas Carol*, Past and the memories he brings softened Scrooge and caused him to weep, which started him on the path to changing his ways. Similarly, in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*, Rothschild used Past, Fan, and Belle to soften Scrooge and cause him to break down. After my scene, things began to fall apart (in the story) more and more until the trial reached complete chaos and Scrooge revealed his plan and everything turned upside down. It was my part that hinted to the audience that this play had a message and was not just a fun parody.

The transitions between characters continued to be a problem. We decided not to put anything inside the magic hat to save time and grace. I asked for some time to spend with the props on my own so that I could make the transitions smooth.

I did some personal identification work with Belle and her world last night and I found a vulnerability and pain to her that I played with in rehearsal today. While I did find some emotional truth that I was missing before, I felt weakened in the scene. Jim even commented that I was playing too vulnerable and that I needed to find more power. He asked me to think of Belle as “made of steel.” What I did today was too full of self-pity. I wanted to have more strength. I got it from a full, deep voice and tall posture. It did not make sense for this woman to come and
show her vulnerability to the man that hurt her in front of a courtroom full of people. Sweet, vulnerable Belle was the one we saw in *A Christmas Carol*. This Belle was older, wiser, and in a totally different situation. Belle protected herself by being hard. The pain was there, but it was hidden under a cold exterior.

**QUESTIONS/PROBLEMS:** How does Belle “steel” herself? What are the places where that cracks and the pain shows? How does this read? How might an audience see this Belle?

**November 21, 2008**

I had some time on my own with the hat, shawl, bonnet, and transition music to work on my transitions between characters. I am now changing quickly enough, but the effect remained sloppy and not as graceful as I wanted it to be. Jim suggested that I rehearse with mirrors so that I could see what the transitions looked like from the back, since that was what appeared to the audience.

Jim worked closely with me on Belle today. He gave me imagery to play with such as “a statue of a war goddess” and “a portrait of a proper English lady.” He said that as the war goddess I had a fire in my eyes that worked very well. For the first time felt truly confident as Belle. She became very proper, British, dignified and severe. I found a level of cold severity that I did not know I was capable of portraying.

My new found confidence gave me the impulse to try something new. We rehearsed the scene many times and I finally suggested that Belle try to leave the courtroom. For today’s last run of the scene I put my idea into action. When my conversation with Scrooge got especially heated, specifically on my line “A lonely old man intent on nothing but the pursuit of wealth,” I
stood and started to leave the courtroom. The scene suddenly had new life. The surprise and audacity of this move seemed to electrify the entire courtroom. It gave Rothschild a motivation for his line to the judge “can’t you control—”. Scrooge also had a new energy in the scene; Joe Vincent (the actor portraying Scrooge) appeared to be more shaken emotionally. I think the scene needed something unexpected, which was what this new blocking choice gave. Jim commented that I found a new depth in my voice and emotions. I believed this would help build the chaos Jim asked for at the end of the scene. Ultimately I felt great about today’s rehearsal and looked forward to taking this new idea further.

November 22, 2008

Today we worked through the last twenty pages of the play. After that we ran the entire show.

As Past, I let the physicality and essence of a floating, flickering flame grow in my movements. As a light creature she was wafted and tossed about by the movements of things around her. This became especially noticeable in act two, when there was a lot of chaos and physical movement on the stage. As Rothschild ran past me I let the current of air he created blow me slightly upstage. When the judge yelled, his voice threw me off balance and down stage a little. In the chase around the witness stand between Marley and me I was caught in a whirlwind. This idea of being whirled about came from the lightness I found as Past. This gave one more layer of unearthliness to her.

DIRECTOR’S NOTES FROM THE RUN:

Everyone: Don’t play the punch line during the set-up.
Belle is taking little hesitations. This reads as her searching for the right words. Keep that.

Belle had great power on her lines “lonely old man” and “No I did not.”

November 24, 2008

I was given more time today to work on the character transitions with the props. I stood in front of a mirrored wall while an assistant stage manager held a full length mirror behind me at eye level so that I could see in the reflection what the back of me looked like while I performed these transitions. This was a tremendous help and the transitions improved greatly. I let my arms gracefully move out to the sides more so that they could be seen on either side of my back. When Jim saw the results he was very pleased as well. He said it was much more interesting and magical.

After each transition, when both Fan and Belle turned around for the first time they looked right at Scrooge. The action was repeated for both women but produced very different reactions. When Fan took him in, she gasped in delight and joy to see her big brother. When Belle turned around and saw him, she coldly sized him up as an enemy. These actions immediately established their relationships with him.

Today as Fan I acted on an impulse to reach out to Scrooge. When it came time for Scrooge to cross-examine Fan, I reached for his hand and waited. He was taken slightly aback, but then picked up on the idea and tenderly took my hand. The effect was lovely. Joe and I made a very special connection in this moment. Jim also said that the gesture was very emotionally powerful and asked us to keep the moment for the show.
As Belle I continued to experiment with leaving the witness stand at different times, with different motivations, and in different paths. When I charged down on “Why didn’t you stop me?” the move came from an emotional outburst and a strong desire to confront Scrooge head on. When I left the stand on “You fear the world too much,” I became very disgusted and dismissive and tried to leave the courtroom as if I had nothing more to stay to Scrooge. A third time, I started to leave when Scrooge was yelling at me and I was not speaking at all. That time the abandonment of the witness stand was about escaping the conflict and avoiding overwhelming emotion. I had a number of possibilities to choose from, and Jim said that he did not want to set the blocking for fear of stifling the spontaneous energy of the scene.

**DIRECTOR’S NOTES FROM THE RUN:**

Love Past’s giggle. Keep using it more and more.

Belle can’t leave the courtroom because she is actually Past, who cannot leave. Don’t walk out of the room, but keep that intent. We want the audience to be in suspense whether or not she will leave.

**November 25, 2008**

Today we worked and ran act two. Jim told me to pull back the accusation of Marley, which had been growing larger and brattier. I reached the extent of exploration of that moment; I then had to pull it back and give it shape for good storytelling.

**November 26, 2008**
Today we worked Belle’s scene and then ran act one. I was sick today with a sore throat and had to pull back vocally to prevent damage or strain. I greatly missed the vocal power. Belle’s main weapon was her strong voice she used to attack Scrooge. I felt weakened with less volume and resonance.

Based on my choice to leave the witness stand, Joe made a new choice in his blocking. After I left the stand, he went into it. This gave the end of the scene a very interesting new dynamic. Suddenly the roles became reversed and I was the one questioning him. This was something that happened in the lines, and today the physical stage picture started to illustrate this reversal of power as well. Jim continued to encourage us to explore and keep the blocking unset.

**DIRECTOR’S NOTES FROM THE RUN:**

What does “You fear the world too much” mean? Right now it is too general. Make it more specific.

On Fan’s line “Never in my heart” hit the word “my” to set yourself up in opposition to your father.

**QUESTIONS/PROBLEMS:** Does Fan know why she is here or how she got here? I am playing her first moments with a certain disorientation or confusion. She has been magically brought back from the past. Does she know that she has died?

Is it possible that Past was alive at some point? I am playing her as a spirit, an essence of an idea, but she is also called a ghost. Does that mean she was once a living human?

**November 28, 2008**
Technical rehearsals began today. We worked the most technically involved sections of the play, including my first entrance, and then did a line speed through of the entire play. I was very secure in my lines and had no problem with the speed through.

There were a lot of technical elements surrounding Christmas Past’s first entrance. I entered upstage right from behind the coat rack. There was magical sounding music with tinkling bells. The lights changed, including moving lights that were timed with my movements. There was also a great deal of fog, which created a cloud for me to appear out of, as if I materialized in the room. The fog was so thick I could not see where I was going for my entrance. I had to blindly walk through it and then pause once I was on stage to get my bearings. But I thought that the effect was worth the inconvenience.

**November 29, 2008**

Technical rehearsal continued today. There were more effects for Past during the scene after her entrance. The magical “lantern” projector rose out of the witness stand behind Past with fog, lights, and spooky magical sounds. There were leaves falling inside the courtroom while Past talked about Scrooge’s childhood home. The leaves represented the changing in seasons and the passing of time, a major theme in Past’s section. Also when Past talked about the slide depicting Scrooge’s friends playing in the snow, a snowstorm occurred in the courtroom over Past. The snow was very heavy and a bit overwhelming and distracting. In the transitions between characters there was a lot of gold dust showered on me, music, and the circular window at the back of the courtroom became a clock that ran backwards done by a moving light
projection. I mentioned all of these technical considerations around my scene because the
“magic” was very important to the creation of the character of Christmas Past.

At the end of Belle’s scene, there was a gap between the last lines of the scene and the
blackout. To fill this time, I turned and looked out at the audience and then at Rothschild. This
became a very interesting moment where Belle suddenly realized that she let her guard down and
became emotional in front of a crowd of people. This was a very powerful moment and I planned
to continue to play with it. Jim said that the gap in time before the blackout would not be quite as
long as it was today, but he liked the look I did and agreed that I should keep it.

**November 30, 2008**

In this afternoon’s rehearsal we had a technical run without costumes. There was much
less snow on Christmas Past today and I found it less distracting. I felt during this run that we
needed an audience and that we were ready for them.

Later this evening was first dress rehearsal. I had my costume on today for the first time
since my first fitting. That costume did a lot to define Christmas Past. It was beautiful and
extremely feminine. The silver fabric was draped in garlands of rich red flowers. The corset and
flowing bustle accentuated her curves. She was beautiful and sensual and literally glowing. All
of my skin that showed was dusted with fine glitter. When I saw myself in that costume, I was
filled with confidence in my interpretation of Christmas Past. As soon as I was laced into the
corset, my posture changed and I felt more like the character.

**December 2, 2008**
Tonight was our second dress rehearsal with a small invited audience of about thirty people. The run was very messy and a lot of lines were flubbed by several actors. The pacing was slow and the audience barely laughed at all. We expected the laughs to come from the way the play quotes *Christmas Carol*, but in a new and unexpected context. But there were no laughs on those referential plays on the text. After the run, we questioned whether we needed to push those punch lines more. We had been playing the trial as realistically as possible, but after tonight we wondered if we should play things more over-the-top, to send-up *A Christmas Carol*, and make fun of it more.

Despite the audience’s silence, I felt better about Fan and Belle than I ever had before. Jim commented on the story that Joe and I created in both sections. He said he could see how Fan set up Belle by opening up the audience’s emotions so that they were ready for the powerful climax that Belle brought. Before the run I told myself to give in to the scene and trust my work and that apparently made a big difference in my performance.

**December 3, 2008**

In this afternoon’s rehearsal we ran the show without technical elements or costumes. Jim instructed the cast to “just have fun.” He believed that at his direction, everyone was taking the play very seriously and needed to loosen up and give in to absurdity and comedy. He asked us to play the characters further over the top than ever before, in hopes of finding more laughs. For me, this meant relaxing into the roles even more. Fan and Belle were not comedic characters, but this run let me take the pressure to give a huge, dramatic performance off myself. My energy was not any less, but this new attitude put things in perspective and reminded me that we were indeed
doing a comedy. As Past, who was very comedic, I let myself fly. Instead of analyzing every move, I let loose and had a great time. It felt really good and I became very excited for our next run.

Tonight was our first preview, with a sold-out house. The audience was great. They still did not seem to pick up on the specific *A Christmas Carol* line references, but they laughed at all of the slapstick and circumstantial humor. They laughed at every one of Past’s giggles. I thought that the intensity of Belle’s scene greatly surprised them. I heard a few nervous laughs at the end of that scene.

**DIRECTOR’S NOTE FROM THE RUN:**

Fan and Belle are just heartbreaking. That’s why we need the raucous laughter to build to that point, so we can surprise them with the emotional power of those two scenes.

**December 4, 2008**

Tonight’s second preview was also sold out. I felt self-conscious as Fan and Belle tonight. I let the praise and positive reactions influence my performance as I tried to remember and recreate what I did the night before. I reminded myself not to let outside praise let me hold back on stage. Past felt good, however. I noticed many people grinning at me when I talked to the audience, whom we use as the courtroom audience. That was encouraging.

I had a discovery tonight as I was sitting in the green room listening to the performance and the audience over the monitor. The audience did not appear to remember *A Christmas Carol* word for word, which is perhaps why they did not laugh at the clever sport with Dickens’s language. They did, however, remember the general story and its major characters. They
responded to the archetypes of over-the-top characters like Scrooge, Marley, and The Ghost of Christmas Future. Nearly all of them remembered and responded to Christmas Past, perhaps many of them remembered Belle, and I expected even fewer of them to remember Fan. Of course, all of this varied between individual audience members and depended upon how familiar each person was with the story.

**DIRECTOR’S NOTE FROM THE RUN:**

The line “They had done it all in one night” did not have the imaginary quotes on it that it usually does. You really need to play hard that you are quoting your father or the audience will miss that moment.

**December 5, 2008 (morning school performance)**

This morning we did a preview performance for groups of high school and middle school students who came to the theatre on a field trip. The student audience had a very different energy than the preview audience. They were even more removed from the traditions of *A Christmas Carol* than the adult audience. They were not entirely lost, however. This audience laughed a lot at the jokes based in slapstick and simple comedy. And I could feel that they were paying attention. They actually laughed at Christmas Past more than the previous audiences did. Perhaps the sweet simple archetype of that character was more accessible to them. We also had a talkback session with the students after the show. Some of the students related the characters in this play to what they saw in films of *A Christmas Carol*. I included unnamed students’ pertinent comments at the end of this entry.
I had a very successful run this morning. I felt very fresh doing the show in the morning for a change. Sometimes doing a show after a long, tiring day was difficult. My new lack of fatigue made me think of how vocally demanding this role was. Although I was not on stage for very long, in the course of those fifteen minutes that I was featured I stretched my voice to both ends of my range. Even with warm-up this was taxing if I was at all tired.

**TALKBACK COMMENTS/QUESTIONS FROM STUDENT AUDIENCE:**

“For the girl with the red flowers: Is it fun being preppie?”

“Christmas Past was more beautiful than I could have imagined.”

“Y’all were awesome.”

**December 5, 2008 (evening performance)**

Tonight was our official opening night performance. The entire cast had high energy and the audience was energetic as well. I had a very good show. Fan was especially very emotionally connected tonight. I felt my eyes brimming with tears when Scrooge took my hand. I did not think Fan weeping would be appropriate, but that little sting of happy tears felt right. The pace was excellent and clean for Past’s questioning. Belle did not feel like my best, but I was still very pleased with our opening performance.

As Belle, I started letting my voice crack at the emotional height of the scene. This was both a relief for my hard working vocal instrument and a potentially effective release of emotion. I decided not to use it excessively, however, and decided that once per scene was enough. Tonight it happened on the line “Why didn’t you say that then?” at the very end of the scene. Belle’s difficulty speaking was good for me and my performance. When I let go that much in
that moment, I gave myself something to do immediately after: to recover and regain composure in front of the crowd.

**December 6, 2008**

For our second show we had a very small house, about half full. This audience was not nearly as responsive last night’s. I expected this from a small crowd; in comedy a large crowd fed itself with laughter and was much more raucous. However, I thought this was a literate audience; I heard more small titters at the literary references that peppered this script.

There was one moment that happened several runs in a row and that I was especially struck by today. At the end of Scrooge and Belle’s climactic scene, when I turned back to look at Rothschild, Mark Brown (who played Rothschild) smiled at me. It was a knowing smile, and what it communicated to me as Belle was that this lawyer intended for things to get out of hand. He planned for Scrooge and Belle to have this heated argument. It was a powerful moment.

In the moment when Scrooge took Fan’s outstretched hand, I frequently saw a hesitation or fear almost in Scrooge’s (played by Joe Vincent) face. To me, it seemed as if Scrooge was unsure if he could actually touch the shadow of his dead sister. Today I gave the slightest nod, as if to tell him it was alright. I played Fan tonight with the idea that she knew she was dead and reached to him from beyond the grave. Logistically I was not sure if it worked, but it was emotionally powerful. I was curious what an audience might say from where and from what time Fan came.

I felt somewhat stilted as Christmas Past tonight. I began analyzing and thinking too much about what I was doing as I was doing it. I told myself to relax and trust my work. When
Past became mechanical I lost some of the joy and life of this role. I had to let go and have fun with it.

**December 7, 2008**

We had a fairly small house for our Sunday matinee today. There were a lot of people coughing, which I found distracting. I was concerned that the audience would lose some of my words when there was coughing over them. But I tried to push those thoughts out of my head and give the same performance I would any other day. I did pay special attention to my diction today because of the added noise.

There was one moment as Fan that I did not mention before. After Scrooge released her hand and walked away clearly very sad, Fan wanted to reach out to him; to offer him some comfort or at least tell him that things were alright. But right as she opened her mouth to speak, Rothschild called to the witness stand Mrs. Belinda Worthington. Fan wanted to speak to Scrooge before she disappeared, but the magic sucked her away and Past appeared to summon Belle. What would Fan have said to him if she was allowed to speak in those last seconds?

I was much more relaxed as Past today. I got back to the fun and joy of the role without wondering if I was doing it right. That was the key to playing Past: to have fun. I turned off the thinking and let loose.

**December 9, 2008 (morning school performance)**

Today’s school matinee was a very young audience; mostly sixth through eighth grade. This audience was less responsive than the last school crowd. They were attentive, but not
getting all of the jokes. But they laughed at Past’s giggle. I thought during the bittersweet
connection of Fan and Scrooge I heard several sniffles coming from the audience. I do not know
if they were sniffles of emotion or illness. They erupted into conversation immediately after
Belle’s scene into intermission. Whether or not it was my scene or even the play that inspired the
conversation I did not know. But I took it as a sign that the students were awake and excited
about the show.

Past felt slightly off again. I did not think I became very technical or overanalyzed my
actions as I did before, but there was something strange about the rhythm of the scene today.
Perhaps a day off let us get a bit rusty. I felt that my fellow actors and I were missing the
connections and communication we usually had in Past’s scene.

I felt very good about Belle’s scene today. I found a very deep chest resonance quite
easily. I think again the difference was in being fresh in the morning without the long day to
fatigue my voice. When I found that depth in my voice without having to really reach for it, I felt
very powerful and alive.

TALKBACK QUESTIONS/COMMENTS FROM STUDENT AUDIENCE:

“You’re gorgeous, by the way.”

“Do you ever improvise in this play?”

“How do you learn all of those different accents?”

December 9, 2008 (evening performance)

Tonight was a special performance bought entirely by a company for their Christmas
party. The audience was very unruly and distracting. Lots of people left and returned during the
show. A group of women sitting right of the stage found Past very funny. They laughed and commented at everything I did. People held conversations out loud during the show. During the tender intimate moment when Fan and Scrooge held hands, a woman in very noisy high heels walked in front of the audience and out of the theatre. I continually pushed these distractions out of my head to stay focused. I found it most helpful to focus on my scene partners.

**December 10, 2008**

I had a lot of fun as Past tonight. For some reason the echo modification of my voice through the microphone seemed a little more exaggerated tonight. Instead of letting it distract me, I embraced it, and it reminded me of Past’s magic. She was a truly magical being, not a crazy person. This prompted me to give in to all of the strange and fun choices I made for this character. I loved playing unearthly characters: I had license to make bizarre choices and explore them fully.

Belle was off vocally tonight; I started a bit higher in my range at the beginning of her scene. I had some trouble getting there, but I found it a few lines into the scene. Perhaps I had difficulty getting low because I was so excited about Past and her airy head voice.

This evening I saw the archival photos of the show that were taken during our final dress rehearsal. The pictures of my characters were fascinating and affirming to me. From Past to Fan to Belle, I truly looked like three very different women. This was not just because of the minor costume changes. Even in the still photographs I saw the behavioral differences in the three characters. The postures, facial expressions, and energies of all three were very different. Past
had an exaggerated, almost maniacal joy about her; Fan was wide-eyed and sweet, and Belle looked hardened and hateful.

December 11, 2008 (morning school performance)

We performed for a small, very young school group today. A large high school group cancelled their trip to the theatre so we were left with about seventy middle and elementary school students. The few times they did respond, they seemed to laugh at us rather than with us. They laughed at Past’s giggle and they also laughed during my transitions between characters. Mark suggested that the changes made them uncomfortable because they were young and I was a woman changing clothes in front of them.

Past physically influenced and was influenced by the people around her. She elicited warm memories and feelings of Christmases past from the mortals around her. In turn, when they were most immersed in fond memory, when their pasts filled their hearts and minds, Past’s “light” burned brighter and brighter and she came even more alive. In my performance, this manifested in the “magical” arm movements that floated about me. The stronger the memory or emotion in the other characters (especially Scrooge), the larger my arm movements became and joyfully higher my voice. The height of this happened when Scrooge viewed the slide of his school friends. Past and Rothschild then brought forth Fan, who was the next step in emotion and love in Scrooge. If Past was on the stage at the same time as Fan, she would have glowed with her magic arms blowing wildly about her.

TALKBACK QUESTIONS/COMMENTS FROM STUDENT AUDIENCE:

“Why did the girl ghost play three different women?”
“Is it hard for the girl ghost to move her arms like that?”

December 11, 2008 (evening buyout performance)

Tonight was another performance bought by a company for its employees. This crowd was much more docile than the last company party. They were not as vocal in their laughter, but I felt that they were paying attention. One woman in the front row cried during Fan. The knowledge that some of our audience was willing to go with us emotionally helped me in those scenes. She reminded me that, as in A Christmas Carol, there was real heart in this play.

I learned to let go of my failures. To call them failures actually sounded extreme. It was very difficult to analyze this performance while I was still in the run and stay in the moment while I was onstage. But tonight I let go of that. Specifically, I stopped paying so much attention to my voice as Belle. I reached for my low chest voice on her first line only and then let myself fly for the rest of the scene. The result was very successful. I knew that the work I have did was there and I trusted my instrument.

I remembered once having trouble focusing and following the story after my entrance in Act Two. Without lines or much direction I did not know my part in the story. Today I discovered I no longer had a problem with that. I attributed this in part to my fellow actors, especially Mark and Joe, who made the story they told much clearer. I also learned a lot more about Past, what was at stake for her, and the way she saw and dealt with the world. The notion of no longer existing terrified her, but she did not fully understand terror. She spent a large part of the end of the play trying to understand what was happening and absorbing and being tossed about by the emotions of the humans around her.
December 12, 2008 (morning school performance)

In this morning’s performance I experienced Fan with fresh eyes. I felt tears stinging my eyes again and was filled with emotion. The slide show from the magic “projector” led me to this today. I always created for myself images of a lonely child Ebenezer and took the time to see them during the scene. But today I was reminded of my own family and how I missed them. It reminded me of the essence and purpose of Fan: she was a reminder and a living embodiment of the warmth and love of home and family.

For some reason this morning I ran into everything on my entrance and exit. My vision was obscured by fog and darkness every show, but I usually managed to avoid hitting things. On my very first appearance I whacked the proscenium with my ethereally waving arm. After Belle, as I exited in darkness, I walked right into one of the railings, then tripped over the coal box stage left. I was uninjured, but amused and slightly distracted by these accidents.

Our student audience today was very responsive to Past. I heard cat calls and whistles at her on my first entrance. The young audiences always responded to Past. Boys and girls both loved her. The appearance of Christmas Past was extremely feminine. Her voice was light and cheerful, she only existed to serve. She was made of light and happiness and everything good. She was magical, a fantasy creature, and this greatly appealed to adolescent boys, who did not censor their reactions.

TALKBACK COMMENTS/QUESTIONS FROM STUDENT AUDIENCE:

“I have a question for the ghost of Christmas Past: What is your phone number?”

“How did you come up with those three different voices?”

“I really like your dress and hair.”
December 12, 2008 (evening performance)

Tonight committee member Kate Ingram attended the show. I spent extra time relaxing during my warm-up and reminded myself to give the same performance, as if there were no one in the audience analyzing my performance for a thesis review. I felt very successful in maintaining my focus. I will confess, however, that having my former voice teacher in the audience gave a little extra sharpness to my final t’s.

I had a nap before tonight’s show and it made a great difference. The nine show weeks were exhausting. But because of my nap I felt well rested for tonight’s show and gave a focused, energetic performance with ease.

Tonight’s audience was one of our most responsive yet. They were a large group and laughed at most of the jokes.

December 13, 2008

Past did not get many laughs tonight but up until then the audience had been very responsive. This affected me and made me self-conscious. Their silence made me wonder if my performance was off, if I was doing something different or had lower energy. This in turn made my performance less focused. While I resolved to continue to take audience reaction into account for this journal I tried to find a way to keep it from affecting my performance in a negative way.

December 14, 2008

I had a smooth, uneventful show today. I had nothing new to observe or report for this performance.
December 16, 2008 (morning school performance)

Today’s school audience was large and full of middle school students. They enjoyed the low brow comedy but again missed the Christmas Carol references. There was no applause at the end of act one, which was a first. Even when the explosive fight at the end of the act left them in stunned silence the other audiences always applauded when they realized that the act was over. They did not today. Probably this young audience did not understand the protocol of applause and audience etiquette. But it was interesting to consider that Scrooge and Belle’s shouting match did not inspire cheers from a student audience.

TALKBACK QUESTIONS/COMMENTS FROM STUDENT AUDIENCE:

“Is it hard to breathe in your corset?”

December 16, 2008 (evening buyout performance)

Tonight we had another company buyout audience. They were very well dressed and very well behaved. Past felt very good and easy. Fan and Belle went smoothly as well.

December 17, 2008 (senior matinee)

Today we had a special matinee performance at a discount price for senior citizens. I expected this audience to be quiet and less responsive. But they laughed a lot, especially at the Christmas Carol references.

I had another emotional show as Fan and as Belle this afternoon. I worked to keep the experience fresh and it paid off emotionally. Finding new images and impulses, without changing the blocking or direction of the play, helped me to keep this freshness.
Every time Rothschild asked Belle “How did that make you feel?” as Belle I whipped my head around and snapped at him “Unloved.” Tonight when I did this I heard a woman in the audience laugh. I had not heard this reaction before, and I certainly never thought of it as a joke line, but I after that I saw some humor in it. The subtext of the line was, “How do you think it made me feel, you jerk?” Perhaps it was Belle’s surprise at the question and blunt answer that evoked this audience member’s laughter.

December 17, 2008 (evening performance)

Tonight’s show was successful. I had nothing new to report.

December 18, 2008

Tonight Fan’s line “They had done it all in one night!” got its biggest reaction yet. Often an audience member or two gave a slight noise of recognition or appreciation for this reference to A Christmas Carol and connection between Scrooge and his father. But tonight several people actually laughed at this line. This audience was very attentive and perceptive to the Christmas Carol lines. After tonight’s show we had a talkback for the general public.

TALKBACK COMMENT FROM PUBLIC AUDIENCE: “Many of the actors play multiple characters, but Desiree had to do three different women in a matter of minutes without leaving the stage. Was that challenging to do?”

December 19, 2008 (morning school performance)

Today’s school audience was very vocal, rowdy even. Today was the last day before school’s holiday vacation. I was worried that this young crowd would be out of hand, but they
stayed with us and paid attention, even if their reactions were less than conventional. Several young men whistled at Christmas Past, not just on my entrance but on into the scene as well. There was one group of girls I could hear from stage left that liked Past very much. They laughed at every giggle I made. There was one point where I always sang the word “No!” in response to one of Rothschild’s questions. When I did it today one of the girls from that group repeated it back. She either really liked it or was ridiculing me. Either way I am grateful that these student audiences responded to our show instead of sleeping through it.

On December seventh, I mentioned Fan’s last moment on stage before she disappeared for Belle’s appearance. I played with different impulses in that moment, and what exactly she would have said to Scrooge if she were allowed to continue. Often I had it in my mind to offer him words of comfort, to reassure him that I was in a better place in death. Sometimes I wanted to ask him why he seemed so unhappy. Tonight I had a totally new experience at the end of the scene. Because I played Fan at the age at which she became pregnant, I thought to ask about my child, Fred Fitzpatrick. As Fan, I knew that it was several years into the future, and I realized that I had since passed on. Today the impulse to ask after my son came to me. I wanted to say “How old is he? Is he happy? May I see him?” This idea was very emotionally evocative to me. I chose to keep it in future performances. I knew that the audience would not understand exactly what I was thinking; it was my secret. I believed however, that they would see that I had an emotional experience and interpret that how they chose.

Today I played with a slower pace for Past’s arm movements. I think they slowed down naturally when I let them go without thinking about the movement. When I paid attention to it today I noticed that it made a difference in my gestures. I let the general movement be smaller
and calmer so that the specific gestures stood out more as events. This felt slightly less engaging for me, and more peaceful, but just as magical. The effect was one of floating rather than flickering, and I felt more benevolent, which I thought was entirely appropriate for this character.

**TALKBACK COMMENT FROM STUDENT AUDIENCE:**

“Why did you move your arms like that?”

**December 19, 2008 (evening performance)**

I had a smooth show tonight, except that I noticed my throat was a little scratchy. This could have been illness or fatigue. As I said before, the two-show days with rehearsal for other shows in between were exhausting. The feeling did not have a large impact on my performance. Belle may have been a bit rougher voiced.

**December 20, 2008**

I was especially ruthless as Belle tonight. I found it more effective for me to play her as having been waiting for the opportunity to say these things to Scrooge rather than wanting to avoid the confrontation. When I really laid into him in the heated part of the scene, I tended to spit a lot in my speech. At first I thought this might be detrimental to the image of a dignified woman that I created, but then I liked it in the scene. I literally spit at him in disgust. Ron Schneider (who played Judge Pearson) complimented me on the scene tonight. He said that a lot of pain came through Belle tonight.

Tonight as Belle I also rediscovered how she referred to Scrooge. In the beginning of the scene, she only called him “Mr. Scrooge.” She called him Ebenezer for the first time when she
said that she felt “Brokenhearted. I loved Ebenezer once.” This was where I played one of her “cracks,” a place where her hardened exterior fell away and the pain she felt so many years ago began to show. I had forgotten why this was the place I chose to crack. The choice came right from the textual clue of using his first name.

December 21, 2008

Committee chair Be Boyd attended the show today.

I remembered in the rehearsal process being frustrated with my shawl and bonnet, particularly in Belle’s scene having to hold the shawl around my shoulders the entire scene, unable to use my hands for gestures. I even asked for some sort of fastener for the shawl, which I never received because the shawl had to be reversible. I eventually became glad for this former obstacle. My clenched hands around the shawl became a character trait, a distinctive physicality that helped me get into character instantly.

December 23, 2008 (senior matinee)

Today’s senior matinee audience was very quiet. I heard fellow cast members comment that several patrons were sleeping through a good part of the show.

Belle was especially ferocious again today. My scene partners Joe and Mark both complimented me on the scene. Joe said that it was one of our best.

December 23, 2008 (evening performance)

Tonight’s show was successful. I have nothing new to report.
December 24, 2008

Tonight’s performance had a very special energy because it was Christmas Eve. The play itself took place on a Christmas Eve and everyone in the cast was infected by this special energy. I thought it was magical to do the show on Christmas Eve, especially since my family was able to be there. The audience was small but very appreciative and responsive. I had a great run as all three women.

Someone laughed quietly on “If I meant so much to you, why did you let me walk away?” This had not happened before. Perhaps it read as another “of course” moment like the “Unloved” laugh before. This was where I left the witness stand and Scrooge entered it. Maybe this audience member was chuckling at the irony of this staging.

December 26, 2008

It was strange to do this show after Christmas. For some reason it did not feel as effective. However we still had a fair sized house that was very happy to see a holiday show the day after Christmas.

Mark flubbed a line tonight while questioning Past and it made both of us laugh. Fortunately this silly energy worked very well in the scene and we continued on without any further mistakes.

December 27, 2008

I did the show tonight with a bad sinus headache, but I was able to ignore it for the most part. We had a fantastic audience; they laughed at both physical comedy and the Dickens
references. I got another big laugh on “They had done it all in one night!” There were some people out there that knew *A Christmas Carol* very well.

**December 28, 2008**

Tonight the headache from last night grew to a sore throat and fatigue. Apparently my body was waiting for the show to finish for me to get sick. I did not feel the illness when I was on stage, but as soon as I came off it all came back. I am glad that I was still engaged in this enough for adrenaline and instinct to make me feel well for the time that I had to act.

Today was our last performance. I was sorry to leave this show; it was very good for me. I learned a lot about these characters and my own process as an actor. I was satisfied with the growth I made and I felt ready to close the show. After all, the Christmas season was over and it was time to put this story to bed until the next year.
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

In this thesis I explored an approach to playing the characters of The Ghost of Christmas Past, Fan, and Belle from Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* in Mark Brown’s contemporary play *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge*. My goal was to keep the essence of the original characters while also offering something new in the updated script, thereby serving the intents of both texts. I studied the characters and their contexts from the original *A Christmas Carol*, considered other adaptations of these roles in many plays and films of the tale, and analyzed the characters as they appear in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* in conversation with the playwright and through textual study. In rehearsal, I explored ideas inspired by my research and attempted to develop characters that were recognizable and evocative to audiences. In performance, I left my mind open to new discoveries and observed audience reactions to my performance. I discovered that a lot of the work of combining old and new was already done by the playwright. Simply naming the characters and referencing lines from the original novel did a lot to establish these well-known characters.

My research enhanced my understanding of the characters and the importance of *A Christmas Carol*. By studying the novel and its impact on Western culture, I gained a greater appreciation of *A Christmas Carol* as a Christmas tradition. My interview with Mark Brown gave me an idea of the purpose of his play as well as specific insights into Christmas Past and Belle. The study of other dramatized versions of the story revealed several specific choices for the characters that I could either borrow or react against. I felt that this part of the research was essential to understanding my audience’s expectations, as many of them may have had images of these characters based on plays and films that they saw. By watching and reading several
different versions, I gained a general impression of all three characters. This served as a foundation for building my own interpretations.

The Ghost of Christmas Past was very elusive in my research. I could not define one correct way to portray this spirit. Even Dickens describes it as an ambiguous form, always changing shape. In rehearsal I found Past’s strange ambiguity liberating. The creation of the character came from my own imagination. Inspired by Dickens’s image of Past as a flickering candle I built a character that was light, whimsical, childlike but wise, flirtatious, and very warm. I loved playing Christmas Past. I found her fun and challenging. The challenge was to combine all of the elements of the performance: the flute-like high voice, the stylized movements, and the non-human simplicity of her emotions. My Christmas Past definitely made an impact on audiences. They laughed when she laughed, and some even whistled, flirting back at her. Audience members frequently commented on the movement of her arms. She seemed to cast a spell over everyone else on stage and even the audience. I successfully kept the benevolence and mysterious quality of Dickens’s Past, but layered into my own interpretation a vivacious charm, sweet sex appeal, and innocent playfulness.

Fan came very naturally to me in rehearsals. I immediately identified with the sisterly love I observed in her from Dickens and other interpretations. The concept of home is very important to me personally and I found little trouble communicating this idea. Because I grew comfortable with Fan so quickly, I began to consider details that added new depth to the character. I layered into the performance a level of maturity and an awareness of pain and death. However, I tried to adhere fairly closely to a traditional representation of this character. I think that Brown attempted to preserve the essence of Fan from Dickens’s novel, and I agreed with
that choice. I thought that this would also be helpful to the audience, as Fan is a smaller character and less memorable than Past. I did not get much verbal feedback about Fan, but her scene frequently evoked tears from the audience. She was also the most emotionally evocative character for me personally. I loved Fan and I felt very successful in my portrayal of her.

While Past required the most involvement in research, Belle proved to be the biggest challenge in rehearsal. I gained a general impression of Belle from my research, but Brown’s script presented a picture of Belle that was different from others I observed. This Belle had deep regret and resentment toward Scrooge. Brown’s text suggested that Belle had become hardened by her life experience. As an optimistic young woman of twenty-four I found this bitterness and hardness difficult to portray. I did not have any similar personal life experience to draw from emotionally for this character. I answered this problem by focusing on a technically precise performance. I spent a lot of rehearsal focusing on a strong, distinguished posture and a deep voice. These technical considerations actually helped me to find this new Belle, both physically and emotionally. I would like to play this character again, in this play or other adaptations. I feel like I could still go much further and deeper with Belle.

Ultimately I found this research and rehearsal process very engaging and effective. My goal was to give a performance in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* that honored both the script and the original story it retells. I found that studying *A Christmas Carol* and other adaptations of it served my process in *The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge* very well. From this research, I understood the characters and the story with greater detail than Brown’s play offered. Audiences, who responded favorably to this show and my performance in it, seemed to recognize the characters as icons. Through research and rehearsal, I was able to enrich these iconic types with
specific details and choices. Though the journal at times encouraged me to overanalyze my
performance, I found it a very helpful way to track and develop my characters. This process was
very effective in my opinion and I will use it again in future plays that present a similar
challenge.
APPENDIX A: REHEARSAL AND PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS

Photographs courtesy of Rob Jones
Figure 1: Desirée Bacala experimenting with movement in rehearsal as The Ghost of Christmas Past.
Figure 2: Bacala takes the witness stand as The Ghost of Christmas Past.
Figure 3: Bacala as The Ghost of Christmas Past.
Figure 4: Bacala transitions characters from Past to Fan.
Figure 5: Bacala as Fan sharing a tender moment with Joe Vincent as Ebenezer Scrooge.
Figure 6: Bacala as Belle on the witness stand.
Figure 7: Bacala and Vincent argue heatedly as Belle and Scrooge.
APPENDIX B: EMAIL PERMISSION FROM PHOTOGRAPHER
Re: Production Photos

From: Rob Jones (robj@orlandoshakes.org)

Sent: Tue 4/07/09 10:36 AM

To: Desiree Bacala (d-bacal@hotmail.com)

Knock yourself out! Glad you can use them.

Rob

----- Original Message -----

From: Desiree Bacala

To: robj@orlandoshakes.org

Sent: Monday, April 06, 2009 10:17 AM

Subject: Production Photos

Hello Rob,

I would like to include some of the photographs you took during The Trial of Ebenezer Scrooge as part of my written performance thesis. May I have your permission to use them?

Thanks,
Desiree
REFERENCES


