

Your Present Blessings: Trinity reimagines *A Christmas Carol* for a year like no other



When the Charles Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol* was first published in 1843 by Chapman & Hall, its author was struck by the the world's reevaluation of the famous holiday. Traditions and customs were evolving, and symbols we take for granted today were only beginning to cement themselves, like carols and Christmas trees.

Forty-three years ago, a Rhode Island tradition launched with the very first production of Trinity Repertory Company's *A Christmas Carol*. Since then, it's become a stalwart of the holidays here in Providence and the annual production that has put the theater on the map all over the country. If you're a participant or supporter of the performing arts in the area, *A Christmas Carol* is usually the first thing people ask you about no matter the time of year.

This year, like so many other observances, there was a question of whether there would have to be a break with tradition as it became evident that an in-person spectacular would not be in the cards.

Luckily, Trinity is no stranger to thinking outside the box, and the theater has shown not only versatility

in its plan to transform its most popular show into a digital classic, but through the generosity of donors and sponsors, this year's production will be free of charge, allowing for a level of accessibility that will give people a chance to take in the magic of *A Christmas Carol* from the comfort of their homes.

The lengths the company had to go to in order to ensure a safe experience for cast and crew turned this year's holiday play into a production all its own.

"There are so many headwinds that you're facing," says artistic director and this year's *A Christmas Carol* director, Curt Columbus. "You have to create pods of people. So you have to cast people who live together, who can be the Cratchit family, and oh they have to have a child, and then you have to send them equipment. It's not like making a movie in that so much of this is so constrained."

But the work is already paying off as tens of thousands of people have already registered to see the production — and from well outside of the Ocean State.

"We have people from Puerto Rico, DC, the Virgin Islands, Canada," says Columbus. "It's kind of incredible the amount of interest there is."

That excitement has helped overcome the expected hesitation any group of artists might have in putting together a digital production. Over the past eight months, we've seen the highs and lows of what can be accomplished over Zoom and other platforms, and I asked Columbus whether he had any ambivalence when he and the creative team first set out to reimagine what the show could be.

"We started this process going, 'Why would anyone record *A Christmas Carol*? Why would we do this?' Okay, we're doing this because there are people who have lost their jobs, who need hope, who are feeling really lost, and it's a story about in the face of all sorts of [obstacles], you wake up one more and go 'I am alive.' And so that was what motivated doing it at all. So when we started thinking about how this would be distributed, we realized it had to be free, because this year people need it to be free."

There are advantages to taking a story from in-person to digital, and Trinity's been finding new ways to approach the age-old tale by finding opportunities within its new medium.

"It's really been in the last couple of weeks as things started to come together, and these wacky ideas that I had started to look interesting. As an example, our whole Ghost of Christmas Past stave takes place in a storybook. It's an illustrated storybook. We watch the Ghost of Christmas Past (played by company member Rebecca Gibel) who's a librarian, pull him through the screen, and he turns into a little cut-out and she puts him in the book, and that's how we enter the storybook. For the [Ghost of Christmas] Future stave, which takes place in a graveyard, I was actually really inspired by Ingmar Bergman movies, and the way that he uses these medium shots interspersed with close-ups as a very specific tonal storytelling."

When I asked about how to create that notable sense of theatricality that's become the hallmark of every Trinity production, Curt pointed out that the direction the company is going in is still true to its roots, and that they're not attempting to create a movie.

"This is not a CGI film. It is still handmade. We are actors putting on costumes. We're actors reading the story from a book. When Scrooge goes home, he goes to Trinity Rep, because that's where Scrooge lives for us. In a movie, you'd build a set and a house and an apartment, and it would all be perfectly real. Instead, what we've done is, we've taken theatrical tropes and expanded them into a new media

framework. Sometimes really self-consciously. When Scrooge goes home and goes into his bedroom for the first time, he turns on the ghost light onstage, and then the lights rise on his bedroom, and we're on the stage. Some things are incredibly Trinity Rep in the sense that we take the story and tell the story. We are still who we are as contemporary people, and the period of the story is acknowledged by costumes and language, but we're still who we are."

And who they are is a theater that's very comfortable viewing a classic story through a new lens. Other productions helmed by Columbus include inventive marvels like *Beowulf* and *Ragtime*, but it's been a while since we've seen him in the director's chair for *A Christmas Carol*. I asked him if coming back to the story with this new challenge ingrained in it had caused him to see the famous parable in a different light.

"It's given me a new appreciation for how the story uses storytelling mechanisms to keep us moving forward. Think about *A Christmas Carol* and how each of the staves is directed by a particular ghost, but the particular ghost informs how the stave is experienced. It's almost like each section has its own temperature, and now, in order to render that in some way [cinematically], you really have to go, 'What are the mechanisms that tell the story in this section?' and interrogate those, and that's been incredibly fun. You have to essentialize the story, that's why the whole thing runs under an hour. Part of what we're doing is trying to shift modes constantly, so sometimes we're in a 1950s TV mode, and sometimes we're in *cinema verite* mode, and sometimes we're on Zoom, and sometimes we're in the storybook. Sometimes it's cinematic, sometimes it's theatrical."

Columbus has been working with director of photography Albert Genoa to create some of the distinct imagery for the production.

"He works with Rhode Island Latino Arts. He's a genius. He's been doing these drone shots. He and I just really clicked in terms of what he was seeing and what I was seeing."

When asked about whether his experience on this has opened the door for future digital productions, he admits to not having an idea for what those could be right now, but he is hopeful.

"I never want to lose a live connection with an audience. But in the current situation where we're not going to have a live audience until fall 2021, we've talked about what it means if we do another piece like this."

In the meantime, it's exciting to have one of our grandest local traditions still intact. It's also a great lesson in the audiences theaters are now able to reach for the very first time, and some who are returning to it from places near and far.

"Folks have been writing to us from across the country saying, 'I grew up in Rhode Island. This is my chance to see *A Christmas Carol* again and watch it with my family this year.'"

To register to watch A Christmas Carol online and for free, go to A Christmas Carol - Trinity Repertory Company