

Scrooge: From book to screen to stage

Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" has been one of the most loved Christmas stories since it was first published in 1843. At the time a not-so-veiled attack on what Dickens saw as the evils of the society of his own time with little support for the poor, we may now view it as the irresistible tale of a man learning to be human.

The story was written in a little over six weeks in order to get it published in time for Christmas.



Finding himself in the middle of a feud with his publishers, Dickens took on the publishing of his book himself. It was lavishly illustrated and bound but sold for only five shillings in order that many people could afford to buy it. Dickens' accounts show that its early printings sold out immediately although due to the high production costs and low price, it made very little initial profit.

Ebenezer Scrooge represents the unacceptable face of the capitalist classes, indifferent to the plight of the poor. Dickens himself was well aware of this world having been forced to support himself and his family as a child working in a "blacking" factory whilst his spendthrift father was condemned to the debtors' prison. For a time, he and his family lived in a small house in Camden which, it is believed, served as the inspiration for the Cratchits' house.

Marley's ghost visits Scrooge in the original John Leech illustration

Just four years before the book was published, it was estimated that nearly half of the funerals in London were those of children of ten years old or younger. Those of the working classes who survived would almost never go to

school (the need for money being so acute) and would therefore be unlikely to develop the skills to escape the deprivations into which they were born.

Society's answer to this was to enact The Poor Law in 1834. Until then, individual parishes had been burdened with the care of their poor. This new law required parishes to band together and create regional workhouses where aid could be applied for. They were little more than a prisons with hard labour: civil liberties were denied, families were separated, human dignity was destroyed. The true poor often went to great lengths to avoid this "relief".

Against this social backcloth, like so many of his stories, *A Christmas Carol* was conceived. It became Dickens' most beloved of creations.

Dramatic and literary adaptations aside, Dickens' tale has inspired over 70 different film versions. The earliest known dates from 1901. The one that is most closely associated with our show is from 1970 and there have been another 45 since then!

It is no surprise that Scrooge's story should appeal to Leslie Bricusse. The theme of an otherwise disagreeable central male figure being transformed into an affable and caring human being is a regular subject for him: "Littleman" in *Stop the World – I Want to Get Off*; Doctor Dolittle; the boring, crusty schoolmaster in *Goodbye, Mr Chips* (surely one of the most underrated film musicals)...and, of course, Ebenezer Scrooge himself.

The original movie of *Scrooge* was slated to open for Christmas 1970. The multitalented Bricusse was to write the screenplay, music and lyrics but, due to working on *Goodbye, Mr Chips*, could not start on it until late summer of 1969. Shooting needed to start in January 1970. Never mind, they had



Albert Finney in the 1970 film version of "Scrooge"

a trusted director in the person of Ronald Neame, a strong supporting cast and (most important of all) a star; Richard Harris, fresh from his triumph in the film version of *Camelot*.

Then Harris's current film fell behind schedule and he therefore found himself (metaphorically and literally) out of the picture. A new star was needed. Fast. Rex Harrison – a personal friend of Bricusse's and fascinated by the project – worked on the music between performances of his current West End play then fell ill just two weeks before filming was due to start.

Just days before the 1969 Christmas holiday a list was drawn up; Peter O'Toole, Richard Burton and Albert Finney. Nobody knew if any of these gentlemen was available - much less interested – in the project. O'Toole had served Bricusse admirably in the aforementioned *Goodbye, Mr Chips* but the vocal demands of Scrooge were going to be much greater...probably *too* great. Burton at that time really only came as part of a Burton/Taylor package and was likely to be beyond the financial resources available. ...and so the first to be approached was Albert Finney.

Later that same evening, Bricusse pitched the film to Finney over dinner. Within 24 hours the new star of *Scrooge* was being fitted for his costumes for filming to begin a few days later. Bricusse himself (who didn't read or write music and was now in the USA) was still writing the score, the method of getting it to the arranger (in the UK) being to play the melodies over the phone on a whistle! Finney, of course, is not primarily a singer and, like Rex Harrison before him opted for the unusual practice of performing his songs "live" on set (rather than miming to a pre-recording) with microphones hidden in his costume.

Fast forward to 1990 and Bricusse was approached by a young theatre producer to adapt his screenplay for the stage. This, and the opportunity to work with his old friend Anthony Newley, was too good a chance to miss. The stage version of *Scrooge – the Musical* premiered on 9th November 1992 at the Alexandra Theatre in Birmingham before a West End run the following year. It has since been seen across the world and extensively in the UK. Triumphant returning to the West End in 2005, Tommy Steele is now the person most closely associated with the central role of Ebenezer Scrooge.



Anthony Newley – the first stage Scrooge in "Scrooge – the musical"

Terry Foster

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