



LOOKING BACK WITH JAMES BLACK

INTERIM ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

The Alley's Interim Artistic Director James Black has been working at the Alley for over thirty years as a member of the Resident Acting Company and a frequent director. During the season he curated as Interim Artistic Director, we are delighted to present a series of essays from him about his career and his memories of the Alley.

There are a handful of stories that have real magic in them. In their telling, something primal is rattled in the listener. Something rumbles deep in the DNA. The story can illuminate an unexpected truth each time it is heard. Its message constantly reveals itself and grows with you, becoming more personal and profound with each passing year.

A Christmas Carol is that story for me. I have had the unique and rewarding experience of either performing in or directing Michael Wilson's stage adaptation of Charles Dickens' tale on an annual basis for nearly half of my adult life. It's not a passing Christmas encounter, like a singular viewing of *It's a Wonderful Life*. It's a total and complete ten-week immersion into Dickens' genius and his wisdom of the heart. Every year since 1989, through countless

hours of rehearsal and a thousand performances in a variety of roles, his testament of personal redemption and compassion for your fellow man finds new ways to move me. This year the message promises to resonate stronger than ever as I revisit the role I once played as a much younger man.

Like many people of my age, my first experience with this story wasn't the novella, but the annual holiday broadcast of the Mr. Magoo cartoon. The hour-long adaptation featured Magoo as an actor playing Scrooge on Broadway. The scenes of the play itself are remarkably faithful to Dickens with long passages of dialogue lifted directly from the book. To this day, there are certain lines that I can only hear in their nasal, Jim Backus cadence. Over the years, I discovered other versions of the story with other

equally distinctive Scrooges. There was the stinging nobility of Reginald Owen, the eccentric explosive joy of Alistair Sim, the hunched denial of Albert Finney, and the towering self-loathing of George C Scott. Four drastically different, yet valid interpretations by four great actors that prove the role of Scrooge can be as rich, rewarding, and complex as any in Shakespeare. For an actor, it's a journey that combines the emotional scope of *Lear* with the ghosts and prophecy of *Hamlet* and the Scottish play, and its conclusion has all of the redemption and forgiveness of *A Winter's Tale*.

My first experience as an actor with *A Christmas Carol* at the Alley was a brief stint playing Christmas Present. Then suddenly, I found myself promoted at the age of 32 to Ebenezer himself. Technically I had the chops, and after an hour-long session in front of the makeup mirror, I cut a reasonable late middle age silhouette. But the foundation underneath the paint and grey wig was still my youth with its limited concept of regret and loss. My makeup pallet was full of colors. My life pallet, not so much. As a result, those early performances were probably more effective than affecting. More sleight of hand than real magic. But I had the great privilege of playing the role from the early nineties until the early aughts and



Top: James Black as Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, 1992. Photo by Jim Caldwell.

Bottom: James Black as Ebenezer Scrooge and Jeffrey Bean as Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*, 2005. Photo by T Charles Erickson.

each trip around the sun added another thin, but palpable layer of truth to my portrayal.

It's rare for a stage actor to have a relationship with a character for such an extended time. It's usually limited to several months - the length of the rehearsal period and the run. It's a brief but intense fling complete with regrets, "what ifs" and "what might have beens." No sooner do you get to know the person and then, suddenly, they're gone. If you are lucky, you will get the rare opportunity to revisit the character, usually in a different setting, with different people, but you will pick up right where you



James Black as Mrs. Dilber in *A Christmas Carol*, 2008.
Photo by John Whaley.

left off. You'll know their secrets, their strengths and weaknesses, where they will carry you, and where they'll let you down. But you will also be bringing to the relationship what you have lived and learned since your last encounter. More colors on your pallet.

I stepped away from Scrooge in the early 2000s but remained a part of *Carol* by directing the remount of the production each holiday. For several years, I combined my directing duties with playing the double role of Mrs. Dilber/Jacob Marley. By this time, the amazing Jeffrey Bean had taken over the role of Scrooge and he would make it his own for over a decade as well. I began experiencing *Carol* from an objective perspective as I watched Jeff grow exponentially in the play over those years. Every

life event, every passing season, adding another layer of poignancy and depth. But as Dickens reminds us, life is made of ever so many partings welded together. Last year, Jeff and his family moved to Philadelphia, and I suddenly find myself at sixty getting reacquainted with an old friend.

So here I am. Returning to a role I first played over a quarter of a century ago. This time, age appropriate with no make-up to hide behind and a life pallet too heavy to hold in one hand. A character and an actor simultaneously looking back on thirty years of life-mistakes, regrets, and yet still, a promise of redemption. A circle comes to a close.

In the span of eternity, man's life is not very long. So each day, each hour, each minute must be cherished. You cannot have a wondrous and what you call profitable life if you do not treasure its brevity.

- Christmas Present

God bless us, everyone.

- Tiny Tim