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WHY MUST HUMANS BEWARE THE MIDAS TOUCH?

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PJC REVIEWS

CHARLES DICKENS

A CHRISTMAS CAROL (1843)

ADAPTED FOR STAGE PERFORMANCE

BY LAURA TURNER (2010; updated 2019)

Viewed at Palace Theatre, Appleton Gate, Newark NG24 1JY

16 November 2019

**Cast (alphabetically): The Chapterhouse Touring Company –
Gareth Cary; Matthew Christmas; Eliza Jade; Graham Hill; Alexandra Lansdale;
Amy Llewellyn; Zachery Price**

Director: Antony Law



'Bah! Humbug!' With those great words, Scrooge launches an evening of festive entertainment and a ripple of appreciation spreads through the audience. The central theme is set. When is it right to be frank, forthright and unsentimental? To speak the truth as one sees it. But when does such behaviour become surly, selfish and inhumane? Dismissing genuine concerns as simply

sentimental and confected? There is a special resonance to such questions right now since an election campaign is in train when the Prime Minister seeking re-election has dismissed concerns about personal safety and the coarsened state of public discourse, as emotionally expressed by a female MP, as *'Humbug!'*

On stage, the youthful cast of seven actors throw themselves energetically into recreating the bustling life of mid-nineteenth-century London. All but one play multiple roles, including the ghost of Scrooge's former partner Jacob Marley. Their parts are rather stereotyped; but they make an effective ensemble, under the skilful stage direction of Antony Law.

One character, however, has to undergo moral growth and change from being an old skinflint into a sentient, feeling human being. He is Ebenezer Scrooge, as played by Matthew Christmas, who is visibly youthful and good-looking. Does that matter? Surely not, Acting is make-believe. If Sarah Bernhardt in her 70s, with a wooden leg, could make audiences cry when she played Hamlet, then a young actor can play an old man, or woman, come to that. Christmas was stern and inflexible enough as Scrooge in the opening scenes; but perhaps he needed to convey a bit more thoroughly that Scrooge had spent an entire, dreary lifetime in amassing money, and in doing nothing but that. His avarice should be imprinted in his visage. Anyhow, once Scrooge began to soften, Christmas played the role very well. His look of initial surprise at himself when returning to the world of emotions was excellent.

The outcome of the story as a whole, as Dickens had intended, is heart-warming. There is a danger that scenes involving ghosts (four appear during the play) can be unintentionally risible. This production avoided that outcome, by playing everything to the hilt, with full intensity. There is another danger that scenes involving youthful death – in this case the demise of the handicapped but perennially cheerful Tiny Tim – can become too sentimentalised and, as a result, also unintentionally comic. No danger in this production. The actors switched immediately into a clear and still rendering of an appropriate

Christmas carol, unaccompanied. It was very moving. Indeed, they sang a number of carols throughout the play, underpinning the theme of festive cheer. What a bonus to find a troupe of good actors, all with excellent singing voices.

So what does the story of *A Christmas Carol* mean? In one sense, Dickens's moral is clear and simple. People should care for their fellow humans. Heartless austerity is indeed heartless. Individuals should give personal help willingly, not just for the benefit of those in want but also because caring for others is a means of unlocking one's own heart, which otherwise would remain frozen. To be complete, a human has to be part of society. Not necessarily married or dwelling within a group. But emphatically not living in chill segregation from others.

At the same time, there is a hidden power within the story in the lure of money. Dickens is well aware that it's not just love which makes the world go round. Money provides the basic means of subsistence but can also effect so much more. It constitutes a great source of social status and esteem, as well as confers the economic power of capital. Scrooge is an old skinflint. But he is also a respectable pillar of society and an employer, with the potential to give great happiness to others. Moreover, Scrooge's diligence and his application are admirable qualities. Dickens is not encouraging people to live idly or without employment. Nor is he trying to envisage a different structure for society. He campaigned for reforms (for example, to the prison system), not revolutionary change. Unlike (say) his contemporaries Robert Owen or Karl Marx, Charles Dickens is not a visionary with alternative communitarian economic models in mind.

Instead, his challenge to the world is to re-infuse everyday transactions with moral values. People must work for money but not love it too much. Gold can corrode the heart, as in the classic tale of King Midas. If everything within touching range turns to gold, then nothing is left to eat and drink. Other people too become lifeless, as King Midas killed his little daughter with a touch.

Scrooge has, through his lifestyle, destroyed his own heart and feelings. He is outwardly rich and powerful, but innerly tragic.

Capping the accumulation of immense wealth and undertaking a degree of social redistribution can thus be advocated as a moral as well as a political good cause for democratic societies to undertake. The sort of economic policies that the very rich deride as the ‘politics of envy’. They certainly won’t like to hear that they must redeploy some of their wealth for their own good, as well as for the good of others. They will join Scrooge with further reiterations of ‘**Bah! Humbug!**’ So how are attitudes to change? It’s not enough to rely upon fictional Dickensian ghosts to create a moral awakening across society at large.

Is it being too fanciful to consider that climate change will bring about a fundamental change? In a sense, unprecedented floods, storms, heatwaves, fires and rising seas are signs from Planet Earth that humans are at risk of behaving like a collective King Midas: destroying with their touch the very things that they love the most. These thoughts are perhaps straying too far from the evening of collective good cheer provided by the youthful payers on stage in Newark. They indicate, however, that Dickens’s fable – and Laura Turner’s dramatisation of its scenes of moral redemption – are genuinely thought-provoking. Don’t love money too much! Great wealth is a curse! Make friendships! Save Planet Earth! And enjoy the midwinter festival!