

'Christmas Carol' tradition continues at the Coaster

Many versions have been performed under the stage lights

By Nancy McCarthy
For Cannon Beach Gazette

Every time Ebenezer Scrooge steps on stage at the Coaster Theatre this season, he continues a tradition that began in Cannon Beach nearly 45 years ago.

This year, Scrooge is Darren Hull. He is playing the role for the first time, backed by a cast of 30 community members. Many of those children and adults in "A Christmas Carol: The Musical" have never been on the stage before, but after months of rehearsals, they are retelling the 19th century story about the metamorphosis of a miserly tightwad to an enlightened, generous uncle.

While this is Hull's first time as Scrooge, it's not his first time participating in "Christmas Carol." Like some of those newbie cast members this year, Hull, who moved to town in 1989, decided to follow the suggestions of his co-workers and joined the annual Scrooge celebration at the Coaster.

"It was a wonderful way to get involved in the community," Hull said. "Some of the people I met that first year are still my dear friends all these years later. It was really a feeling of community and family that I've never forgotten."

That year, the homespun musical was called "The Dickens Play," which Hull described as a "mash-up of 'Christmas Carol' and 'Oliver.'"

"There were different versions every year. A lot of times whoever was directing that year interpreted their own version of it," Hull said. "That year there were three narrators, and we were on the stage and kind of moving in and out of the story."

Many different 'Dickenses'

The year after the Coaster opened in 1972, the gas crisis kept visitors away from Cannon Beach. Vickie Hawkins, Cannon Beach Gazette owner, suggested that the town develop a Dickens theme. Store clerks dressed in Dickens-era costumes, including bowler hats, aprons and sleeve bands; window displays hearkened back to the mid-19th century; and

waiters and waitresses spoke with cockney accents.

"We had two trunks of costumes," said Paul Dueber, whose family operated stores in Cannon Beach. "Every year we would get them out, launder them up and wear them. It was pretty fantastic when it happened. Christmas was really a strong community theme."

With a theater in a town full of writers and artists, naturally someone suggested a Dickens play.

Local artist and songwriter Bill Steidel and dozens of other Cannon Beach residents collaborated on the scripts, sets and songs of the Scrooge story. Since then, performances have taken on a variety of interpretations.

There were true Christmas Carol renditions with and without music, several "Dickens plays" with a dash of the "Oliver" orphan tale added, and even a New York gangland version where Scrooge was shot by mobsters.

Drama teacher D.K. Smith wrote the first Dickens play, and Steidel played the first Scrooge. As "Father Christmas," Smith narrated the story while sitting on a wingback chair atop a narrow 4-foot by 4-foot post 12 feet high at the side of the stage. He reached the chair by climbing a ladder, which, Steidel said, often caused the audience to hold its collective breath as the husky Smith, dressed as a gnome, eased himself on the shaky chair.

'It was so much fun'

The early Christmas plays captured the imagination of local residents trying to get through the dark winter days when there was not much else to do.

"We had over 100 people involved at one time. They just wanted to be involved because it was so much fun," said Sally Steidel, who usually brought a pot of stew for the volunteers and worked backstage.

While the plays were far from professional, those who helped out drew from their professional careers for inspiration. Kay Lee, known for her Kay Lee Puppet Theater in Portland, wrote scripts. Stan Glarum, choir director at Lewis & Clark

College, composed music to accompany Bill's lyrics, and Victoria Parker Pohl, a Portland actor, also wrote and directed some plays.

Former television and voice-over actor Dallas McKennon, who appeared regularly in the Daniel Boone television series, provided sound effects. According to a written history of the Coaster Theatre, to reproduce the clank of chains carried by Marley's ghost, McKennon traveled to the Astoria Column and recorded the sound of chains being dragged on the concrete stairs.

Local artists Ken Grant, Frank Lackaff and Steve McLeod also assisted. Metal sculptor and then-Mayor Joe Police fabricated mechanical heads that moved inside the toy store on stage. Cast members sang Bill's songs, including "Toy Store Window" and "Christmas in Our Hometown."

Theatergoers snacked on hot chestnuts from a wagon with a heater installed. Proceeds paid for the costumes.

Community

Bill played Scrooge for four years. When Paul Dueber moved to Cannon Beach in 1983, he first played an Irishman and an English Cockney. Then he became Scrooge for several years.

"The cast didn't change that often," Dueber said.

But the plays changed during the following decade, and "Christmas Carol" — or a version of it — wasn't staged at the Coaster again until "Scrooge the Musical" in 2012.

This year's "A Christmas Carol: The Musical" is mostly that: music. The plot, however, follows closely the traditional Scrooge story, and like dozens of Coaster "Christmas Carols" before it, the community is the heart of the production.

"Ultimately, the message of the Scrooge story is that kindness and the Christmas spirit is what uplifts people," Hull said. "It's about reaching out a hand to help each other up. And when people are having a hard time, that's an important thing to do. I think that's the core of the story of Scrooge."



NANCY MCCARTHY PHOTO

Bill and Sally Steidel led the community effort to produce a version of the 'Christmas Carol' story at the Coaster Theatre. The theater has had a holiday play there since 1973, and at least 24 of those plays have been about Ebenezer Scrooge.

Right, top to bottom: A Coaster Theatre production of "The Dickens Play" in the 1970s; a production from the 1980s; and in 1989 "The Dickens Play" featured Darren Hull, who is playing Scrooge for the first time in the 2017 production.

COURTESY COASTER THEATRE

IF YOU GO

WHAT: A Christmas Carol: The Musical

WHERE: Coaster Theater, 108 N. Hemlock St., Cannon Beach

WHEN: Fridays and Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. through Dec. 23; Sunday matinee, Dec. 17, 3 p.m.; and Thursday, Dec. 21, 7:30 p.m.

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