

CRITIC'S PICK

# Review: A Ham's 'Christmas Carol,' Without the Honey Glaze

The astonishing Jefferson Mays stars as everyone (and a potato) in a dark and pointed adaptation of the Dickens holiday classic.



By Jesse Green

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A Christmas Carol NYT Critic's Pick

Charles Dickens knew how to sell "A Christmas Carol." For years, he even took it on tour.

Consider his sold-out appearance, on Dec. 9, 1867, at Steinway Hall on 14th Street in Manhattan, where he kept the audience rapt for 90 minutes as he read his 1843 novella aloud. With a variety of voices, faces he'd practiced in front of a mirror in Boston and, as The New York Times reported, a "free use of gesticulation," he wowed the crowd with the tale of greed and redemption.

Though Dickens did not have the benefit of modern technology, just a customized rostrum, the same handcrafted spirit is summoned by the astonishing Jefferson Mays in a live-capture "Christmas Carol" stuffed with every trick and whiz-bang available. He plays not only Scrooge, Tiny Tim and various ghosts but also, in Michael Arden's riveting film rendering, "the dying fire" and "an indignant potato."



The drama is occasionally fleshed out with animations and recorded elements rendered on LED tiles built into the set. via A Christmas Carol Live

Yet however delightful it is to see Mays nail, in just one look or intonation, the essence of a vegetable knocking "loudly at the saucepan-lid to be let out and peeled," as Dickens described that potato, this is not just a tour de force. The production, based on one Arden directed in 2018 for the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles, aims to reproduce what the novelist clearly intended his own readings to be: an opportunity to make what was already a classic story feel new, while also making it feel as if it should matter forever.

It should, and not just because the film, streamable through Jan. 3, is vastly effective as spooky entertainment. (It may even be too intense for some children.) Based on Dickens's touring version of the tale, itself slightly altered from the printed text, this "Christmas Carol" is the most fearsome I've seen — I mean morally fearsome. It is thus the most faithful to a story that is not merely about the miserliness of one man, but, potentially, of all mankind.

So although there is plenty of ham here, starting with Mays's snarling, paranoid Scrooge, whose lower lip hangs down to the left as if to provide an exit ramp for his bile, there is almost no honey glaze to sweeten it. Most "Christmas Carol" adaptations depend on that honey, just as theater companies that produce them each November depend on ticket sales generated by a familiar, "beloved" work they can market as family entertainment to finance the rest of their seasons. Even the impressive production from the Old Vic in London, streaming Dec. 12-24, makes the story as festive as it can, often by pelting it with food and music.

Not so with this version, adapted by Mays and Arden and Susan Lyons and conceived by Arden and the set designer Dane Laffrey. For one thing, it insists on emphasizing the act of storytelling, whether Mays is reciting the text as a lively but neutral narrator or portraying, seemingly simultaneously, all the characters in a scene.

As he demonstrated in "I Am My Own Wife" and "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder," Mays is an astonishing quick-change artist. A heartier timbre gives us Scrooge's nephew, Fred, in a flash; a flinging of hands makes an excitable child.

Even in the spiritual world, it takes just a shift of color from the lighting designer Ben Stanton and some increased reverb from the sound designer Joshua D. Reid to complete Mays's leap from tormentor to tormented in Scrooge's confrontations with Marley's ghost. The other ghosts are rendered with similarly effective theatrical illusions, including shadows and puppetry by James Ortiz.

And though the drama is occasionally fleshed out with animations and recorded elements rendered on LED tiles built into the set — the haunting projection design is by Lucy Mackinnon — they retain a preindustrial aesthetic. Even the filmed figures seen attending a Christmas dance in Scrooge's memory are kept upstage and deliberately blurry, their merriment generalized into distant hubbub. Mays remains always the most special effect.

That suits the subject. Filmed live but with no audience on Oct. 28 at United Palace in Manhattan's Washington Heights neighborhood, this "Christmas Carol" uses theatricality as a metaphor for engagement in the lives of others; the auditorium, emptied by pandemic precautions, stands in well for Scrooge's unpeopled heart. As scenes of other households' happiness disappear on a turntable or vanish into the flies, he remains onstage for the entire 90 minutes, with only hints of a back story to explain his omnipresent awfulness.

It is actually one of the problems with "A Christmas Carol," when adapted as drama, that Scrooge and his transformation are so thinly motivated: He is a horrible human until he gets freaked by a bad night's sleep, at which point he turns into a completely lovely one.

Some have discerned in this an allegory for the unearned grace of Christian redemption, but Mays and Arden suggest a more relevant interpretation. Dickens doesn't give Scrooge any normal psychology, they demonstrate, because the man, like the newly industrial society he profits from, does not need it. His greed is hard-wired, a genetic inheritance, a prehuman trait that this human has turned into a rage for power.



In this adaptation, Scrooge's greed is hard-wired, a genetic inheritance, a prehuman trait that he has turned into a rage for power. via A Christmas Carol Live

But not just one human. Perhaps unavoidably in our day, this "Christmas Carol" takes every opportunity to underline Dickens's disapproval of a world that not only allows but is organized to require extreme inequality. (Dickens himself spent part of his boyhood working in a dismal boot polish factory when his father was sentenced to prison for debt.) Mays follows the money, never letting us forget that structural poverty makes misers of everyone. The Cratchits' Christmas goose is admired for its tenderness, flavor and size but also, Mays emphasizes with an odd turn of voice, its "cheapness."

Well, don't let all that scare you too much. There are comic and musical moments throughout — albeit the fleeting comedy of ironic observation and the melancholy music of Sufjan Stevens singing carols. And we do get Dickens's completely jolly ending.

But make no mistake, this is a production that understands "A Christmas Carol" as a work of protest no less than "Oliver Twist" and "Bleak House." The question it raises isn't whether Scrooge can be salvaged by an evening's theatrics, but whether we can.

#### **A Christmas Carol**

Nov. 28 to Jan. 3; [achristmascarollive.com](http://achristmascarollive.com)

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