

One Christmas Carol

Dickens' classic work is distilled into one character at the Corner

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Joe Morris has performed A Christmas Carol in one version or another for seven of the past 10 years, but never like this. It took the veteran actor a week to tell Cornerstone Theatre's manager JP Thibodeau that he was willing to take on the 33 characters he is to play in One Christmas Carol this December.

And though Morris stressed the one-man play adapted from Charles Dickens by Douglas H. Baker is by no means a one-man effort, he knew from the beginning he had his work cut out for him.

"This is probably the single biggest challenge I've had here in Canmore — absolutely," the eight-year resident said.

And even though when he was asked to do the show, Morris said he took every last second he was given to decide whether he would accept the script, he suggested that he had to take on the script that handed him so many roles and he also credits the director and producer Thibodeau with bringing him through the process.

"Artistically to challenge yourself is one of the greatest gifts that someone can give you," he said. "And JP (Thibodeau) has shown nothing but full confidence in me, which is a gift in itself. And so there really are no drawbacks. When you do a show like this the amount you grow as an artist and an actor, you can't measure it."

Every character in the entire canon of A Christmas Carol makes an appearance, through Morris, in the minimalist staging of the timeless classic.

"Thirty-three distinct characters is a mountain you have to climb," he said. But he knew he couldn't pass up on the opportunity and then live with the regret of not taking on the challenge.

"Every show, no matter how small the role is or no matter how big the role is, is a challenge as long as you put your heart and soul in it," he said. "This is a challenge, obviously, of a scale greater than many of the others that I've taken on, but in essence it's no different than any other acting role.

"The only challenge of this is that you have to do it with 33 different characters, but the essence is still there, to expose your heart to the audience and let the audience believe what's in your eyes."

There are a couple of scenes, where the dialogue flips back and forth through a number of characters that Morris said will be interesting to see how they work, but because it's a timeless story and there are such well known characters it's up to Morris to merely let the story unfold through him.

"At the time Dickens wrote it about the industrialization of London," Morris explained.

"And it touched people . . . and it's interesting that 150 years later, plus, it's still touching the same chords.

"It's one of those things that 100 years from now people will still be retelling it, it's almost like a Shakespeare, it has universal themes and universal characters, it's an amazing, amazing story."

And though it is a Christmas story, he said, there's really very little in the story about Christmas, rather the tale focuses on the themes of morality and redemption.

This version, Morris said has been stripped down to its barest essence. And like every good story there's someone to identify with, he said. In his preparations, Bob Cratchit, has really taken on a new significance for

the actor.

"Bob is the everyman, and it's hard to play the everyman, especially when you've got such distinct characters as Scrooge and Marley and the Ghost of Christmas Present," he said. "They're big, big characters and Bob isn't."

Cratchit is the character that Dickens as the author wanted his readers to relate to and Morris admitted that he had originally thought that Cratchit would come after the other roles he needed to take on. But he has three very important scenes, including one that Morris said was probably the most touching scene of the show — when the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come brings Scrooge to the Cratchit home after Tiny Tim has died and Bob has to muster a smile and tell his family he's happy and that things will be OK.

"On stage as the actor my heart breaks every time I do it," Morris said. "It's such a beautiful moment in that show and for me it's the moment when Scrooge looks at it and says 'OK, it's time.'"

With only Morris and three chairs on stage, One Christmas Carol, despite its stripped down staging, promises to be a full-theatrical production. "The only thing stripped down about this production is one actor, three chairs and no costumes," Morris said.

The show runs for about 90 minutes, with a 20-minute intermission.

The show begins Dec. 5 and runs Saturday, Sunday matinees and Monday, Tuesday evenings through Dec. 22. There is no meal attached to the show, but there will be coffee and bar service. General ticket seating prices are \$30.95; tickets for children six and up are \$20. Go to athecorner.ca or call the Cornerstone Theatre at (403) 609-0004.

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