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Performance Review - A comparison between the performance at the Old  
Vic in January 2020 and its adaptation for Old Vic in Camera in December  
2020

**Marianne Dugeon**



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# A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, adapted by Jack Thorne

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## Factual Information about the shows

| January 2020, Old Vic                       | December 2020, Old Vic in Camera             |
|---|--|
| <b>Performers</b>                           | <b>Performers</b>                            |
| Paterson Joseph (Scrooge)                   | Andrew Lincoln (Scrooge)                     |
| Melissa Allan (Little Fan)                  | Melissa Allan (Little Fan)                   |
| Kwësi Edman (Young Ebenezer)                | Samuel Townsend (Young Ebenezer)             |
| Hollie Edwin (Jess)                         | Rosanna Bates (Jess)                         |
| Fred Haig (Fred)                            | Eugene McCoy (Fred)                          |
| Nick Hart (Nicholas)                        | Tim van Eyken (Nicholas)                     |
| Rayhaan Kufuor-Gray (Tiny Tim)              | Lara Mehmet (Tiny Tim)                       |
| Andrew Langtree (Father/Marley)             | Michael Rouse (Father/Marley)                |
| Myra McFadyen (Ghost of Christmas Past)     | Julie Jupp (Ghost of Christmas Past)         |
| Steven Miller (Bob Cratchit)                | John Dagleish (Bob Cratchit)                 |
| Maria Omakinwa (Mrs Cratchit)               | Maria Omakinwa (Mrs Cratchit)                |
| Gloria Onitiri (Ghost of Christmas Present) | Golda Rosheuvel (Ghost of Christmas Present) |
| James Staddon (Fezziwig)                    | Clive Rowe (Fezziwig)                        |
| Samuel Townsend (Ferdie)                    | Sam Lathwood (Ferdie)                        |
| Rebecca Trehearn (Belle)                    | Gloria Obianyo (Belle)                       |

## Creative Team

- Adapted by: Jack Thorne  
Director: Matthew Warchus  
Set and Costume: Rob Howell

Composer and Arranger: Christopher Nightingale  
 Lighting: Hugh Vanstone  
 Sound: Simon Baker  
 Casting: Jessica Ronane CDG  
 Movement: Lizzi Gee  
 Musical Director: Oli Jackson  
 Voice: Charlie Hughes-D'Aeth  
 Associate Director: Joe Austin  
 Original Associate Director: Jamie Manton  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Associate Director : Josh Seymour  
 Associate Set: Ben Davies  
 Associate Costume: Irene Bohan  
 Associate Lighting: Sam Waddington  
 Associate Sound: Victoria Wilkingon  
 Associate Movement: Sam Archer  
 Associate Music Supervisor: Will Stuart  
 Stage Management: John Caswell, Maria Gibbons, Kim Battistini

- 2 There were only a very few changes in the creative team for the *Old Vic in Camera* production, most notably the addition of Jay Jones as Associate Broadcast Sound and Video.

## Website

*Old Vic in Camera*: <https://www.oldvictheatre.com/whats-on/2020/old-vic-in-camera>

The January 2020 production of *A Christmas Carol*:

<https://www.oldvictheatre.com/whats-on/2019/a-christmas-carol-3>

The December 2020 production of *A Christmas Carol*:

<https://www.oldvictheatre.com/whats-on/2021/old-vic-in-camera/a-christmas-carol-5>

The programme for the December 2020 production:

[https://cdn.oldvictheatre.com/uploads/2020/12/ACC\\_Programme\\_2020\\_Final\\_-2.pdf](https://cdn.oldvictheatre.com/uploads/2020/12/ACC_Programme_2020_Final_-2.pdf)

## Review

- 3 Ever since it was published in 1843, Charles Dickens' novella *A Christmas Carol* has been enjoying continuous fame among readers, but it has also become one of the literary works most often adapted to the stage, and later to the screen. In the past decade, for instance, it enjoyed no less than 15 different productions in theatres across the UK and the US with revivals every year for most of them, and it is now one of the highlights of the Christmas season for families.
- 4 Jack Thorne's adaptation for the Old Vic, first produced in 2017 and revived every year since, has itself become a reference. As I was in London for research in January 2020, the show was still on, and I decided to get a ticket to join a friend and her two sons for a matinee. I was then far from imagining that this would be one of the last plays I was to see as part of an audience for some time, as the pandemic struck Europe and led to the closure of theatres for months on end.

- 5 Almost a year on, my family and I were still stuck at home, and we missed the theatre. I had watched video recordings, which are of interest for a researcher. But I had found it hard to feel immersed, part of an audience, sitting alone on my couch watching something produced months—if not years—before. I had also tried some live performances over Zoom offered by some innovative British theatres. Even if I felt more enthusiastic at the idea of seeing a show live again, I still found myself alone, as none of my family are able to follow plays like Brian Friel’s *The Faith Healer* and Stephen Beresford’s *Three Kings* at the Old Vic.
- 6 This is why a revival of *A Christmas Carol* would be, at last, a perfect choice for a family experience in the festive weeks just before Christmas. It was also the occasion for me to compare two productions of the same play and measure very concretely the consequences of a change in format and reception.
- 7 The play I saw in January 2020, at the Old Vic, had been a beautiful moment of communion, and I remember most vividly the feeling of partaking in a gigantic feast. As soon as the spectators entered the theatre, they were offered mandarin oranges and mince pies.

Figure 1



The cast distributing mandarin oranges.

Photograph: Manuel Harlan.

- 8 The theatrical space was built in the round, so as to enhance the feeling of being part of a community: the stage spread like a star, with 4 thrust stages dividing the audience in the stalls in four parts. I was sitting in the dress circle, and had a more distant but all-encompassing view of the acting area. The action took place in the centre of the auditorium; the spectators who were sitting in what would normally be the stage in a more conventional setting had the privilege of being on the same level as the actors, if not a little higher.

Figure 2



Personal photograph taken before the performance on 14 January 2020.

- 9 As the audience took their seats, musicians played Christmas carols in candlelight. We were immersed in Victorian London, in the eerie and ghostly atmosphere of *A Christmas Carol*.
- 10 On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2021, as I rearranged our living room so that we faced the screen of our family computer, I had to make sure my children could read the subtitles in English to help them follow the story, but I also tried to recreate the atmosphere of a theatre: no phones allowed, all lights switched off, we had mandarin oranges and sweets ready for the interval. But the setting was frontal, and felt more like a cinema than a theatre.
- 11 The cast of the January production was colour-blind, with Black actor Paterson Joseph playing Scrooge and White actor Andrew Langtree his father. Indeed, Thorne's adaptation develops a narrative thread which is absent from the novella, imagining a brutal and austere father to explain Scrooge's lack of empathy. This more psychological thread is one way of updating the story, making it more realistic (the father is an alcoholic and forces his son to work to cover his debts), but it also gives ample resonance to Dickens' social message, which is often obscured by the Christian imagery of Christmas. The ghosts appeared on stage through collapsible doors which rose up from the floor, props were reduced to the bare minimum, the *mise-en-scène* relying more on symbolism than on realism.



Figure 3



Scrooge (Paterson Joseph) facing Marley (Andrew Langtree).  
 Photograph: Manuel Harlan.

- 12 The play was inclusive and convivial. The chorus of beautiful voices and the many instruments, pipes, bells, whistles as well as the more traditional violins, ensured that we were all sharing in the Christmassy spirit. By the end of the show, the whole theatre, including the audience, was covered in snow: we were ready for the impressive finale, the feast at the Cratchits', with buckets of potatoes sliding towards the central stage on sheets spreading all the way from the balcony, brussels sprouts slowly falling down with their individual parachutes and a huge turkey flying by zip line through the auditorium, while the talented cast partook in the choral arrangements in every nook and cranny of the theatre.
- 13 As I prepared for the *Old Vic in Camera*, I wondered how they would manage to create the sense of inclusiveness and participation that I had found so central in the performance I had seen almost one year before.
- 14 From the start, the camera was made use of rather than considered a hindrance: the screen was split and organised depending on the number of characters who appeared on stage. When the chorus sang, they appeared in all four corners of the screen, as if enclosing the central image, devoted to the narrative, with the musical accompaniment. When two characters faced one another on stage, each had his or her rectangular space, underlining and exaggerating the frontality of a setting that is reduced to two dimensions, compared to the three-dimensional theatre space. The Zoom performance managed to capitalise on its assets and limits by recognising them and playing with them.

Figure 4



Belle (Gloria Obianyo) opens her door and faces Scrooge (Andrew Lincoln), or, in the video as it is streamed through Zoom, finds herself in her own separated space, side by side with Scrooge.

Photograph: Manuel Harlan.

- 15 When the characters shook hands or hugged, their images got closer and closer, then overlaid one another, ensuring that the actors abided by social distancing measures without changing the story.

Figure 5



Technical devices ensure actors keep social distances.

Photograph: Manuel Harlan.

- 16 As a spectator I was impressed by the ingenuity and inventiveness of the technicians: not only was the performance working, but they had really created an altogether different show. While doors were symbolised by empty rectangular shapes which audience members who were present at the Old Vic could see through, the angle chosen by the cameramen of the Zoom performance played with our suspension of disbelief, making it possible for there to be a real door. Distributing the characters in different squares on the screen also meant that doors could be symbolised by the limits of the squares. Thus one of the climaxes of the Zoom performance was a scene which had been forgettable in the original production: we saw the younger and older versions of Scrooge facing each other with younger Scrooge repeating “I don’t want him to be me”; as the two Scrooges got closer and closer, and finally merged in a single image, the moral lesson of Dickens’ story took shape, bringing into question the ineluctability of fate and recognising the possibility of change. Indeed, the life choices that the characters make in the novella were not merely evoked in retrospect but materialised through the multiplication of the images of each character, also representing the collusion of past, present, and future.
- 17 The technical devices made available by the Zoom performance were also taken advantage of in the representation of the ghosts: while their human nature was unquestionable, and therefore underlined, when the play was performed in front of an audience, the camera could, and did, turn them into transparent shadows which overlapped the images of the other characters. The rendition was certainly more frightening, but the ghosts often broke the fourth wall, addressing the audience directly (“This is all very dramatic, isn’t it?”), thus guaranteeing a cheerful and merry atmosphere, even for young children. The lighting effects were made even more efficient than in the original performance, with close-ups on the candlelight reflecting in the glasses of the ghosts, and more general views turning the ceiling of the Old Vic into a starry night.



Figure 6



Golda Rosheuvel, the Ghost of Christmas Present.

Photograph: Manuel Harlan.

- 18 Generally speaking, the adapted performance of the *Old Vic in Camera* managed to take advantage of the technical possibilities offered by video, turning the communal experience of the show at the theatre into a more individual connection.
- 19 The spectators were made to share, not in the festive happiness, but in the emotions felt by individual characters. The close-ups on the faces of the actors put the stress on their feelings. We witnessed Scrooge's fear at the appearance of the ghosts, and partook of it much more than at the theatre where we were sitting at a remove from the stage. We empathised with Tiny Tim whom we could now recognise as Lara Mehmet, an 11-year-old actor, herself handicapped by a still-undiagnosed condition which has affected her growth. The inclusiveness of the cast was made more immediate and unavoidable through close-ups on Mehmet's face and body, and the story of Dickens's sickly character was rendered more poignant, realistic, and relatable.

Figure 7



From left to right, the four children who performed the role of Tiny Tim in 2019 and 2020: Lara Mehmet, Eleanor Stollery, Lenny Rush and Rayhaan Kufuor-Gray.

Photograph: Manuel Harlan.

- 20 However, the feast at the end of the show marked a harsh return to the realities of a world with Covid: the magic of the live performance seemed to have disappeared as masked technicians brought the visibly fake food on stage, while a message announcing how we could donate food for those who go hungry rolled on our screen.
- 21 In conclusion, the two performances were evidently costly super-productions, gathering a numerous cast as well as musicians and offering a beautiful instance of total theatre. While the show presented in front of an audience celebrated Christmas by upholding communal values and a sense of gathering, the *Old Vic in Camera* offered a one-to-one relation and emphasised more personal emotions. The cast spread so as to fill the empty theatre but did not try to gloss over the lack of a live audience. The pandemic offered the Old Vic an occasion to explore convincingly the potentialities of state-of-the-art technologies. Nevertheless, we can't help hoping for a quick reopening of theatres.

Figure 8



"The cast spreads in the stalls for the songs (rehearsal)" [to avoid repetition]  
Photograph: Manuel Harlan.

Figure 9



The Company fills the empty auditorium with heart-warming dancing and singing.  
Photograph: Manuel Harlan.

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## ABSTRACTS

Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* was adapted by Jack Thorne at *the Old Vic* in London in 2017. The review compares the January 2020 production in front of a live audience and the covid-19 production in December of that same year, which was broadcast live via visioconference as part of the programme of the *Old Vic in Camera*.

Adapté par Jack Thorne, le *Conte de Noël* de Dickens a été produit en 2017 au théâtre The Old Vic de Londres et revient depuis tous les ans dans la programmation. Nous proposons une comparaison entre la création de janvier 2020, en présence du public, et une version adaptée à la crise sanitaire avec une diffusion par visioconférence, en direct, en décembre 2020.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Old Vic, Old Vic in Camera, Zoom, adaptation, Dickens, Conte de Noël, Jack Thorne, communauté, inclusivité

**Keywords:** Old Vic, Old Vic in Camera, Zoom, Adaptation, Dickens, A Christmas Carol, Jack Thorne, community, inclusivity

**Subjects:** Theater

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