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'Christmas Carol' A Helping of Cheer

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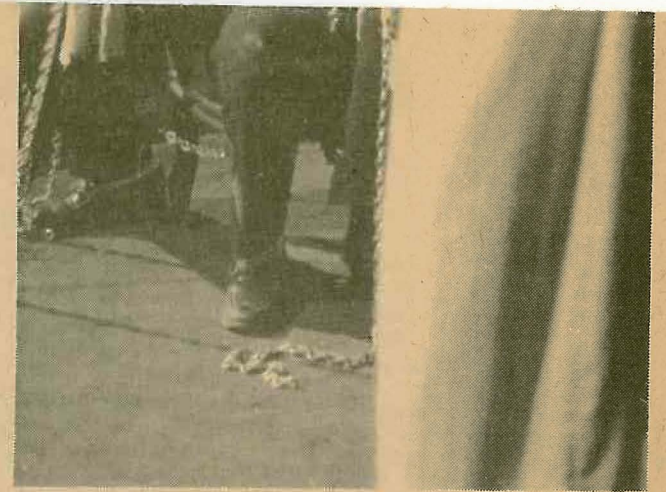
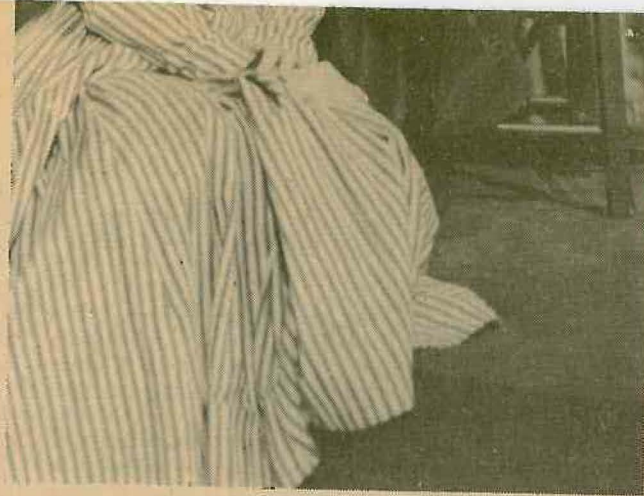
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'Christmas Carol'

In scenes from Eastern Illinois University's production of "A Christmas Carol," Scrooge and nephew hold a conference in the miser's counting house. They are played by John Hightower of Effingham in the lead role and Barry Johnson of Charleston as Fred. At center, members of the Crachit family are Janet Fox of Mattoon (seated), Matthew McDivitt of Lerna as Tiny Tim, and Katie Sullivan of Charleston. At right, Scrooge gets a late night visit from his late partner, Jacob Marley (Wendell Sheeley). The play will be presented at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and at 2 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are available at the Fine Arts Box Office, 581-3110.



'Christmas Carol' a Helping of Cheer

By WALTER LAZENBY

Charles Dickens had an intense and abiding love for the theatre; but, disappointed in attempts at an acting career and at writing plays, he had to be content to act in amateur theatricals and write popular novels with theatrical elements in them.

The theatre has returned the affection full measure in its eagerness to present stage versions of his Christmas books and fifteen novels. Since 1837, his works have seldom been absent from public view in one form of theatre or another; well

over 400 dramatic pieces and numerous films and radio and television plays owe their inspiration to his works. At one Christmas season versions of

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"The Cricket on the Hearth" were playing simultaneously at twelve London theatres.

This season, in addition to whatever television may offer (perhaps Mr. Magoo as Scrooge

again), local audiences can this weekend see "A Christmas Carol" on the Eastern campus.

For this production Director Gerald Sullivan, dissatisfied with available acting scripts, made his own adaptation.

To lengthen playing time he added a chorus singing Christmas carols — appropriate, considering the title. Admittedly, the appearance of a chorus has no particular dramatic justification, except to create atmosphere; and it added to the costumer's burden. The choral interludes rather stiffly interrupt the flow of the story, but the songs and singing

are agreeable. The costumes, incidentally, are impressive, especially one cloak decorated with shamrock-shaped cut-outs.

To flesh out certain scenes he took certain lesser known details from the original. The result is a version which gives slightly more explanation than usual of how Scrooge became unhappy with Christmases. And with one striking visual effect it opens up a larger view of the story's relevance. I mean the tableau demonstrating the threat to the Future posed by Ignorance and Want, represented by two benighted and suffering children.

Legislators and taxpayers faced with the problem of funding education, take note.

Preserved intact is the fairy-tale quality, fittingly suggested by Clarence Blanchette's stylized revolving set pieces and reinforced by the presence of a narrator, of this story of an ogre who becomes benign. The child in each of us can respond to this motif. The adult will perhaps more readily respond to Scrooge's coming to existential awareness of his own end, the cutting off of chances to make his life meaningful.

I did, more than usual this

time. Perhaps the show moved me because of my large prejudice in favor of live performances, but surely the demeanor of Matthew McDevitt as Tiny Tim and an appealing performance by Jeff Eaton as Bob Cratchit contributed.

And I compliment John Hightower for his sustained, consistent, accomplished portrayal of Ebenezer Scrooge. He does an especially good job of capturing Scrooge's joy in his transformation.

IN BRIEF: seventy minutes of Christmas cheer to start the season off or help it on its way, good for young and old.