

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Christmas Carol and David Byrne on Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 27th, 2019

The holiday cheer begins at the Lyceum Theater before the latest incarnation of Dickens' classic *A Christmas Carol* even commences. The holiday outing arrives on Broadway after a hit run in London. Lighting designer Hugh Vanstone has created a warm 19th century glow aided by lit candles throughout the theater. Patrons are greeted by cheerful staffers dressed in period costumes offering free cookies and clementine oranges. Cast members and musicians stroll onstage and play traditional yuletide favorites. The atmosphere is comfy and cosy for the beloved tale of the cold-hearted Ebenezer Scrooge and his redemption by a gaggle of benevolent ghosts, told with new shadings and vigor.



Campbell Scott and Dashiell Eaves in *A Christmas Carol*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

There have been so many iterations of this tale it's difficult to imagine a new way of telling it. From the gold standard of the 1951 Alastair Sim film version to multiple musical variations to countless cartoons and parodies, Scrooge is part of our collective Christmas consciousness. Director Matthew Warchus and playwright Jack Thorne, who won a Tony for updating another legendary British icon in *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, meet the challenge by adding to the misanthropic miser's complexity and building a frighteningly justifiable case for his tight-fistedness.

Sounding like a Trumpian capitalist, Campbell Scott as Scrooge mounts a steely resistance against the pleas of Jacob Marley and his fellow spirits for the old skinflint to put humanity before money. Scott, whose father George C. also played the role in a memorable 1984 made-for-TV movie, is a much younger and more vital Scrooge than usual. He's not a caricature of inhumanity, but a twisted soul battered down by the economic brutalities of his age. His metamorphosis into a cheery old soul is all the more miraculous for his convincing and subtle portrayal of the character's grinchiness. Thorne also adds details to the character's oppressive family life and blighted romance with the strong-willed, idealistic Belle (fierce and fine Sarah Hunt). There is much symbolism and the specter of death is ever present. Scrooge's first employer Fezziwig (an effervescent Evan Harrington) is now an undertaker. However, the script hits the nail on the head a bit too much and could use some cutting. The intermission is unnecessary and some of Thorne's additions feel extraneous.



Sarah Hunt and Campbell Scott in *A Christmas Carol*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

But Warchus' quick paced, jovial staging counters the weightiness of Thorne's expansion on Dickens's taut original with a light-hearted holiday sprit and spooky effects, augmented by Rob Howell's versatile set and Vanstone's spectral lighting. There's a great deal of audience involvement which adds to the running time but not to the entertainment. One sequence involving the theatergoers passing food onto the stage for the Cratchit family feast goes on too long.

The ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future are not their traditional templates of holiday cut-outs but variations on Scrooge's dead little sister Fan, all similarly costumed by Howell. Each pushes a baby carriage which eventually evolves into a coffin.



Campbell Scott and LaChanze in *A Christmas Carol*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

As Christmas Past, Andrea Martin displays her customary dry wit (she hilariously goes "Boo" when introducing herself as a ghost). LaChanze make Christmas Present a stern West Indian taskmaster who will put up with none of Scrooge's nonsense. Rachel Prather transforms the customarily horrifying Christmas Future into a benevolent promise of hope. Chris Hoch provides the appropriate gnarled nastiness as Scrooge's unloving father and a truly frightening reminder of what Scrooge could become as Marley's Ghost (tethered to the underworld by an endless chain in Howell's otherworldly costume). This is altogether a wondrous *Carol* celebrating the spirit of the season and the magic of theater.



David Byrne and the cast of *David Byrne's American Utopia*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

David Byrne's American Utopia is another celebratory theater event unusual for Broadway. The former front man for the Talking Heads and a genius-level solo artist, Byrne presents an intoxicating hybrid of rock concert, dance program and howlingly fun party. Audience members at the performance attended had no hesitation to stand and dance in the aisles to "The Road to Nowhere," "Once in a Lifetime," and the ultimate shake-your-booty inducer "Burning Down the House."

Byrne, in remarkable shape and voice at 67, is accompanied by a stageful of international instrumentalists, mostly percussionists, and two charismatic backup singers (Daniel Freedman and Tenda Yi Kuumba), creating finger-popping, infectious music. All are barefoot and dressed in identical grey suits. Choreographer Annie-B Parson's stylized movement and patterns of staging lend variety and eccentricity to each number. Alex Timbers who collaborated with Byrne on the immersive musical *Here Lies Love* is listed as Production Consultant, so it's difficult to judge where his contribution begins and Parsons' ends. The storyless concert is stitched together by Byrne's commentary and his desire for connection between the ordinary world and the vibrant spirit which binds us together. It's a fun evening, even if you're not a Byrne-head.

A Christmas Carol: Nov. 20—Jan. 5. Lyceum Theater, 149 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$69—\$299. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

David Byrne's American Utopia: Oct. 20—Feb. 16. Hudson Theater, 141 W. 44th St., NYC. Wed.—Fri. 8pm, Sat 5:30pm & 9pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. \$69—\$499. (855) 801-5876. www.thehudsononbroadway.com.

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