

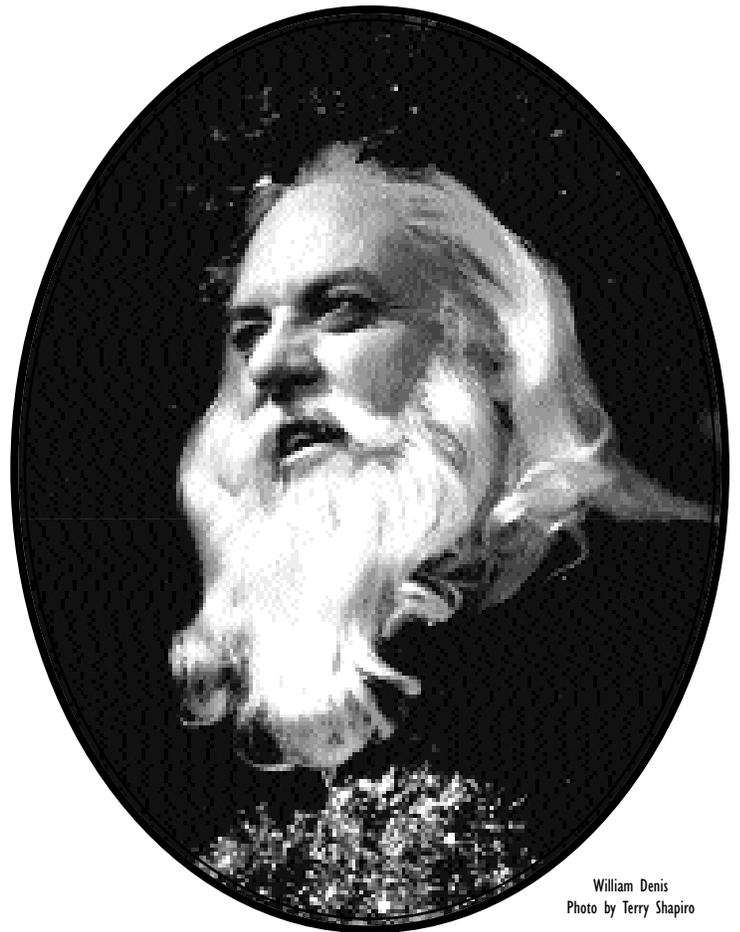
A Christmas Carol

November 24-December 24, 1995

By Charles Dickens

Directed by Laird Williamson

Adapted by Dennis Powers & Laird Williamson



William Denis
Photo by Terry Shapiro

Study Guide



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Each show the Denver Center Theatre Company produces has its own unique informational needs. We, here at the theatre, use the resources of our own and other libraries continually. Without access to information, it would not be possible to do what we do whether it is searching for the costumes of a particular period; defining the language of a specific time; discovering the customs and culture of when and where the play takes place; or finding technical information to produce the special effects on stage. Our people have to be well informed. We also think it's important that we share some of the resources we have discovered with you. In fact, this study guide has taken many hours of research, writing and editing in order to help you enjoy the production you are about to see and enrich your theatrical experience at the DCTC.

—Linda Eller
*Librarian, National Theatre Conservatory
A department of the Denver Center Theatre Company
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The SCFD has been recognized as a national model for the enhancement of community quality of life through the arts: cities from California to Pennsylvania have sought to replicate this special funding District. The residents of the Denver Metropolitan area benefit every day from its programs.

**“My best of wishes for your Merry Christmases and your Happy New Years, your long lives and your true prosperities. Worth twenty pound good if they are delivered as I send them. Remember? Here’s a final prescription added, To be taken for life.”
(Doctor Marigold’s Prescriptions [1865])**

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

In keeping with the holiday spirit, the Denver Center Theatre Company will once again perform the Dickens’ classic, *A Christmas Carol*. This story was written over 150 years ago at a time when the celebration of Christmas was in decline. Dickens’ story recreated Christmas, redefining the modern holiday for us.

“This story has become as much a part of the tradition of Christmas as holly wreaths, mistletoe and Christmas carols. Dickens’ skill with humor and character analysis is particularly evident. At the beginning of the story we are made to dislike Scrooge for his miserly ways but we are in sympathy with him as he is subjected to the tortures of his ghostly journeys. Dickens provides a psychological explanation for Scrooge’s bitterness and desire to live apart from the rest of the world. At the same time he paves the way for Scrooge’s reform, so that it comes as no surprise. It is entirely right that Scrooge should become an example of the meaning of Christmas...”¹

Adapted for the stage almost immediately after its publication (a performance in London was recorded in 1844) *A Christmas Carol* lends itself easily to drama because of its many vivid characters, incidents and striking use of fantastic elements. Inevitably, changes must be made because of Dickens’ heavy dependence on descriptive embellishment. The adaptation of the story for the Denver Center Theatre Company, written by Laird Williamson and Dennis Powers, has streamlined the narrative while preserving the basic plot and spirit of the original. The play is structured in one act and presented without an intermission.

It focuses on the childhood of Ebenezer Scrooge. As the locks and latches on the compartments of his memory spring open, we go along with Scrooge on his journey of self-discovery. As pieces of Scrooge’s past are visited, parts of the set fly away and are discarded as he discards his past. When Scrooge states “I will honor Christmas in my heart,” we realize he has finally made peace with himself and the world.

“ ‘God Bless us every one!’ , said Tiny Tim, the last of all.”
(*A Christmas Carol* [1843].)

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

SCROOGE - a mean-spirited miser. Also seen as a boy and as a young man.

DICKENS - the author (who does not appear in the original).

MARLEY - the ghost of Scrooge’s dead partner.

GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

BOB CRATCHIT - Scrooge’s downtrodden but forgiving employee.

MRS. CRATCHIT and children, including the sickly **TINY TIM**.

TWO GENTLEMEN - whose holiday charity appeal is spurned by Scrooge.

BELLE - Young Scrooge’s girlfriend.

FRED - Scrooge’s amiable nephew, and his wife **MARY**.

FEZZIWIG - Young Scrooge’s jolly employer.

MRS. FEZZIWIG - wife of the above.

MRS. DILBER - a laundress.

OLD JOE - a fence.

MRS. FILCHER - a charwoman.

**“A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.”
(*A Tale of Two Cities*[1859])**

**“Do other men for they would do you.’ That’s the true business precept.”
(*Martin Chuzzlewit* [1843-1844].)**

“Throughout life, our worst weaknesses and meannesses are usually committed for the sake of the people whom we most despise.”
(Great Expectations [1860-61])

A TALE TOLD BY A WINTER FIRE

by Jonathan Marks

Dickens was dead. The word spread through London on that June day of 1870 and seemed to touch everyone personally. A young girl peddling fruit and vegetables from a barrow in Covent Garden was stunned: “Then, will Father Christmas die, too?”

The spirit of Charles Dickens still hovers over Christmas, in more ways than are immediately apparent. In a very real sense he was the father of the modern Christmas. What we think of as the “traditional” celebration didn’t exist before his time. The Christmas tree and Christmas card, the goose and turkey, and even Santa Claus were all traditions established or popularized in the nineteenth century, and the holiday season’s emphasis on family, children, charity, goodwill, and nostalgia were, for the most part, supplied by Dickens himself. During the first three centuries after the establishment of the Christian religion there was no Christmas: the Church opposed the celebration of birthdays as a pagan custom.

Throughout Europe, though, late December and early January was a time of celebration for everyone but Christians. In AD 336, the Church finally succumbed to the people’s desire for a Christian feast to coincide with the pagan festivals and established a feast of the Nativity. Since the Gospels make no mention of a date, the Church had a free hand and they chose to celebrate Christmas on the same day as the Mithraic sun-worship holiday, December 25.

For many centuries, even after their faith had dominated Europe, the Church could not focus the holiday on a pious celebration of the Nativity. The populace tended to make it a secular, even an irreligious festival: a celebration of gluttony and drunkenness, license and misrule, a feast of buffoons and devils.

In the seventeenth century, when the Puritans were firmly in control of old and New England, their religious fervor inspired them to stamp out Christmas. The British Parliament met in regular session

on Christmas Day, and the army was assigned to keep the shops open. The Massachusetts General Court passed a law in 1644 decreeing that:

Anybody who is found observing, by abstinence from labor, feasting, or any other way, any such days as Christmas Day, shall pay for every such offence five shillings.



These sober men of industry were the figurative ancestors of Scrooge. Their “reforms,” made in the name of religion, were largely successful, even after the Puritans had been swept from power. By the first decades of the nineteenth century, Christmas was barely celebrated; it was surpassed in popularity by New Year’s and even Valentine’s Day. The holiday would not die without a fight, though. The journalism of the 1830’s reveals that every year there were more and more expressions of regret that the winter break in the cold, sober routine had passed from the calendar. This nostalgia was solidified in

1836 by a 24-year-old writer in his first novel: *Pickwick Papers*. In it, Charles Dickens painted rosy word-pictures of an idealized eighteenth-century family Christmas, unlike any ever celebrated, but one for which everybody could feel nostalgic. Others had contributed, and were to contribute, to the resuscitation and transformation of the holiday, notably three Americans (Washington Irving, Clement Moore, and Thomas Nast) who helped to focus its celebration on children by popularizing a minor figure in the folklore of the

Dutch settlers of New York called Santa

Claus. However, it was Dickens who would make the most sustained and telling effort. The most important blow was struck in 1843, when

Dickens took a few weeks off from the writing of *Martin Chuzzlewit* to dash off a little book called *A*

Christmas Carol. In this book, Charles Dickens reconstituted Christmas as an important secular holiday with moral and religious overtones. It was a riproaring good ghost story, complete with fantastic elements of time-travel. It endowed the Christmas feast with a moral dimension, reconciling the notions of a secular and a religious holiday that had been in opposition for fifteen centuries. Dickens took the contrary notions of an austere religious celebration and a sumptuous feast washed down with plenty of

liquor, blended them together, and came up with a celebration of family, shared abundance, charity, and fellowship, focusing on the link between the adult, the child, and the child within us all.

There are connections with the story of the Christ child and his teachings. It echoes the gospel injunction to renounce worldly goods and follow Christ, and the verse from Matthew (18:3):

“Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

Dickens wrote to his children, “Remember! — It is Christian TO DO GOOD always — even to those who do evil to us,” and this was the essence of his faith: what he was later to call his “Carol philosophy.” Most of

all, he wanted to teach this simple lesson to as many people as possible, as entertainingly as possible. His goal, he said, was “to increase the stock of harmless cheerfulness,” and the best way to do it was through enormous popularity. He succeeded.

The first edition of *A Christmas Carol* was a new idea in publishing: a small, inexpensive volume designed as a gift, and meant to be read to the family beside the Christmas fire. It sold out the first day it hit the stores. Thackeray called it “a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness.” More editions followed, and other writers rushed to turn out Christmas books. Dickens himself wrote four more. He founded two weekly magazines, and took special care with the Christmas issues, which readers snapped up to read Dickens’ own contributions. Over his entire career, most of the short stories he wrote dealt with the holiday, and they rivaled his novels in popularity. To the public he was the patron of Christmas.

The enormous popularity of his writings was not enough for Dickens, though. He wanted the stage. He had always wanted the stage — to be an actor, director, and manager. For a three-year period when he was young he went to the theater every night. He applied to the Covent Garden theater for an audition as a character actor, and practiced for it up to six hours a day; but when the day came, he got sick and his face swelled up, so he canceled and resolved to try again the next year. By then his literary career had taken off.

Playwriting was, at that time, considered unworthy of a serious writer, but Dickens tried his hand at it. Three plays found commercial success, but when the fourth was rejected by the theaters he gave it up.

He never gave up the thought of the theater, though. He edited the memoirs of the clown, Grimaldi. He became the friend of the leading actor of the day, Macready, and reviewed his landmark production of *King Lear*. He had a long affair with an actress. He wrote about a theatrical troupe in *Nicholas Nickleby*. He produced and acted in amateur theatricals, and set up a little theater in his home for family productions at Christmas. He still suspected that his true calling was the stage.

His daughter Mamie was once allowed to sit in Dickens’ study while he was writing, and discovered that his method included theatrical improvisations; he would stand in front of a mirror, making “extraordinary

facial contortions...talking rapidly in a low voice, playing all the parts, and then rush to his desk to get it all down.” Her brother Charley said that “if ever a man seemed to have been born for one particular pursuit it was my father in connection with the stage.”

Within two months of the publication of *A Christmas Carol*, five different adaptations appeared on London stages and one in New York. His later Christmas books were written to be staged as well as read — and they were, with equal or greater success. But it was not enough for Dickens. He wanted to do it himself.

Two days after the Christmas of 1853, for an audience of two thousand at a charity benefit, Charles Dickens performed *A Christmas Carol*. He had created physical, facial, and vocal characterizations for each character, and rehearsed them hundreds of times. “The success (he told a friend) was most wonderful and prodigious, perfectly overwhelming and astounding altogether.” Two days later he performed another Christmas piece, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, and a few days later gave another performance of the *Carol* at reduced prices for working people. The success was even greater, “I felt as if we were all bodily going up into the clouds together.” In 1857, after a number of other benefits, he turned professional, touring England and America with performances of his own works. He continued writing, but found time for almost five hundred performances before adoring audiences, which gave him enormous gratification and wealth. In England, though he insisted that a portion of the tickets be sold at one shilling for the lower classes, he still made more per performance than Macready; in America, where he tripled the prices, scalpers sold \$2 tickets for as much as \$26. In the last decades of his life, he was as famous for his performances as his writing.

Dickens performed sixteen different works, but the mainstay of his repertoire was always the one that lent itself best to performance, that aroused the most laughter and emotion, that created the strongest sense of communion with an audience, *A Christmas Carol*. He was always reworking it, cutting it again, improvising new approaches. He loved to perform it and experience its effect on an audience.

The audience came as one New York reviewer wrote, “partially, to thank Charles Dickens for all the Happiness he has given to the world. It is a better world because of him.” And he continued to make it better;

after a Boston performance on Christmas Eve in 1867, one New England industrialist vowed that the next day he would “break the custom we have hitherto observed of opening the works on Christmas day,” and every Christmas thereafter he sent each of his workers a turkey.

Audiences came away, though, with an added appreciation for the breadth of Dickens’ genius; a *New York Times* critic voiced an opinion generally held when he said that he “acts better than any Macready in the world: a whole tragic, comic, heroic theater visible, performing under one hat, and keeping us laughing... the whole night.” Ivan Turgenev wrote that:

“there were several first-class actors in his face alone who made you laugh and cry.”

He was a first-class actor, but he was also the author/narrator. In Portland, Maine, the reviewer describes how Dickens, the author, comes in at intervals to enjoy his own fun:

“you see him in the twinkle of the eye and the curve of the mouth. When the audience laughs he beams all over with radiant appreciation of the fun.”

Somewhere he must still be beaming, his eye still twinkling, for the Christmas spirit that he launched has been presiding at every Christmas past for almost a century and a half. All over the world, performances of *A Christmas Carol* have provided a good portion of the glue that brings us together in the spirit of fellowship that he did so much to establish and define. After those first half-dozen productions in 1844, there have been scores of stage adaptations. The first filmed version appeared in 1901; Thomas Edison filmed it in 1910; eight silent films in all, 29 sound films (including *Scrooge* with Bill Murray); ballets, operas, recordings, and television. For years, the Lionel Barrymore radio broadcasts were all an essential part of the American Christmas. *Scrooge* has been played by everyone from Ralph Richardson to Orson Welles, from Marcel Marceau to Mr. Magoo. As long as there has been Christmas as we know it, there has been *Scrooge* to call it humbug, and an audience assembled in a theater to help teach him the values of community, of family, of fellowship, of the joy of companionship, of the restorative power of laughter, of the childlike rediscovery of the goodness of life, to share with him the meaning of Christmas.



“I hold my inventive faculty on the stern condition that it must master my whole life, often have complete possession of me, make its own demands upon me, and sometimes for months together put everything else away from me.”
(Letters [1833-1870] Edited by Mamie Dickens and Georgina Hogarth.)

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

by Laird Williamson

Once upon a time, Charles Dickens wrote a ghost story of Christmas. His intent was to utterly transform the lives of those who read it. This conjuration of ghosts was animated by a passionate concern for the gloomy condition of contemporary society. England was in a state of economic depression. The Industrial Revolution had already begun to generate an atmosphere of indifference. Social injustice was epidemic. Children labored under appalling conditions, and, for the most part, the mass of society lived a life of grinding poverty.

Instead of merely writing a pamphlet which was to be entitled *An Appeal to the People of England on Behalf of the Poor Man's Child*, Dickens launched upon a work which he believed would be much more powerful. “By the end of the year,” he said, “you will certainly feel that a sledgehammer has come down with twenty times the force - twenty times the force I could exert by following my first idea!” He was already thinking about *A Christmas Carol*.

We cannot gauge to what degree the book eased the ills of early Victorian society. We do know, however, that Charles Dickens resurrected Christmas. At a time when the old holiday festivities were on the decline, he reconstructed a model for the season which embraced sparkling merriment, warm open-heartedness, hospitality, bright fires, glowing faces, radiant spirits, flickering laughter and dazzling generosity. His “sledgehammer” blow was that of a warm breath thawing a frozen heart. By rekindling an almost extinguished flame, his name forevermore was made synonymous with Christmas. With the writing of *A Christmas Carol* the vision that man's estate could be “a warm and glowing celebration of sympathy and love” came closer to becoming more than a dream.

Dickens believed that the diseases of society could be cured by a profound revolution within the individual human spirit. So, Ebenezer Scrooge came to be. He epitomized the “utili-

tarian man” of the age, a man whose existence is impelled solely by the accumulation of wealth. He embodies the mercenary indifference of the prosperous classes who believe that their responsibilities toward their fellow man are completed once they have paid their taxes. The redemption of the seemingly irredeemable Scrooge signals the possibility of redemption for all of us.

In this production, we have imagined Scrooge's world to be one of shut-up boxes, cases and cupboards—coffins of his memories, safes into which his feelings have long since retreated. Out of the pain of existence, he has constructed elaborate receptacles for his life. He has created his own “hiding place.” Fragments of the past are lodged in sealed, keepsake boxes; the wardrobes, shelves and drawers have become the hosts of his psychological existence. His heart confides in no one. In the chests and caskets his secrets lie dormant. In dark coffers his inner life has become entombed.

The strains of an antique carol, the spectral image of Jacob Marley, the premonition of his physical death and the power of Christmas itself forces him inward. The locks and latches on the compartments of his memory spring open. From remembrances his life begins to change. Scrooge, the failed human being, is awed, moved, stirred by natural feelings he had denied for a long time. The marvelous joy, laughter and pain of each illusion, the scenes of affection and brotherhood between family and friends bring him closer to his most dreaded fear—a loveless and lonely death.

It is at the moment when he is face to face with his imminent death that Christmas happens. Just as light and life return to the earth at the darkest time of the year, Scrooge is reborn at the darkest time of his life. He becomes a child again. He sheds the shackles formed in growing up. He becomes the embodiment of renewal and his story is the essence of Christmas itself.

OTHER CHRISTMAS STORIES BY CHARLES DICKENS

Charles Dickens initiated the now famous tradition of writing and publishing ghost stories for Christmas. The magic of his seasonal tales remains undiminished through the years. The world knows Dickens as the author of fifteen novels, of which a larger number are still read or remembered by the general public. He is also known universally for one shorter tale, *A Christmas Carol*. He took the short story very much as he found it: it was what had come down to him from the past, a newspaper sketch, a journalistic feature or filler, a bit of popular folklore, a “character,” a fireside or Christmas tale, a holiday entertainment. The English Christmas inspired the best-known and most popular of his shorter tales. Around the eighteen-forties Dickens wrote his five longer Christmas “books.”

A Christmas Carol
The Chimes
The Cricket on the Hearth
The Battle of Life
The Haunted House

For two decades he wrote an annual feature for his magazines *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, in the form of a Christmas tale or entertainment—twenty-one shorter pieces collected as his Christmas stories. These include not only his most popular holiday tales but also his most celebrated writings in another and related vein, the ghost story.

The Mother's Eyes
The Goblins Who Stole a Sexton
The Rapping Spirits
The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain
The Goodwood Ghost Story
The Signal Man
The Last Words of the Old Year

SUGGESTED READING

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Notes

1. Masterpieces of World Literature, Magill, 1952

Activity Package

A CHRISTMAS CAROL STUDY QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

1. List and discuss the points that lead to Scrooge's self-knowledge.
2. When did Scrooge change his nature? How does he describe that change?
3. Describe the significance of WANT and IGNORANCE to the play. (Note that in the original book, IGNORANCE appears as DOOM. In what ways might this substitution change the weight of the scene?)
4. Give examples of incidents in Scrooge's life that may have led to his attitudes toward Christmas.
5. The emotional poverty of Scrooge's early life clearly made a strong impression on him. The Cratchits, though financially poor, have a strong family affection to support them in rough times. That support was denied Scrooge. To what degree might his lifestyle be driven by fear and loneliness rather than greed?
6. Considering that prior to Dickens, Christmas was not a particularly significant holiday, to what degree is the characterization of Scrooge overly harsh?
7. Investigate Christmas traditions prior to the 1843 publication of *A Christmas Carol*. Give examples of both secular and religious traditions or rituals.
8. Discuss the effects of the Industrial Revolution on the social conditions of the 19th century. How representative of common business practices of that time period were Scrooge's actions?
9. Describe how the use of the stage sets, lighting and sound effects contribute to the metamorphosis of Scrooge's character.
10. Dickens' description of Christmas Day centers on the family activities of eating together and then playing games together. What comparisons can be drawn between the holiday activities of that time period and common holiday activities of today?
11. To what degree is the disdain for Scrooge a result of his self-imposed isolation from his family, rather than his avarice?

Activity Package By Rosalyn Boatman and Robert D. LaRue, Jr. 1993

**“Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness.
Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.”
(David Copperfield.)**

EBENEZER SCROOGE AND HIS MONEY

Understanding the old British monetary system can be confusing. Not only do there seem to be so many different names for the coins, but there seems to be no logic to the division of the units. That situation changed in 1971 when the United Kingdom switched to a decimal based monetary system, but that provides us with no help for understanding the financial transactions of Dickens. The chart below details the relationships between the coins, but then we must ask about relative value. This is a particularly sticky question since it hinges on the basic assumptions of monetary theory. We will avoid the stickiness by saying that various authorities have placed the value of one pound sterling (£1) in the late 1800's at anywhere from \$20-200! That doesn't help much, but we can calculate that Bob Cratchit raised his family on 15 shillings a week, or £39 per year. We don't really know how much Ebenezer had salted away. Dickens was sufficiently concerned with the plight of the poor that when he gave public readings of *The Christmas Carol*, he demanded that the ticket prices be kept down to two shillings, one shilling, and six pence, so that even the poorest could get in. Needless to say, the scalpers were active, as John Camden Hotton reports that the tickets sold out two weeks in advance and were being resold for as much as a guinea (21 shillings) each.

Amount	Coin	Bill	Slang Term
£10		10 pound note	tenner
£5		£5 pound note	fiver
21 shillings	guinea		
20 shillings	sovereign	£1 pound note	quid
10 shillings	half-sovereign	£1/2 pound note	
5 shillings	crown		bull
2 1/2 shillings	half crown	half a crown	
2 shillings	florin		
12 pence	shilling	bob, hog	
6 pence	sixpence	tanner, bender	
4 pence	groat		
3 pence	threepence	thruppence	
2 pence	twopence	tuppence	
1 pence	penny	copper	
1/2 pence	halfpence	ha'penny	
1/4 pence	farthing		
1/8 pence	half farthing		

Just for fun, calculate in your head 6% of £8.9.4 (Eight pounds, 9 shillings, four pence)!

The answer is: 10 shillings and 2 pence (10/2), break the pounds and shillings down into pence, then calculate the 6%, rounding up the 1.92 pence to 2 pence.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS FOR DISCUSSION

Before the performance discuss the following terms that are found in the text of the study guide. After the production explain how they were used or illustrated in the play.

1. Winter Solstice - The time at which the sun reaches the December Solstice for dwellers in the Northern Hemisphere, December 22nd.
2. Myth - A story invented as a veiled explanation of the truth / Fable / Allegory.
3. Want - The state of being in need.
4. Ignorance - Destitute of knowledge.
5. Pagan - A follower of polytheistic religion (as in Ancient Rome).
6. Temporal - Of or relating to earthly life as contrasted with heavenly, (Terrestrial).
7. Reformist - One that advocates gradual rather than revolutionary change.
8. Industrial Revolution - An economic revolution (England 1760) characterized by a marked acceleration in the output of industrial goods, correlative with the introduction of power-driven machinery into industry and consequently decline of hand work and domestic production.
9. Primal - Relating to the 1st period or state - original primitive.
10. Transfiguration - An act, process, or instance of undergoing an exalting, glorifying, or spiritual change.
11. Metaphor - A figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them.
12. Catalyst - A person or thing that precipitates change.
13. Redemption - A deliverance from the bondage of sin.
14. Wassail - English toast to one's health or good luck made when offering a drink, a drink consumed on such occasions.
15. Resurrection - A raising from the dead.
16. Mortality - Being mortal, subject to death.
17. Idealism - A theory that affirms that mind or the spiritual and ideal is of central importance in reality.
19. Apparition - Ghost, phantom, specter, a haunting fear of future trouble.
20. Benevolence - Kindly disposition to do good and promote the welfare of others.
21. Reclamation - The act or process of reforming or rehabilitating.
22. Apprentice - One who is bound by indenture or legal document to serve another person for a certain time with a view to learning an art or trade.
23. Charitable - Full of love and good will for others; benevolent, kindly.
24. Farthing - a British unit of value equal to 1/4 of a penny, a very small quantity.
25. Munificence - Lavish generosity.