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# A Christmas Carol Ballet Book

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Notes, Musings, Teachings, and Learnings

Thomas Griffin Foote

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# Cover photo

*Finale, 2016*



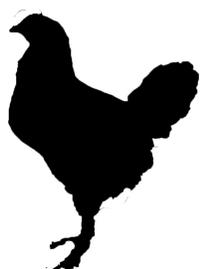
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# *A Christmas Carol Ballet Book*

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Dedicated to Sara Miot, and to all Ulster Ballet Company, it's founders, directors, members, performers, stage crew, past and present.

# Preface

*Nov 3, 2019*

This booklet is a collection of stories relating to the Ulster Ballet Company's original production of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol". Many of these stories have been read out loud or shared with the performers, parents, directors, and backstage assistants for this production. They are inspirations that came to me during rehearsals or productions over the past two years. The message in these stories is merely an example teaching for the life lessons that performers and audience experience. I hope you enjoy reading my words as much as I have enjoyed being a part of this ballet.

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# A Christmas Carol, a gift to you from the Ulster Ballet Company

*Nov 4, 2019*

If you see only one show this holiday season, make it the Ulster Ballet Company's annual performance of Charles Dickens' classic tale, A Christmas Carol. This performance is truly a Hudson Valley Original, a masterpiece in its own right. Twenty-four years ago, in 1994, choreographer Sara Miot wanted to showcase the Ulster Ballet Company with a unique holiday production. Bill Reinhart suggested A Christmas Carol. Sara knew the story by heart, as her father had read it to her family every holiday season. Scarlett Fierro and Quiedo Carbone devoted the Saugerties Ballet Center to the production. For nearly a quarter century, the Ulster Ballet Company has made this hero's tale of triumph over villainous greed and the redemption of the soul into a beloved Hudson Valley holiday tradition. Many other movies, plays, TV sitcom skits, and cartoons have told the story. But this ballet rendition has a soul that will, using the medium of music and dance, scare the Dickens out of you, and then slowly and thoroughly warm your heart.

Everything about this ballet is delivered to the audience with love. The all volunteer performers, directors, stage designers, lighting director, stage crew, set and prop masters, costume designers, photographers and cinematographers refine and present their craft year after year because it makes them feel good. Many of the original team are still devoted to this artistic rendition that they conceived years ago. It warms their hearts in the same manner that the final production warms the hearts of every member of the audience. The family that is the Ulster Ballet Company is so proud to give this holiday present to the Hudson Valley community.

We know this timely, yet timeless tale, a story that truly knows no religious, cultural, or societal boundaries. Clouded by greed, an unwitting and unwilling Ebenezer Scrooge must be led through his own dreams by ghosts of his own past, his own present, and his own future, to enable him to slay his own dragon, his own self absorbed all consuming greed. He must endure the wrath of those he has wronged, from the youngest child to the wealthiest banker. He finally realizes how much those closest to him, Bob Cratchett, his maid Mrs. Dilber, his nephew Fred, the London town folk, truly mean to him. By honoring them, he receives redemption.

There are 60 or more dancers in this ballet, and another 60 people behind the scenes, each with a story to tell. Every individual story is a piece of the whole story. In an early scene you see Scrooge reject a begging child in want of a mere stale crust of bread. This same child

will later become a terrifying nightmare in Scrooges' tormented dream. Year after year, young dancers in the ballet school assume more challenging roles. From running child one year to party dancer the next, they absorb the spirit of this story as they hone their skills. Most of the principle dancers started their careers in the Saugerties Ballet Center, playing the parts of children, eventually earning prominent roles. This personal history is what inspires each dancer to deliver a message right to the heart of every person in the audience.

No one can tell you better than the audience. One third grader said to me "Mr Scrooge, did that mean Golden Ghost steal your wife?" She felt the story. Another audience member, with tears in her eyes, said to me that she had seen literally hundreds of Broadway NY shows, and this was in the top 10. Another said to me that he saw his own personal story reflected in a mirror image of one of the scenes in the ballet. After you experience this show, you will say thank you, Charles Dickens, thank you, to the Ulster Ballet Company, to the supporting production team, to each individual dancer, and to every person in the audience, for being a part of this wonderfully unique Hudson Valley gem.

Humbly yours, Thomas G. Foote, aka Ebenezer Scrooge

See the show, Nov 30, Dec 1, 2, 2018, at the Ulster Performing Arts Center, 601 Broadway, Kingston NY

# To Tell A Story

*First learning, Nov 18, 2018*

This story was told after the first full run-through. Rehearsals for this year's show began several months ago. Now, two weeks before the show, the full cast is on stage. All of the performers of all of the scenes are called to receive their notes and corrections. They sit patiently on the floor, children downstage, older dancers a bit upstage, and adults, for whom standing is more comfortable than sitting, listen from the wings. Sara calls the first notes, "Susie, no talking when the doll is dancing", "Brian and Joe, pay attention to the music cues, watch Kevin." Scarlett and Aubrey share their observations. "Scrooge, keep your mouth closed!" Ok, Ok. Hopefully the notes will be remembered. Amazingly, all sixty people in the room are actually paying attention, most of the time, or at least some of the time. And now it is Scrooge's turn to teach a story.

"I just learned something. In the street scene, when most of you are either on stage or in the wings waiting to be on stage. I learned that the street scene is perhaps the most important part of this ballet. You already know your steps, your positions, your music cues. When the Bankers Children run up to Mommy, they pull her away from her adult conversation, and point to the Poor Children, huddled, shivering, on the cold park bench. Mommy gives her wool scarf to a poor cold waif, and the waif shares the warmth with her friends. In this act of shared kindness, a little secret was revealed to me. You are telling a story that every person in the audience already knows. We all love a good story, and the best stories are those that are told over and over again, stories that we have been part of — and everyone in the audience has helped someone else in need, just as you have in real life, and just as you are doing now on stage.

Every one of you has your own individual story to tell. Each is different. All of the people in the audience have their own personal story, and each of these stories is different. When the people in the audience look on stage, they see you, but at the same time they are actually feeling their own memories, reflecting on their own lives. You, the dancer, the actor, are holding up a mirror. They see themselves. In the language of dance, in the emotion and feeling that you put into the dance, you stir the emotion and feeling of everyone around you. This is the power that each of you wield.

Together, we are telling a bigger story. All of the pieces fit together like a puzzle. Each piece was originally crafted in words on paper a century and a half ago by author Charles Dickens. He masterfully wove all of these pieces together into one story that we begin to tell at first curtain and hold and knit and fit until long after last bows. The first street scene introduces to the audience a reflection of their own memories. It follows the story as it

unfolds into a truly believable dream, with all of life's joys, trials, and tribulations. The final street scene, with all the colors and costumes, actors and dancers and music, again holds up the mirror to the audience and joyfully gives the gift that is a celebration of life.”

# First, Dreams

*Second Learning, Nov 20, 2018*

Have you ever had a dream? Just kidding. We all dream, every time we sleep. I had a dream the other night that I shaved my Scrooge beard off for some reason that I can't remember, of course. It was a dream. I dreamed into the mirror and I didn't even look like myself. I had fat cheeks. My real body was paralyzed, fully asleep, unable to move, but locked in this nightmare. I do remember waking up abruptly, disturbed, scared. How was I going to grow a beard again in time for the show? Awake now, I rubbed my face with my hand. I sure was relieved to find that I still had a beard.

This ballet story that we are telling is a dream, at least from the time Marley first appears until Scrooge wakes up and redeems himself. Scrooge and the three ghosts float around in Scrooge's poor old brain for hours and hours. All sorts of things bang around inside that little skull of his. Past sorrows and joys, loves remembered, loves found, loves lost, Ignorance and Want, mirrors, reflections of life, all these things bouncing and pouncing in dreams. And you, children, youth, adults, ghosts, all dancing here on stage, are living this dream for all the audience to see. You are really alive. You are his dream.

The funny thing is, I really think that the audience is dreaming too. They are all sitting in their seats, just like their bodies are paralyzed in a dream state. They can't move, they can't get up, all they can do is wiggle their eyes, listen with their ears, and let your story float around in their brains just like they were dreaming. Each movement, each emotion they feel from the stage triggers their own brain to let your story into their lives. This is why you must be so clear in the story you tell on stage. Fezziwig party has so much going on, so many different little stories, exciting dances, fun, surprises, that it's like a brain dream gone wild. It jangles the audience to remember their own fun, their own party, their own music, their own dancing, their own dreams. With each scene change, different lights, music, mood, feelings, everyone's story shifts into a new dream, a new nightmare, and in the end, a new restful place.

If you really pull it off, if you really stay in character, the audience will stay in their dream until Scrooge wakes up, until the final street scene, until we wish them all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

# Character

## *Third Learning, Nov 25*

When I did my first performance as Scrooge, I had never really acted on stage before. Even in practices I was too self-conscious, too worried about the mechanics of my role, unsure of why I had to do what when, to bother to get my sense of presence into character. Other people must have at least sensed my uneasiness, but I was the only Scrooge actor in this year, so they had to live with my foibles.

On opening night as the pre-curtain music began, everyone in costume back stage, I clearly remember watching Bill, aka Bob Cratchett, as he paced back and forth across the empty setting, preparing himself, getting into character. He was teaching me, unbeknownst to him, telling me, to get myself into character. I shrugged my tailcoat higher onto my shoulders, straightened my neck, stiffened my jaw, closed my senses to those around me, and using my ledger book as my prop, began to harden my soul. I breathed deeply, flashed the vignettes through my brain, not practicing, but just flashing my memory. When curtain rose, I had no nervous energy. I felt like an angry old man. As I stepped onto stage and addressed Bill at his desk, it was clear that he sensed my vile presence. When the bankers asked me to contribute to a “fund to feed the poor”, I glared and shook my hand at them so violently that they were jolted out of their socks. I shocked them into character, as Banker Jim clearly reacted in his most realistic manner yet. From that moment on, I was in the groove.

Most of you are really in the groove. I say this because I see it, I hear it, and most of all I feel it. Sure, we all fall out of the groove once in a while, like watching old I Love Lucy bloopers on TV, but we have to bounce right back. We’re live on stage. And, too there are some grooves in the scenes we play that are really hard to get into. That’s when we really need to suck it up, to let go of our inhibitions, and ask for help. It’s free, like when I got help from Bill by just watching how he does it. When you are really in the groove, you know it, the audience knows it, and the feeling is contagious.

# Second, Dreams

*Fourth Learning, Nov 28, 2018*

I had another dream last night. You did too. Snippets of memories bounce around inside our skulls like ping pong balls, caroming off each another, events of today jangling events of the past, mingling together in a hodgepodge of a dream that we mostly forget before we awake. In my nightmare dream last night I dreamed that I had shaved off my Scrooge beard. I was at some kind of a party, a wedding perhaps, with music and lots of people. My dream was in color. I was looking into a mirror and saw this chubby faced guy that looked mostly like me, but without a beard. Suddenly I realized that I had a ballet performance tomorrow. I had no Scrooge beard. Sara and Scarlett and Jane were going to be hopping mad. I couldn't move. I was dreaming. My body was paralyzed. I was so scared. I awoke with a start. The first thing I did was to reach up and touch my beard. I slumped back into my pillow, relieved. I was safe again.

In my awakened state I began to think. I am not sure whether the thinking part is as real as the dreaming part, but that's another subject. I realized that when we are on stage, dancing, acting, performing our individual character roles, the audience is in fact in a dream like state. They can't move their bodies. They are stuck in their seats. Peer pressure keeps everyone silent and still. Their brains are mesmerized, hypnotized. Their eyes move, watching everyone on stage. Their ears hear the music. They are in a state not unlike REM sleep, Rapid Eye Movement sleep. Their eye muscles work, their teeny tiny inner ear muscles work, but their body is still, paralyzed, as if in a dream. Each character on stage is like a ping pong ball inside their brain, bouncing around in the minds of everyone in the audience, awakening their memories, jiggling their past experiences. We on stage have no sense of this, as we are in our own acting, dancing, performing characters. And as long as we, each of us, each and every single person on this stage, stays in character, we remain the bouncing ping pong ball in the brain of each one in the audience. Only when we startle them with some kind of emotional jolt do their brains and bodies leave that mesmerized state, and like a murmuration of starlings erupt in applause, laughter, shock and awe.

The key to keeping the audience dreaming is to stay in character. We shall never know what each individual is dreaming about, but that doesn't matter. If one person in the audience is focused on one of us on stage, and that one falls out of character, the person in the audience loses the ping pong ball, loses their train of dream, and perhaps loses a part of the message, the story that we are all trying to give, as a gift, to the audience. Please, even though you are one of many, keep in some back corner of your mind that you must, for all of us, for all of the audience, stay in character.

# Afterwards

## *A letter to the Company, Dec 3, 2018*

Greetings and salutations, on the day after the best performance of “A Christmas Carol” yet this year. I would like to share with you some of the feelings from the audience, as well as my own thanks to you.

First to Scarlett, who after the Thursday school show, came up to me and asked me where I had learned to dance, where I had learned my acting skills. She had been watching the whole show from the wings, and for the first time, not in a “notes writing” mode, was able to absorb the feeling of the show, as do the members of the audience. I assured her that I was never schooled in dance, although Luzia and I enjoy cutting the rug with a Lindy Hop swing now and then. Luzi danced with the Wild Women in the Sinterklaas parade in Rhinebeck on Saturday evening, an hour and a half on asphalt and concrete. I merely get tossed about by ghosts, ballerinas, and poor children. As far as acting goes, I did work for IBM for too many years, and that is certainly where I learned everything I knew before joining the Ulster Ballet Company.

Saturday morning I went to pick up a piece of farm machinery from my friend George. After years of cajoling, I had finally convinced him to see the show. He and his son Austin, who has acted at Rhinebeck Performing Arts in their annual “A Christmas Carol” as nephew Fred and in other roles at the Phoenicia Playhouse and elsewhere, saw our show Friday night. George, a carpenter by trade and a musician and singer at heart, got off his tractor and spent a full fifteen minutes telling me how much he loved our theatrical ballet.

George told me that he was fully expecting to see another local semi-amateur production. He was absolutely blown away by our show. From the opening curtain to the final bows he was fully engaged. He thought he was on Broadway in New York at a full run show. Our staging was incredible. He had never seen a local show that had such attention to stage detail. He could not anticipate what scene would appear next. The lighting, ghosts appearing and disappearing, following the scene story, revealing fragments of dreams, exploding with the music, awakened him as it does me as I feel my role on stage. The backdrops amazed him to no end, as the lighting changed the mood of the backdrop from festive to frightful to invisible.

He could not believe the dancers. He asked me how the ballet company was able to afford all the professional dancers. I had to assure him that the green sprites in tutus were actually high school kids, that musicians and ghosts and party goers, the Cratchett family, were in many cases the same person in different costume. I explained that some of the dancers had been performing roles, sometimes different, sometimes the same, for the past twenty-four

years. He was amazed how well the young boys and the young girls danced, so together, like they were having so much fun. “Where did they all come from?” — “Saugerties,” I replied, “and Catskill and Tannersville and Kingston, New Paltz, Port Ewen, Red Hook, Rhinebeck, Woodstock, all schooled in ballet at the Saugerties Ballet Center.”

The costumes, George said, were unbelievable. There was so much attention to detail. They were so colorful, so period authentic looking. From the first street scene to the party scene, through the ghosts, Ignorance and Want, poor children, to the final street and bows, there was so much eye candy, he was in awe. He really felt like he was at a holiday party, dancing and having a blast.

He was astounded by everything that was unique about this production. The minimal narration blended so well with the dance, the emotion of the music, the entire sensual experience, that it brought his soul on to the stage with us. But the most amazing thing to George, the thing that carried him away from his thoughts and into his soul was the story telling, everyone, together, as one family. The reason we were able to hold his attention was that all of us, on stage, off stage, back stage, front of the house, behind the scenes, were telling the same story.

So, Scarlett, to answer your question, “Where did I learn to act?”, the answer is clear to me now. I didn’t learn to act. I learned to tell a story, from my heart, from my feeling, right here right now, in the moment of this production. I learned to tell the story from my teachers, those of you who have told this same story on stage for 24 years, and from those of you who are telling the story for the first time, this year. And where did I learn to dance? I learned from my dance instructors, all of you who are the graceful ballet students of the Saugerties Ballet Center.

Signed,

Ebenezer Scrooge

postscript, Nov 8, 2019.

Dr. Pappas, before dilating my eyes so she could examine my retinas, spent five minutes lecturing me that the Ulster Ballet Company should take this show to Broadway, New York, New York. She will bring her Mom to the show again, on Broadway, Kingston, New York, Sunday, Dec 8th, 2019.

# The Most Important Person

*Oct 6, 2019*

I must tell you, cast members, parents, directors, all of you backstage, a story about the most important person in this ballet. In short, you are the most important person. It is not your physical self, but the character you portray. To go a bit deeper, it is actually not your character, but is the feeling that your character emotes.

The spirit that you project is like a mirror to the audience. They gaze upon the stage and see the reflection of their own personal emotions. They know their own hunger, fear, anger, frustration. They know joy and happiness, the warmth of giving and receiving. Most of all, they know love. When you, on stage, pour true love into our character, you are polishing your mirror to its finest. All the audience will see, in their reflection, the depth of the character whom you portray.

As the final curtain falls and the emotions of all the audience erupts with joy, you run onto the stage one final time. You look into the mirror that the audience is holding up for you to see, and you feel your love reflected back a thousand times. At this moment you will know in your heart that you are the most important person in this ballet.

# Feel Your Pull

*Oct 17, 2019*

“I need to feel your pull. You’re behind me, I can’t see you, and you’re too far away to touch me. I need to sense that you are pulling me away from Belle.”, explained Andre. He, Shaya, and Lyanla were rehearsing Greed Trio, and Andre could not feel the force of Shaya’s pull. On the next run-through, Shaya focused her energies and propelled Andre backward, pulling him from Lyanla’s beckoning arms.

Everyone, everything, every being has a radiant energy, waiting to be sensed, to be tapped, to be manipulated. I see this so often in my observations of natural animals, and have written about it many times. All of us, at some time in our lives, have experienced this power. It is the kind of energy that a mother senses when her child, far away, at school perhaps, is experiencing some kind of trauma. She doesn’t know why, but for some unseen reason she rushes to her child’s aid. Only then does she learn the detail of the real physical event that cause the child to call, from a great distance, to her mother.

Andre and Shaya learned to feel each others’ energies. We all really have this tool in our toolkits of life. We don’t often have the conscious or even unconscious sense to harness it, but as natural beings, we possess this power. Each of us, in our interactions with each other, may in some manner use this tool unconsciously. This is perfectly fine. It is a projection of our emotions, a call and answer sense of force. Sometimes we inadvertently suppress this tool and miss an important message from someone else. If we learn to harness this energy, we have a powerful tool.

In this performance, we must be vigilant. We must tune our movements with all others on stage, focusing and magnifying our energies. We call to the audience, the silent player who is ever vigilant, watching, waiting. Their senses are heightened by the emotions we project from the stage. They are yearning to feel our pull.

# Two Feelings

*Oct 27, 2019*

There are two feelings that I must share with you as we rehearse the Greed Trio, or the Greed Quintet. Actually we are the Greed Sextet, the sixth dancer being the music. The audience is using all of their physical senses to fuel their souls with our spirits. The music is such a moving force in this entire ballet. Each of our motions must be empowered by the emotion that flows from the strings of the orchestra. Whether we are moving slowly or quickly, whether the changes are sudden or subtle, we are under the unseen direction of the orchestra conductor. Together, we place our story on the wings of sound, to be carried to all who listen.

The second feeling is the heart and soul that we pour into our movement. In a practice session we may be less inclined to fully engage with the soul of our character. On stage we will be much more emotionally engaged. But in truth, we are on stage now. Our audience, in rehearsal, is first ourselves, second each other, and thirdly the choreographer. Fourthly, in rehearsal, other students and performers will be in attendance, in this room, sitting on the wings, and watching in wonderment. We must be in full performance mode. Not only will we help each other to feel the flow of the story, but our influence will flow into the hearts of all who are watching, and their hearts in turn will be opened to respond, to learn, and to lead by example the rest of the cast.

# Stories Told To Others

*Oct 30, 2019*

Here is a story that I shared with my Tracker Family, a group of people who try as best they can to live in oneness with all beings, physical and spiritual, on this our Mother Earth.

Greetings,

Tonight I attended a social organization meeting with a small number of people. We were chatting in groups of three or four. The room seemed stark, linoleum floors, plain walls, florescent lights. I noticed that the talk was mostly of exploits, adventures, and situations. I surrendered and felt that I was in a place where the conversation was almost entirely in the physical world. Certainly the story tellers were animate in their telling, but the radiance of the stories said “Look at me, look at what I did.” rather than, in a spiritual sense saying “Let me share the depth of my feeling about my experience.”

I felt that I had to manipulate this stiff radiance. I told my little group a story about another organization I participate in, oddly enough a ballet company that performs “A Christmas Carol”. Our practice space is also a stark setting, vinyl floors, no furnishings, florescent lighting. We work together in small groups. The emotion of the story we are telling moves all dancers into a the radiance of a spiritual state, even in the time of idle chit-chat between scenes. I shared the story of the scene where the golden idol of greed steals Scrooge’s ability to feel love. Young Scrooge’s lover rejects him because of his obsession with physical gold. The dancer performing the role of lover expresses her character so personally that she literally weeps real tears.

I sensed a change in the men with whom I shared this story. Their stiffness softened. One man’s body physically slumped as he felt the tears of the lover falling on his feet. Another became uneasy with the change, checking himself to make sure that it was socially acceptable to experience emotion in this group. I knew that I had given them a gift, and they were thanking me in whatever way they were able.

thanks,

Tom

# The Most Important Rehearsal

*Nov 1, 2019*

Today is the most important rehearsal day. Today is the first full run-through of all of the scenes. You have practiced each of your scenes, listened to the music, learned your steps. During each practice you may have had several different teachers. They may actually have told you different things. No one can tell you exactly how to move with each step. That is up to you. You must learn to feel and express your story together, as one, with the other dancers.

Today, as with every day, you will hear critique of your actions. They are gentle and kind suggestions. Put them in your toolkit, as you will need all of them, in some form, at a later time, in this production, and for the rest of your life. All of us, together, learn from each other. You are dancing with your dreams. Today is the most important rehearsal day.

# Now is the Most Important Time

*Nov 10, 2019*

Now, right now, the present moment that you are in, is the most important instant in time. Time moves forward. You move with time, but you are always present in the instant that is Now ... — to be continued.

# About A Christmas Carol Ballet Book

*Nov 4, 2018*

One day, in the not too distant past, my buddy Quiedo called me on the telephone ...

# Acknowledgements

Quiedo, Scarlett, Bill, all the dancers and instructors, choreographers, parents, stage crew, et. al. ...

# About Tom Foote



Tom Foote, hopefully, is striving for redemption from whatever ails him.