

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## A Christmas Carol

Charles Dickens, adapted by Patrick Barlow

Theatre by the Lake

Theatre By The Lake, Keswick

22 November 2019–11 January 2020

Who better to adapt Dickens's seasonal parable than Patrick Barlow, and whittle it all down for performance by a cast of just five?

After all, he's done much the same with everything from [The 39 Steps](#) to [Ben Hur](#), or—as one half of comedy drama duo The National Theatre of Brent—Wagner's Ring Cycle to Zulu! All treated with equal measures of respect, and irreverence, of course.

The balancing act here, however, teeters into an over-long and wordy transcription of the original, with one or two flashes of comic brilliance, but not enough to light up the story, especially for younger audiences.

As one character complains of Dickens's skinflint Scrooge: “Gawd, he's a talker!” much the same can be said of the production.

It all opens brightly enough, especially with sight gags concerning doorbells and snow-bedecked visitors to Scrooge's doorstep. But like the one-liners about Bob Cratchit's name, they seem soon forgotten, especially amidst the protracted scenes around the Ghost of Christmas Past.

Christmas Present picks up the pace at the start of the second act, with a fairylight-festooned Fairy Godmother in glittering Doc Martens. As the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come, a faceless Frankenstein figure may well leave some smaller theatregoers Yet To Get To Sleep.

The energetic, multi-instrumentalist cast (Darren Lawrence, Pete Ashmore, Sally Cheng, Claire Storey and Max Gallagher) give it a kind of concert party effervescence, and Hannah Wolfe's minimalist cut-out style of stage design, with steps down into the audience, suggests a production eager to break down the fourth wall, but never having the nerve to do so.

Why not, for instance, bring the exquisite comedy creation of the Tiny Tim character downstage and let everyone properly marvel at puppeteer Matt Hutchinson's clever invention?

If he's having anything to do with next year's seasonal offering of *The Borrowers*, book a front stalls seat now.

**Reviewer:** [David Upton](#)