

British Theatre Guide

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A Christmas Carol

Charles Dickens

Assembly Festival and Riverside Studios

Arts Theatre

(2011)

It takes a particular kind of mind to sit back after reading *A Christmas Carol*, novel heaving with imagery and imagination, and say 'You know what this needs? Less'.

Such a mind was well at work with this version of Dickens' best loved story, featuring Simon Callow and little else. Callow is an incredible presence, telling the story like the best kind of grandparent with feeling, warmth and colour. You come away from this production with that warm Christmassy glow.

This is partly because of the understated staging, where there's only a few lights, some chairs and a large revolving, see-through black screen. All very angular and modern. The changes in lighting enhance the mood and this cold stage suits the bareness of Scrooge's life. Towards the end, the stage is filled with bright light as the true meaning of Christmas comes alive. Overall though, it's Callow impressively making a whole story out of nothing at all.

But part of the joy of this story is its heavingly-detailed scenes, and while Callow paints a good a picture as possible, it's hard to ignore the gapingly-black canvas of a stage surrounding him. I also wonder how much someone who didn't know the story beforehand would understand and, if I were a kid watching this for the first time, if I would be able to follow. Plus, Callow tends to move quickly between scenes and characters, especially over the second half, giving not enough visual clues that he's a different person in a different place. Add this to the minimal staging and the rich material is not only underexploited but hard to visually grasp.

The intention here is to create a space that can be fleshed out and filled only with the story. And you do find yourself in Dickensian London, laughing, smiling and tearing along. Callow is, as always, perfect and the strength of his performance would have been lessened by more elaborate staging. But this isn't the most approachable take, or the most imaginative.

Reviewer: [Tobias Chapple](#)