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Marley's Ghost and Other Mash-Ups

The director Reid Farrington is a man of the moment. A multimedia collage artist who transcends genres, he makes plays that blend theater and film, drama with art installation.

**JASON
ZINOMAN**

**THEATER
REVIEW**

His work is formally impressive and conceptually fascinating, but sometimes it's hard to tell if his experiments are a

step forward or back.

Last year his "Gin and 'It'" meticulously recreated Alfred Hitchcock's "Rope" with videos of actors like Jimmy Stewart projected on screens alongside live performers. Now he has used a similar aesthetic in "A Christmas Carol," at the Abrons Arts Center, once again mixing live actors with elaborate video, this time from dozens of screen adaptations of the novel. Movie characters are projected onto a dizzyingly diverse series of curtains, rolling screens and hand-held canvases.

This results in a technically complicated mash-up in which George C. Scott, Bill Murray and Donald Duck star along with hustling live actors who double as stagehands. Christopher Loar, who plays Scrooge, has very few lines and acts out the clips of movies like a theatrical karaoke.

The show pauses on famous lines, and then we see many variations of, say, "God bless us, everyone." As a work of descriptive film criticism there's something quite interesting about putting so many different line readings of the same dialogue side by side. The varying ways that directors have interpreted the ghost of Christmas Future suggests, for instance, that "The Seventh Seal" has been a big influence on American holiday entertainment.

If "Carol" is like watching one of those YouTube videos that isolates one cinematic trope and

"A Christmas Carol" runs through Sunday at the Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand Street, Lower East Side; (212) 352-3101; henrystreet.org.



CHRIS KATEFF

A Christmas Carol John Forkner (in top hat) and Christopher Loar in a multimedia version of this Dickens classic, at the Abrons Arts Center.

pieces them together, the difference is that those are much shorter. To sustain an entire show without tedium, Mr. Farrington needs more of a point of view. His editing does not have a strong perspective on this Dickens work or its interpreters. It appears to aim for exhaustiveness, when it would benefit from creating patterns that evoke an idea.

While high-tech companies like the Builders Association take a

critical eye to technology, this show is subsumed by it. The actual flesh-and-blood actors seem incidental. That may be the point, to show how the heart of a classic can be manufactured. But that's an intellectual argument. The experience of watching the show is hollow and ultimately uninvolved. Mr. Farrington's style has real potential, but like so many in the holiday season, he needs to be careful not to be carried away with his toys.

Conjuring Dickens Back to Life

John Forkner, top, and Christopher Andrew Loar channel Dickens.



Occasionally the concept of a new work strikes one as a self-inflicted slap on the forehead: *Why didn't anybody think of that before?!* Visionary theatre artist Reid Farrington elicits just such a response with his latest creation—a spookily appropriate incarnation of Charles Dickens's ubiquitous holiday classic *A Christmas Carol*, fittingly titled *Reid Farrington's 'A Christmas Carol' or DICKENS: THE UNPARALLELED NECROMANCER*. The show plays at **Abrons Arts Center**, Dec. 1–18, just in time to enliven the holiday season's stale roll call of moralizing pageants.

Farrington, who cut his teeth as a video designer in the world-renowned **Wooster Group**, marshals his signature blend of projected media and live performers (*The Passion Project*, *Gin & "It"*) into a Victorian magic show of the "black arts." Given that Dickens's tale is one of haunting specters, Farrington's treatment

is a magical marriage of form and content. The "ghosts" in Farrington's piece are made of clips from more than 70 *Christmas Carol* films, mined from 100 years of cinema history.

Farrington has edited together a mash-up of clips and images of the seasonal staple (including Muppets and animated iterations). Through precise choreography and coordinated video projection, live actors manipulate screens, scrims, cutouts and set pieces that embody, silhouette and channel the characters and apparitions of these many *Carols* past.

Rather than arbitrary experimentalism, this take on Dickens's cultural touchstone feels like a necessary innovation. By making the narrative's pervasiveness the subtext and its past versions the characters, Farrington's *Carol* revives the meaning of Dickens's enduring message, jolting the familiar audience member back to the edge of his seat while creating a singular piece of wonder for the uninitiated. For all the disappearing acts in the play, we see it again as if for the first time. —Frank Boudreaux

Review

Reid Farrington's A Christmas Carol or Dickens: The Unparalleled Necromancer

Created and directed by Reid Farrington

Off Off Broadway, New Play

Runs through 12.18.11

Abrons Arts Center Henry Street Settlement, 466 Grand Street

by [Rachel Merrill Moss](#) on 12.5.11



A CHRISTMAS CAROL. Courtesy of Abrons Arts Center Website.

BOTTOM LINE: Ghosts of *Christmas Carols'* past are beautifully and effectively strung together in this multi-media'd, festive feast.

Charles Dickens's *Christmas Carol*, it would seem, has been performed, passed on, and altered nearly as many times as the years it has been in existence. So imbedded is Dickens's tale within the widespread and commercialized Christmas culture, that even for those whose celebration of the holiday is limited to mass consumption of candy canes and eggnog lattes, an overview of the larger plot points comes quickly and easily. Reid Farrington has submerged himself in this bog of *Carol* tellings and re-tellings to put together what can only be described as a visually cacophonous *Christmas Carol* overview, to great effect. The fruit of so many Christmases past and Farrington's extraordinary piece, *A Christmas Carol or Dickens: The Unparalleled Necromancer*, is now showing in its world premiere at Abrons Arts Center Henry Street Settlement.

With some bits spoken, many bits mouthed to film-version voice-overs, and all physically performed in front of or behind projection screens, the dexterous cast flits between *Carol* characters and time-periods to tell the entirety of the familiar fable. Each scene consists of layer upon layer of repeated lines from the *Carol* canon, with each different intonation reflected in the actors in a different physicality, resulting in an exhausting but ever-pleasing tale torrent. With good, old Ebenezer Scrooge represented as everything from the classic pinch-faced miser to the sarcastic *Scrooged* Bill Murray to Michael Caine's Muppet-thronged moneygrubber, Farrington's survey hits all the bases to ensure the most emotionally evocative conglomeration of stories possible. Though, of course, it is the actor's lightening-quick embodiment of this character-blitzkrieg that serves to be the most stirring.

Mesmerizing, too, is the incredibly finely edited projection material that illuminates the story and many of the characters via silkscreen frames and moveable stage-legs. The unbelievably inexhaustible archive of *Carol* clips that grace the stage throughout the performance are worth the price of admission alone. And while some clips and cuts cannot help but miss their targeted on-stage silk screens due to the chaotic dance constantly taking place, when marks are hit perfectly they come with a delicious pang of delight.

In addition to tapping into the ever-so culturally familiar tale to tease and toy with expectation, Farrington plays with the boundaries of live performance. Much like in his, *Gin & "It"*, which played last year at 3LD and PS122, which combined live-action narrative with projections from Alfred Hitchcock's film, *Rope*, Farrington's way of pushing the live theatre envelope is clever and fun. The line between the film pieces and the actors is not so much blurred as non-existent. The "reality" of the performance taking place on stage is wonderfully bent and skewed, distorted to the point that live applause at the end sounds tinny and unreal.

Never bordering on film reenactment, *A Christmas Carol*, instead plays at reappropriating film for the stage. In his quasi-Brechtian way, the audience is kept at a distance by being fully familiar with, or at the very least aware of, the material being utilized, and with that comfort-zone of no dramatic surprises, Farrington is then able to allow the audience to playfully delve into the traditional lineage. Whether the takeaway is simply holiday enjoyment, or a deeper assessment of the English classic's sturdy foothold in Christmas culture, both are secondary to the impressiveness of the production, but the options are certainly available.

(*A Christmas Carol* plays at Abrons Arts Center Henry Street Settlement, 466 Grand Street at Pitt Street, through December 18, 2011. Performances are Thursdays at 8PM; Fridays at 8PM; Saturdays at 8PM and Sundays at 4PM. Tickets are \$20 (\$10 for students and seniors) and are available at ovationtix.com or by calling 866.811.4111.)

'Reid Farrington's A Christmas Carol' Is a Dizzying Digital Wonder

By Mitch Montgomery | Posted Dec. 2, 2012, 2:51 p.m.

Abrons Arts Center Charles Dickens

Everett Quinton

Reid Farrington's A Christmas Carol theater

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To fully appreciate “Reid Farrington's A Christmas Carol,” playing this holiday season at the Abrons Arts Center, you must acquaint yourself with a unique prerequisite, one a little more current than the beloved Charles Dickens chestnut. In recent years the Internet has yielded an interesting new art form, no doubt born of idle time. User-friendly editing software and the ever-flowing stream of film and TV footage on YouTube have resulted in the “super cut.” These thorough and often artfully put together video remixes (a nice collection of which can be found at www.supercut.org) offer a hilariously wide-angle view of specific recurring motifs in film, TV, and media, such as every Daniel Day Lewis “screaming scene” or every incidence of the word “baby” in the music of Brittany Spears.

With “Reid Farrington's A Christmas Carol,” the titular director, formerly of the Wooster Group, has brought the super cut to the stage in a stylish and funny performance-art piece, compiling footage and audio from the nearly 40 film adaptations of “A Christmas Carol.” Through the use of projections and nimbly choreographed stage movements, an onstage Ebenezer Scrooge, played dutifully by Everett Quinton, is haunted by digital ghosts. The Scrooges played by Bill Murray, Patrick Stewart, F. Murray Abraham, Jim Carey, Michael Caine, and even Mr. Magoo make regular flickering appearances on a collection of picture frames and modular black scrims that sail effortlessly on and off stage.

A dapper John Forkner keeps things moving along as the narrator, who frequently reads from Dickens' original text and, along with the rest of the highly poised cast, stands in for other characters when Quinton needs to interact with them. I say “when” because most of Quinton's efforts entail wild gesticulating and lip synching in time with his filmed predecessors, thus supplying a comprehensive catalogue of the seemingly infinite variations of “Bah! Humbug!” and other signature phrases from the iconic Dickens work. The precision of Farrington's staging—in which cast members quickly hold up a picture frame or drape themselves in a sheet to catch a momentary projection—boggles the mind. The labors of lead editor and assistant director Kelly Colburn and sound designer Marcelo Añez are evident and no doubt crucial to achieving the show's most complex and dazzling sequences, such as when the multiple iterations of Scrooge, led by Quinton, confront their respective tombstones across multiple planes of projection and layers of sound.

It's a testament to the inventive, engaging quality of the work that when one of the six LCD projectors went on the fritz at the performance attended, the audience applauded the technicians who scaled a ladder to fix it.

Presented by Foxy Films and Abrons Arts Center at Abrons Arts Center, Henry Street Settlement, 466 Grand St., NYC. Dec. 1–23. (212) 352-3101, (866) 811-4111, or www.abronsartscenter.org.

Critic's Score: A+



Photo Source: Foxy Films

Reid Farrington's *A Christmas Carol*: Your Seasonal Multimedia Fable

Dickens ghosts around the Abrons Arts Center

By Jacob Gallagher-Ross Wednesday, Dec 5 2012

Comments (0)

We're getting to that time of year when you can turn on the TV at almost any hour and catch some version of *A Christmas Carol*—whether it's animated or live-action, Bill Murray or Muppets, black-and-white or color. Ebenezer Scrooge's late-game conversion from robber baron to human being is maybe the most adapted story ever, and, like ol' Scrooge, we're all haunted by the many iterations we've absorbed over time (and may have sentimental memories about): The Ghosts of *Christmas Carols* Past.

This is exactly the situation that Reid Farrington's multimedia rendition of the fable—an eerie seasonal treat, now ghosting around the Abrons Arts Center—dramatizes. Juxtaposing real actors with projected movie doppelgangers—thrown onto shifting screens, bedsheets, even handheld surfaces for projections on the fly—Farrington puts each well-known moment of Dickens' tale in conversation with a stir of filmic echoes. We get choruses of Cratchits, medleys of Marleys.

Channel-surfing through filmic history, his

performers—an expert bunch, whether delivering plummy Victorian dialogue or channeling cinematic spirits—are stalked by the many famous actors who've embodied their roles before them. Sometimes they karaoke the familiar voices, sometimes they stand aside and let the images take over. We see and hear a who's-who of notable Scrooges: Alistair Sim, Patrick Stewart, Michael Caine, Disney's redoubtable animated duck. And, as we do, we're pursued by our own memories of each *Carol*, and perhaps of the vanished holiday seasons when we watched—or re-watched—one or another of 'em. (I confess to a powerful fondness for the Muppet version). The piece reminds us that our idea of the story is really a collage, jigsawed together from lots of different *Carols*.

Some of the performers the piece resurrects from old movies are now undoubtedly dead and gone—making their flickering avatars the closest thing to actual ghosts you're ever likely to see onstage. And other beloved actors are now much older. (Even sketchy outdated animations or bygone cartoon characters—remember *Mr. Magoo*?—acquire a kind of pathos.) As the evening goes on, the wavering effigies become a spectral meditation on mortality—one nearly as jolting as that delivered to Scrooge graveside by the last ghost.

Despite Farrington's many layers of mediation, the *Carol*'s durable parable still comes through. We're now living in an era that's fast returning to near-Victorian levels of disparity between rich and poor, and it couldn't hurt for most of us to reckon with the stark terms of Scrooge's visions: to face our own fleetingness, and, in a time of unprecedented abundance and widening want, consider whether we've been behaving like the human beings we truly want to be.



Paula Court

The Ghost of Kermit's Past?

Details

Reid Farrington's A Christmas Carol
Directed by Reid Farrington
Abrons Arts Center
466 Grand Street
212-352-3101, abronsartscenter.org

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Christmas Past and Christmas Present:

Reid Farrington Takes on a Dickens Classic

It seems that each year brings new stage adaptations of *A Christmas Carol*—there are dozens of variant versions produced each year on the resident theatre circuit—but there's never been one like Reid Farrington's take on Charles Dickens' classic which premiered in December at the Henry Street Settlement Abrons Art Center in New York.

Farrington is known for creating pieces that turn classic films into live performance pieces. These include *The Passion Project*, devised for a single performer and excerpts from Carl Dreyer's silent masterpiece *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, and *Gin & "It,"* which uses lengthy excerpts from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* to explore the celebrated director's risky decision to make that film in a series of nine reel-length takes. Farrington's *A Christmas Carol* features five performers working their way through a condensed version of Dickens text, aided and abetted by bits and pieces taken from film and television adaptations. Highlights include a 1910 silent version, produced by Thomas Edison; a 1949 television film narrated by Vincent Price; the famous 1951 film, featuring Alastair Sims' iconic turn as Scrooge; the animated *Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol* (1962), a Baby Boomer touchstone; *Scrooge* (1970), starring Albert Finney, which with its Leslie Bricusse score, is popular with musical fans; the Bill Murray vehicle *Scrooged* (1988); and *The Muppet Christmas Carol* (1992). One of the strong points of Farrington's approach is how it allows us to see the many ways in which Dickens' original has been adapted and massaged to meet the demands of different star personalities and audience assumptions.

"I had initially intended to use all 70 film and TV versions of *A*

Christmas Carol for this piece—there are in fact 70 I uncovered," Farrington says, adding that he screened just about all of them before deciding which to use. "Some days, I would watch four versions of *A Christmas Carol* in a row," he adds. "But using all of them, I soon realized, became unwieldy. Some of the versions are, of course, adaptations with dialogue so far removed from the original that it would be unrecognizable to the viewer if I only used a clip. For example I found a disturbing little straight-to-video version called *A Diva's Christmas* with Vanessa Williams, which would have gummed up the works on so many levels. So I placed a restriction on myself to only use *Christmas Carols* that dance around Dickens' original text. My piece uses about 35 films total. That said, my favorite version, hands down, is *Scrooged* with Bill Murray. It manages to weave original text around a modern adaptation perfectly."

No two Farrington projects are alike, and in *A Christmas Carol*, he took a new approach. "Each one of my projects builds on and learns from

the last one," he says. "In *The Passion Project*, I began to learn how to manipulate images in space and combine them with live performers. In *Gin & "It,"* I dissected the film by cutting the actors out from their backgrounds and further advancing the blending of the live and projected. For *A Christmas Carol*, I'm working with multiple film sources. The live element is more woven into *Carol* than any other piece of mine. I'm directing the actors to fully embody the characters from the story. They immerse themselves in the physicality and vocal patterns of hundreds of characters spanning 100 years of film history. The precision is mind-blowing. The actors are no longer outside the films manipulating images, they embody the films completely."

The projection element of *A Christmas Carol* is a vast collage, with clips lasting from a few seconds to roughly a minute. Farrington describes his projected environment as "walking into a movie." The movie clips are large-scale or quick slivers of a moment, always landing on tiny, hand-held screens (think of Victorian fans) or huge sliding screens, all manipulated and held by the cast. Viewed from the audience, it seems like a project of mind-boggling complexity. Farrington says, "We built the show in pieces; we began with the scene where young Scrooge and his fiancée Belle split up, and built out from there. That scene



was good to start with because it had a traditional "two-hander" quality to it. So because the actors had that safety net, we started to blend the scenes from the different versions, lip-synching, jumping from physicality to physicality, film image to film image, but all the while maintaining the integrity of Dickens text. The tension between the live and mediated is a real high-wire act in this scene."

The production is something of a torture test for actors, who have to hit their marks with rapid precision, syncing their bodies and mouths to key pieces of dialogue and holding up small screens. "The piece developed almost completely in rehearsals," says Farrington. "We worked for four-and-a-half months last summer. We met three times a week, and I edited the mash-ups all day in preparation for the evening's rehearsals." He notes that Dickens broke the story down into five "staves (a staff of music);" these were further broken

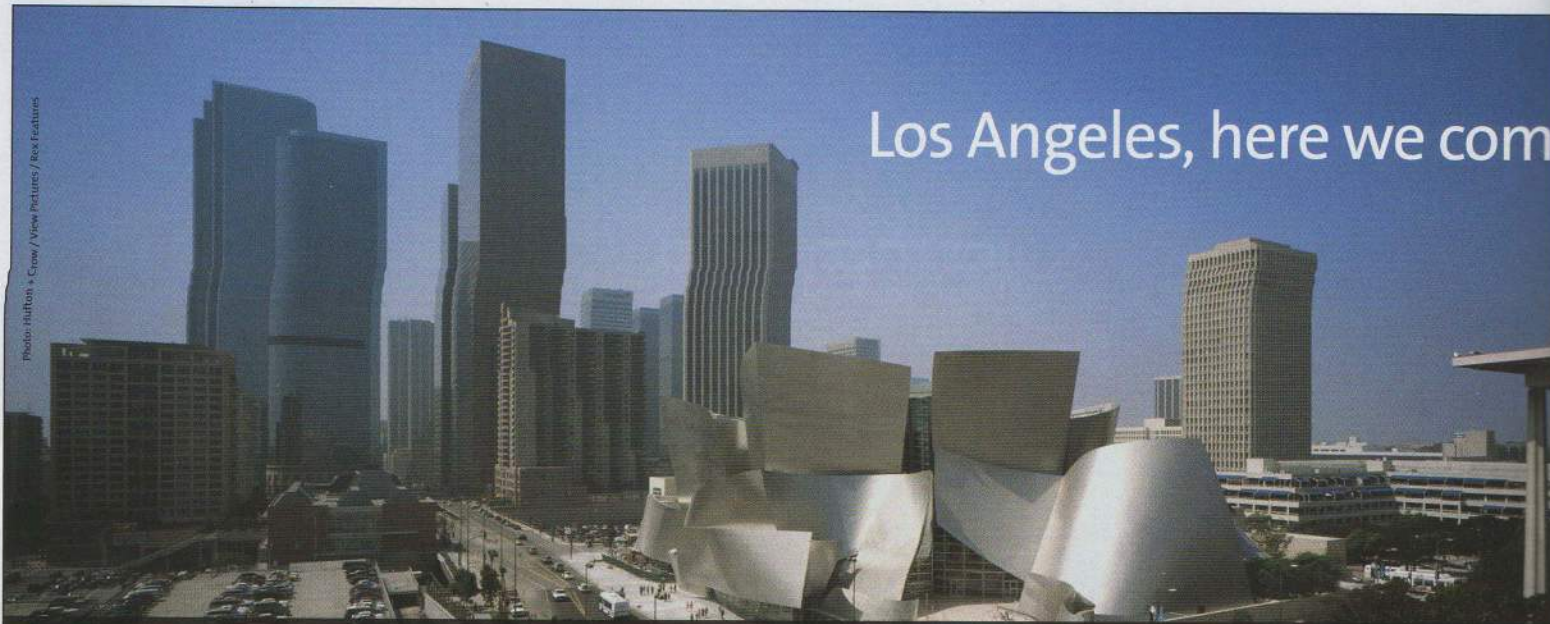
down into three-minute sequences. He notes that the performers influenced many of his decisions. "John Forkner, who plays the male narrator, a sort of stand-in for Dickens himself, really responded to the Vincent Price voice. Laura K. Nicoll responded to the voice of [the Muppet character] Gonzo. So these became part of their characters and remain as character home bases for each actor."

For his media server software, Farrington chose Max MSP and Jitter, family of interactive graphical data flow programming environments for audio, video, and graphical processing. "My Jitter patch models the functionality of a computer lighting board, in the sense that the latter controls intensity from 0-100. Using the same idea, we control scale, horizontal/vertical position, rotation, and brightness for six clips running in sync. It also models the sound board's abilities of assignment. I can send an image to one or all projectors. All of this data is stored

to record a look. Then I recall these looks as cues." There are essentially 27 main cues, each of which has 50 – 150 automated internal cues; these 27 moments are points where the performers, audio, and video can be resynched, if necessary. Audio is run off of Qlab.

The images are delivered by eight projectors—two BenQ NP776FTs, five Mitsubishi XD530-Us, and one Panasonic PDT-550, used for 10'-wide images. "We have three planes of projection—downstage, mid-stage, and upstage; each plane has three areas—stage right, stage left, and center, much like area lighting," says Farrington. "Generally, each performer is trying to catch images in one area of those areas."

A Christmas Carol will return to the Abrons Art Center next Christmas season. It can be enjoyed as a game of spot-the-reference, as an astute cultural commentary, and for the simple power of Charles Dickens' tale. ☸



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SATURDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2011

Reid Farrington's A Christmas Carol



If you ever wanted to see every screen version of Dickens A Christmas Carol make your way down to the Abron Arts Center at the Henry Street Settlement in New York,

because they are presenting a multimedia performance of a Christmas Carol that mashes together almost every screen version there is, not to mention some TV and radio versions as well.

Theoretically I shouldn't be reviewing this, what I saw was the second performance ever and the press performance is tomorrow, but I think I saw enough to know that this is an intriguing work in progress.

The show is the classic story told by a group of actors who both speak Dickens words, but also mouth the words from 35 film versions plus. Clips are projected over the actors on scrims, on sheets, on the floor and on hand held "mirrors". Its the story we all know but with some meta moments where a few classic sequences are played over and over themselves. When it works it works extremely well

CONTRIBUTORS

dbborroughs
Reg
mr c
Frank Grimes
Randi
mondo_curry
John
Ken Fries
Bully
Eden

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with moments that both get to the heart of the story and also shine a new light on its themes. Unfortunately there are moments when the meta nature of the colliding versions falls flat, the speeches of Scrooge that he *will keep Christmas Past Present and Future* if he's allowed to change his ways derails the show at a moment when it really should make us feel something else.

This isn't to sell the show short and say it's bad, it's not. Its simply to say that the show is something that needs work, it needs refining. Its close to being a really good show, but its got kinks in it that need to be worked out. If Farrington had more than 18 days he might be able to turn it into a classic that would be worth seeing every year. Right now it's an interesting doodle.

Big question, is it worth seeing?

Actually yes (after all I'm taking the time to mention it).I think that if you know that you're getting, a weird mash up that mostly works, I say go for it. If you want perfection go elsewhere...or at least wait until toward the end of the run when things may actually work better.

For information and tickets click [here](#).

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