

A Christmas Carol for the relief of homelessness and in support of the arts

Hundreds of Londoners faced the icy chill of last December 11 to attend The Unity Project for Relief of Homelessness and Orchestra London's dramatic reading of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* at Centennial Hall. The pay-what-you-can event was the Unity Project's second annual CBC Radio One presentation of Dickens' original script, delivered by seven excellent readers and with accompaniment by Orchestra London musicians under conductor Dan Warren.

There are many versions of the famous story of Ebenezer Scrooge and the three Christmas ghosts whose visit changes him from a miserly misanthrope to a loving, generous and happy man, but Dickens' own words are well worth revisiting. He was a funny man. And his examination of how we should live and work in this world—"Business? Mankind was my business! The common welfare was my business!" laments the ghost of Scrooge's long-dead partner, Jacob Marley—carries a message that has never gone out of style.

For the reading, first up was Gary Emmett, of CBC's Ontario Morning, who got the gruff and wicked humour of Scrooge in his counting house just right. Maia L. Bent, of Lerner's law firm, delivered the haunting scene in Scrooge's bedroom when Marley's ghost first appears, and Mike Eizenga, of Siskinds law firm, captured the shift from nostalgia to melancholy and loss, as Scrooge visits his once happy past.

After the intermission, readers Jeannette Klaver, reading for Boardwalk Rental Communities (she also directed the production), and Lynne Cram, for Carlyle Peterson, took up the tale with a visit to Scrooge's tight-fisted present. Jim Caskey, of Siskinds, and Claude Pensa, of Harrison Pensa law firm, rounded out the evening and Dickens' tale. When, in Pensa's

reading, an overjoyed Scrooge exclaims again and again, “Delightful boy!” to the very average boy Scrooge has hired to bring him a Christmas goose, more than a few eyes in the house grew misty.

Between the readings, Orchestra London musicians played carols (there were two singalongs!) as well as selections from classics like Tchaikovsky’s *Nutcracker* ballet and Handel’s *Messiah*. The *Nutcracker* march and waltz were light and playful; Pifa from *The Messiah*, tender and delicate. A particular delight was Tchaikovsky’s Arabian Nights, from *The Nutcracker*, full of mystery and featuring an oboe solo by Ian Franklin. Also lovely was the trumpet solo, by Shawn Spicer, which brought The Huron Carol to its exultant close.

The money raised with this performance, from the door and from the many corporate, community, and individual sponsors, will go to support Orchestra London and to support The Unity Project’s work to relieve homelessness in London. Dickens, and the reborn Scrooge, would approve.

Ruth Taylor worked for ten years as a journalist before turning her hand to fiction (and occasional articles like this one). Her short stories have appeared in *Kiss Machine*, *The Danforth Review*, the anthology *Ten Stories High*, and are forthcoming in *The Dalhousie Review* and *The Nashwaak Review*.