



RICHARD G. WILKINS

“Mr. Scrooge”

by Lovisa Lyman

When law professor Richard Wilkins first auditioned for the role of Ebenezer Scrooge in 1984, he was a baby-faced 32-year-old law professor. Theater owner Ruth Hale told him he was far too young to play the part convincingly, but he was the only actor who auditioned who could do a believable British accent, so he got the job. The Hales brought in a Hollywood makeup artist to “age” Wilkins’ youthful face for the role. “She made the face I have now,” quips Wilkins. For widespread fans who make the show a regular part of their holiday celebration, Wilkins has become the consummate Bah Humbug!

Drama has always been dear to Wilkins and his family. He began his undergraduate studies at BYU as a drama major, but after one semester he realized he would have a hard time supporting a family as an actor. So he switched to journalism and persisted to graduation. During his studies he happened to interview Rex Lee about the new law school. Lee observed, “You seem like a bright young man. Why don’t you come to law school?” Wilkins

remembered the invitation after he graduated in journalism and discovered that the only job he could find was as the editor of four weekly newspapers in central Utah, where he earned a princely \$425 a month. To avoid starvation he took the LSAT and began law school the next fall with the idea that he would bring all his training together and study entertainment law.

To prepare for that goal, Wilkins clerked with firms in Los Angeles during summers. Upon graduation, however, the offer of a clerkship for Judge Robert Ainsworth in New Orleans altered his plans. Following the clerkship he worked for Vinson and Elkins in Washington, D.C., for a year. At that point, he was asked by Rex Lee—who was now solicitor general—to serve as one of his assistants.

Wilkins' first court argument was before the U.S. Supreme Court, and he freely admits that all his drama experience failed him. "It was the worst performance in the annals of United States history." His own grandfather, who attended, said, "Rick, it'll get better." Apparently it did. After four years on the job, Justice Burger, who had witnessed the first performance, sent Wilkins a treasured note: "You've become a very fine appellate advocate."

When Wilkins left Washington, he made another hard decision. Vinson and Elkins in Houston offered him a job heading up their appellate division. Wilkins opted to return to Utah and teach at the BYU Law School. That's when the Hales heard him give a high council talk in their ward and told him, "You have pretty good presentation," and asked him to try out for the opening play at their new theater.

Between 1984 and 1999, Wilkins didn't miss a performance of *A Christmas Carol*, appearing as Scrooge a total of 502 times at Salt Lake's original Hale Theater. His wife, Melany, joined him as Mrs. Cratchit for most of those performances, and each of their four children had parts when they were old enough. He continues his much-applauded role at the new Hale Center Theater for the 2002 season.

[men] involve a mutual duty and responsibility," and as a result we must discharge our implied obligations toward each other "cheerfully, faithfully, and honourably; for the history of every useful life warns [us] to shape [our courses] in that direction."⁴¹

Ebenezer Scrooge learned that he could not live in isolation from Tiny Tim. Since, like Ebenezer, we cannot escape each other, our only hope is an enlightened understanding of our mutual, communal obligations. As Ebenezer, we must vow to live in the past, present, and future and not forget, as Marley's Ghost warned, that all of mankind, individual liberty notwithstanding, "is our business." The common welfare, charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence are all our business.

In 1843 Charles Dickens set out to write "A Plea To The People Of England On Behalf Of The Poor Man's Child." He did not complete that effort, but the *Carol*, in his own words, brought the message down "like a sledge hammer [with] twenty times the force—twenty thousand times the force—I could exert by following out my first idea."⁴² It does so because the *Carol* is a song of redemption. Scrooge's resolution to live in the past, present, and future, along with his pledge to "honour Christmas in my heart and try to keep it all the year" has the power to redeem not only Ebenezer, but all those who make the same vow.⁴³

*Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough, in the good old world. . . . May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!*⁴⁴

ENDNOTES

- 1 Michael P. Hearn, *Introduction* to CHARLES DICKENS, *THE ANNOTATED CHRISTMAS CAROL: A CHRISTMAS CAROL 2* (Michael P. Hearn ed., 1989 ed.).
- 2 *Id.* at 3.
- 3 A villanelle is a verse form running on two rhymes and consisting of five tercets and a quatrain.
- 4 G. K. Chesterton, *Introduction* to CHARLES DICKENS, *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* (1924 ed.) quoted in Hearn, *supra* note 1, at 3.

- 5 Hearn, *supra* note 1, at 1.
- 6 *Id.*
- 7 *Id.* at 3.
- 8 *Id.* at 6–7.
- 9 *Id.* at 7.
- 10 Charles Dickens, Speech presented at the First Annual *Soirée* of the Athenaeum: Manchester (Oct. 5, 1843), in *THE SPEECHES OF CHARLES DICKENS* 44, 45–46 (K. J. Fielding ed., 1960).
- 11 *Id.*
- 12 *Id.*
- 13 *Id.* at 49.
- 14 Hearn, *supra* note 1, at 9.
- 15 *Id.*
- 16 *Id.*
- 17 *Id.* at 9–12.
- 18 *Id.* at 12.
- 19 CHARLES DICKENS, *A CHRISTMAS CAROL* (1843 ed.), reproduced in *THE ANNOTATED CHRISTMAS TALE: A CHRISTMAS TALE* 56, 58–60 (Michael P. Hearn, ed., 1989 ed.).
- 20 Dickens, *supra* note 19, at 61.
- 21 *Id.* at 61–62.
- 22 *Id.* at 62–63.
- 23 *Id.* at 69.
- 24 *Id.* at 76–77.
- 25 *Id.* at 77–79.
- 26 *Id.* at 81.
- 27 *Id.* at 103.
- 28 *Id.* at 124.
- 29 *Id.*
- 30 *Id.* at 141–142.
- 31 *Id.* at 142.
- 32 *Id.* at 158.
- 33 *Id.* at 159–60.
- 34 Hearn, *supra* note 1, at 42.
- 35 Dickens, *supra* note 19, at 60.
- 36 *Id.* at 65.
- 37 *Id.*
- 38 *Id.* at 49.
- 39 Letter from Charles Dickens to Dr. Smith, (March 10, 1844).
- 40 Dickens, *supra* note 19, at 124.
- 41 Dickens, *supra* note 10, at 49.
- 42 Letter from Charles Dickens to Dr. Smith, (March 10, 1844).
- 43 Dickens, *supra* note 10, at 49.
- 44 Dickens, *supra* note 10, at 49.

ART CREDITS

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