

## Whose Carol is it anyway?

Improv fun with *What the Dickens*

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What would happen if Ebenezer Scrooge were not miserly but instead always looking at his mobile phone? What if rather than sadness that he needed crutches, Tiny Tim's family mourned his inability to read an instruction manual? Those are some of the audience suggestions received by the cast of *What the Dickens*, an improv version of *A Christmas Carol* at Millspace in Newmarket on Dec. 13 and Dec. 14.

Seacoast-based *Stranger Than Fiction*, an improv group now in its 20th year, uses the Charles Dickens holiday classic as a template for comedy. The show is always different. One night, the Ghost of Christmas Past might have a Mickey Mouse voice; on another he could be Darth Vader. Some touches are written down by patrons as they enter the theatre; others are shouted out during the play.

The show began in 2022, said STF cast member and Marketing Director Dan Schiff-

macher in a recent phone interview, with a run at the New Hampshire Theatre Project in Portsmouth's West End. Last year, STF partnered with Players' Ring Theatre and did the show there, along with performances in Newmarket and Sanford, Maine.

"We wanted to do something for the holidays, something a little bit different, and one of our members came up with the idea," he said. "We started to craft [how] to mix what people know about the story and also have elements of improv.... We didn't want to pre-plan too much, because we still wanted to have that like spontaneity and fun to it."

Thus the principles of Dickens' tale remain — a boss, an employee, his family and some ghosts — but the elements change from night to night. For this year's opener at Portsmouth's Players' Ring Theatre, Scrooge's bad habit was stealing drinks at the pub he owned, where Cratchit tended bar, and one of the ghosts was Ronald Reagan. Other times, the ghosts spoke like Mickey Mouse or Scooby-Doo.

Audience "asks" are often challenging, Schiffmacher noted. When Scrooge & Marley became a Christmas tree company, the ghost character had to come up with a way to transport Scrooge from realm to realm. The solution was to make him climb into the twinning machine to be spun ahead.

Sometimes the mundane is quite funny. "When Darth Vader was the Ghost of



Courtesy photo.

Christmas Future, he cleared the scenes by force-choking us all off the stage," Schiffmacher said. "Our director was on the lights, and he turned everything red. It's a lot of fun when we're all on the same page and can do that."

The process of getting audience input is itself entertaining. When last year's Scrooge character asked for a 1980s movie actor suggestion, response began flying at him immediately, including Bruce Springsteen, as if his videos counted, along with Sean Connery and John Cusack. He ultimately chose Rodney Dangerfield and groused about getting no respect while talking to Marley's ghost.

Between an animated crowd and the venerable improv group always looking to top itself, each show presents many new opportunities

for hilarity. "We're always trying to find different ways to switch things up, make them a little more fresh," Schiffmacher said. "Like we're all different characters — the person who plays Scrooge in the first show won't play him in the second show. We all shuffle around ... everyone has their own approach."

Schiffmacher joined *Stranger Than Fiction* in early 2022, after moving to New Hampshire from Chicago. He has more than a decade of improv experience. He noted that anyone with an itch to try improv can take one of the classes the troupe offers.

"There's a 101 Intro to Improv that starts in January," he said. "We're working on the dates; people can find out more on our website." 🌟

### What the Dickens

**When:** Friday, Dec. 13, and Saturday, Dec. 14, 8 p.m.

**Where:** Millspace, 55 Main St., Newmarket

**Tickets:** \$12 at portsmouthnh tickets.com

### Art

#### Craft fairs

- **The Craftworkers' Guild shop in Bedford** (3a Meetinghouse Road, down the hill in the Library parking lot) is open for the holiday season. The shop is open Wednesdays through Sundays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. through Sunday, Dec. 22. See thecraftworkersguild.org.
- **The Holly Jolly Craft Fair** will be held at the DoubleTree Hilton

(2 Somerset Plaza, Nashua) on Saturday, Dec. 14, and Saturday, Dec. 21, from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. More than 75 artisans will be selling their holiday crafts, including holiday wreaths and centerpieces, reindeer and gnomes, country folk art and more. Visit joyescraftshows.com.

- **The Christmas Holiday Craft Fair** at Bazaar Craft Fairs will be held Saturday, Dec. 14, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at Nashua Bingo Hall

(166 DW Highway, Nashua). See Bazaar Craft Fairs' Facebook page.

- **The NH Audubon's Annual Holiday Craft Fair** is Saturday, Dec. 14, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the McLane Center (84 Silk Farm Road in Concord; n Audubon.org) featuring 30 local crafters, a food truck, a raffle and more.

- **The 2nd Annual Manchester Holiday Craft and Vendor Fair** will take place Saturday, Dec. 14, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., at Club-

Canadian (128 S. Main St., Manchester, 623-9019, clubcanadian-inc.com). Santa will be there all day, taking pictures for free. Visit facebook.com/nevendorevents.

- **The 13th Annual Holiday Bazaar** from Wrong Brain is happening Saturday, Dec. 14, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at a new location, the Rockingham Ballroom (22 Ash Swamp Road, Newmarket). There is a \$1 suggested donation. Visit facebook.com/wrongbrain.

Ventures Gallery (411 Nashua St., Milford) and will run until Dec. 21. The gallery's hours are Tuesday and Wednesday from noon to 4 p.m., Thursday from noon to 6 p.m., Friday from noon to 4 p.m., Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., and Sunday from noon to 4 p.m. Visit creativeventuresfineart.com or call 672-2500

- **"Small Wonders Miniature Art Show"** is at the Mosaic Art Collective (66 Hanover St., Manchester; mosaicartcollective.com) through Sunday, Dec. 22. The exhibition is described as a "celebration of small-scale art that packs a big punch," according to the website.

- **"A Celebration of Light"** Two Villages Art Society (846 Main St. in Contoocook; twovillagesart.org) will hold its 2024 Winter Members Show and Sale, "A Celebration of Light," through Saturday, Dec. 28.
- **Glimpse Gallery's** (Patriot Building, 4 Park St., Concord) newest exhibit begins on Monday, Dec. 9, and runs through Jan. 9, featuring works from artists Pat Arzillo, Byron Carr, Julie Daniels, Mark Ferland, David Wiggins, Barbara Morse and Michael McCormack,

as well as a selection from curator Christina Landry-Boullion. The opening reception will take place on Saturday, Dec. 14, from 5 to 8 p.m.; RSVP by emailing contact@theglimpsegallery.com. Visit theglimpsegallery.com or call 892-8307

### Theater

- **A New England Christmas** presented by Pontine Theatre at the Plains School (1 Plains Ave., Portsmouth) through Sunday, Dec. 15, with performances on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Tickets are priced at \$32 for general admission and \$29 for seniors and students. Visit pontine.org.

- **Disney's Frozen** presented by Ogunquit Playhouse at the Music Hall (28 Chestnut St., Portsmouth, the music hall.org) through Sunday, Dec. 22, with shows Wednesdays through Thursdays (except for Thanksgiving).

- **The Nutcracker** The Seacoast Repertory Theatre (125 Bow St., Portsmouth; seacoastrep.org, 433-4793) through Sunday, Dec. 22. Ticket prices range from \$37 to \$68.
- **A Christmas Carol** at the Palace Theatre (80 Hanover St., Manchester, palacetheatre.org) through Sun-

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## SURLY SANTA, VENGEFUL SHEEP

Bedford Off Broadway presents the final weekend of the production of the comedy *Christmas Belles* at the Bedford Old Town Hall (3 Meetinghouse Road, Bedford) through Sunday, Dec. 15, with shows on Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. "A church Christmas program spins hilariously out of control in this Southern farce about squabbling sisters, family secrets, a surly Santa, a vengeful sheep and a reluctant Elvis impersonator," according to a press release. Tickets cost \$15, \$12 for seniors. Tickets can be purchased at the door or via Brown Paper Tickets. See bedfordoffbroadway.com.