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Dramatic Publishing

*The Christmas
Wiser*



*Drama
by
Sherman L. Fergel*

The Christmas Miser

The Christmas Miser - Drama. By Sherman L. Sergel.

Cast: 4m., 8w. Arthur Felton is a tight-fisted, grasping old miser. He's also a famous actor playing Scrooge in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. On stage, Arthur's friendly warmth has made his audience love him. Backstage, it's different. Arthur fires a young actor who is late for rehearsal even though the young man had to arrange an operation for his wife. Then Arthur is visited by a once-promising actress, whom he fired, and also by his sister. What they say shakes him. Lastly, an old cleaning woman appears and helps Arthur resolve to make amends. Suddenly Arthur realizes that it's Christmas and that he strongly resembles another famous old miser! Like Scrooge, he takes steps—joyous steps! *Bare stage w/props.* *Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: C49.*

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The Christmas Miser

A Christmas Play in One Act

from the BBC Radio play

by

PHILIP LEVENE

adapted for the stage

by

SHERMAN L. SERGEL



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The Christmas Miser

CHARACTERS

ARTHUR FELTON the star of the show
RICHARD HARVEY a young actor
ELIZABETH MELVIN a theatrical agent
MOLLY a faithful friend
JOE SLATER an old actor
SHEILA
FREDDIE LOWE } members of the troupe
DOROTHY DEAN }
MRS. JUDD an employee
SANDRA MASON a nurse
EMILY Arthur's sister
MRS. WOOD an old cleaning woman

PLACE: New York City and Syracuse.

TIME: Around Christmas Time. The Present.

SCENES

Scene 1: A bare room, a rehearsal hall in New York.

Scene 2: The bare stage of a theatre in Syracuse, morning, of a few days later.

Scene 3: The same as Scene 2, 4:30 that afternoon.

Scene 4: A fragment, Emily's room in a boarding house, a few moments later.

Scene 5: The same as Scene 2, later that night.

Scene 6: The same as Scene 2, Christmas Morning.

The Christmas Miser

SCENE 1

AT RISE: *ARTHUR FELTON is discovered on stage. He's half perched on a high stool. ELIZABETH is seated in a straight-backed chair UR. ARTHUR has a script in his hand and is reading the part of Scrooge in Dickens' A Christmas Carol. RICHARD HARVEY is standing DR.*

ARTHUR (*as Scrooge*). "Folks say I'm tight-fisted. That I'm a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, clutching old miser. Well, what of that." (*He hears something.*) "Ah, church bells! 'Tis Christmas Eve. Bah! What's Christmas to me."

ELIZABETH (*adding verbally the sound effect which isn't there*). A door closes off right. (*She nods to HARVEY, who is standing DR*) That's your cue.

ARTHUR (*as Scrooge*). "Who's that. I hear approaching? Ah, 'tis Bob Cratchit."

HARVEY (*playing the part of Bob Cratchit, but without enthusiasm*). "A merry Christmas, Mr.Scrooge."

ARTHUR (*drops his script abruptly, and he also drops the character he's playing. He clears his throat*). Just a moment, Mr. ...

HARVEY. Harvey. Richard Harvey.

ARTHUR. I gather you're not familiar with this play, Mr. Harvey?

HARVEY. I know it very well, Mr. Felton. I've seen the *Christmas Carol* many times.

ARTHUR (*crisply*). I'd never know it from your reading. As Ebenezer Scrooge I'm the one who hates Christmas. But you, as Bob Cratchit, find it, as you say later on ... (*He holds up his script and turns a few pages, then reads.*) "a kind, forgiving, charitable time." (*He drops the script and looks at HARVEY.*)

HARVEY. I'm sorry. Didn't I convey that?

ARTHUR. No, Mr. Harvey, you didn't. You sounded even more dismal than I did. Let's try it again, shall we? From your entrance. I'll give you your cue. (*He reads the part of Scrooge again*) "Who's that I hear approaching? Ah, 'tis Bob Cratchit ... "

HARVEY (*very brightly this time*). "A merry Christmas, Mr. Scrooge."

ARTHUR (*as Scrooge*). "Bah. Humbug!"

HARVEY (*as Bob Cratchit*). "You don't mean that, I'm sure."

ARTHUR (*as Scrooge*). "I do. What right have you to be merry? You're poor enough."

HARVEY (*as Bob Cratchit*). "What right have you to be dismal? You're rich enough ... "

ARTHUR (*himself again*). That was a little better, Mr. Harvey. (*He turns to ELIZABETH.*) What do you think, Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH. To me, he sounds fine. A nice strong voice, and he looks good.

ARTHUR. What experience have you had, Mr. Harvey?

HARVEY. After leaving the American Academy, I was at Minneapolis for a year, then I did a TV serial. You may have seen me.

ARTHUR (*with disgust*). I'm afraid not. I haven't a set.

ELIZABETH. I think I saw you. Wasn't it a mystery show? The time I saw you, you cut the heroine's throat.

ARTHUR. Spare me the details, Elizabeth. All right, Mr. Harvey, the job's yours, providing we can come to terms.

HARVEY (*greatly relieved*). I'm sure we'll do that, sir.

ARTHUR. Talk that over with Elizabeth. She's handling the contracts.

HARVEY. When do we start rehearsing?

ARTHUR. Here, the day after tomorrow, 10:30, sharp!

ELIZABETH. You open in Syracuse, followed by an eight-week tour. Now, if you'll wait in the office, I'll come to see you about the contract.

HARVEY. Thank you. (*Exits R.*)

ELIZABETH. Well, Arthur, that's the last of the auditions, thank Heaven!

ARTHUR. What about Tiny Tim?

ELIZABETH. All arranged. I called Madame Valesca's school for budding stars. She has a little monster who looks like an angel, and who'll bring tears to the customers' eyes the second he hobbles on stage.

ARTHUR (*he nods assent*). Has Molly been through the costumes?

ELIZABETH. No. She should be here by now. Here's the bill. (*She hams it to him.*)

ARTHUR (*appalled*). Three hundred dollars! That's robbery.

ELIZABETH. He asked for four hundred. I had to work.

ARTHUR. I should have bought my own instead of renting from that shark.

ELIZABETH (*changing the subject*). What about the young man's contract? What should I offer?

ARTHUR (*thoughtfully*). I think he needs the job. He called me "sir."

ELIZABETH (*casually*). He does. His wife's expecting a baby.

ARTHUR. Then offer him minimum.

ELIZABETH. For twice nightly! Arthur, he'll never accept.

ARTHUR. If he needs the job badly enough, he'll take it.

ELIZABETH. Oh, Arthur! You'll make a mint on this tour.

ARTHUR. That's what I'm in business for. Whom do the customers come to see? They come to see *me!* When the name "Arthur Felton" goes up outside a theatre, people know they'll get good, clean entertainment of the best kind. I have an audience.

ELIZABETH. I'm not arguing that, Arthur . . . but it's a grinding schedule. Let me offer him ten percent over minimum.

ARTHUR. Minimum.

ELIZABETH (*she sighs*). All right.

ARTHUR. Good, that's settled. By the way, I didn't know we were playing Syracuse. I thought Buffalo was the first date.

ELIZABETH. A conflict in bookings. But it's a nice theatre, capacity twelve-hundred.

ARTHUR (*quietly*). I know it. It must be 20 years since I was in Syracuse. Matter of fact, I was born there.

ELIZABETH. Is your sister still living there?

ARTHUR. I wouldn't know. Ten years ago she married some bank clerk, and I haven't seen her since. (*Dismissing the subject.*) You said Molly was coming over to check on costumes?

ELIZABETH. I don't know what happened—she's always early. (*Thoughtfully.*) Molly's so nice! Nothing's too much for her, a real powerhouse!

ARTHUR. If only she'd stop pestering me to give her a part.

ELIZABETH. Why don't you? She's a fine actress. She only took over the wardrobe to help you. And you did promise . . .

ARTHUR (*cutting in*). If I hadn't, she wouldn't have taken wardrobe.

MOLLY (*off R*). Hello.

ELIZABETH (*calling*). We're in here.

(*MOLLY enters R*)

MOLLY (*warmly, as she comes on*). Hi, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH. How are you, Molly, dear?

MOLLY. Hello, Arthur.

ARTHUR. Is the cast fitted into their costumes?

MOLLY. Except for Bob Cratchit.

ELIZABETH. He's outside. You can run the tape over him as soon as we've agreed on terms.

ARTHUR. When you've done that, Molly, get the railroad tickets and call Parsons about the publicity handouts, then check to see what happened to my wig.

MOLLY. Of course, Arthur.

ARTHUR. And don't forget to pack my make-up at the top of the trunk. I don't want to waste my time searching for it.

MOLLY. I'll see to it. Don't worry.

ARTHUR. I think that does it.

MOLLY. Arthur, I just met an old friend of yours—Joe Salter.

ARTHUR. Salter?

MOLLY. You must remember. You worked with him for years. Remember how the three of us used to sit at the Automat, having coffee, talking people, shows, the chance for a part. Even if we were poor, those were good times.

ARTHUR. Oh, yes, Joe Salter. Of course.

ELIZABETH. He comes into my office twice a week.

MOLLY (*to ELIZABETH*). He looks awful. That suit of his

...

ELIZABETH. Belongs on the rag pile. I wish I could help him—but what can you do?

ARTHUR (*hard, abrupt*). If I can help it I *don't* want to see him. If I know Joe, he's on the bum. Is there a back way out?

ELIZABETH. No.

ARTHUR. Just my luck.

(JOE SALTER enters R. He comes forward, warmly, hand outstretched.)

JOE. Arthur, Arthur Felton—how nice to see you again.

(ELIZABETH and MOLLY go out R, quietly.)

ARTHUR *(putting on a warmth he doesn't feel)*. Well, what a surprise. Joe Salter!

JOE *(as they shake hands briefly)*. I hear you're running your own company. How wonderful. Your name's always in *Variety*.

ARTHUR. Often, yes.

JOE. I knew you'd make it. Cigarette?

ARTHUR. Joe, I'm awfully busy, trying to get the company out on the road.

JOE. Just for a minute, for old times' sake. Have a cigarette. *(He produces a crumpled pack.)* Well, just one. Here, take it. I'm cutting down. Arthur, do you ever think back to the days before the war?

ARTHUR. Mainly I remember being poor.

JOE. Oh, but we had grand times.

ARTHUR. We did? Without work, without money?

JOE. There was the fun of it all. It was wonderful, and you think it's going to go on forever, but it doesn't. It's hard to say good-by to it all, but I have to. That's why I wanted to see you, to say good-by.

ARTHUR. You're retiring?

JOE. That's one way of putting it. No more climbing stairs to agents' offices; or waiting in wings at auditions ... no, I'm going to an old-age home. A senior citizen.

ARTHUR. Couldn't you get into the actors' place?

JOE (*without malice*). No. There were more deserving cases than mine. Since the missus died, I haven't looked after myself. And at my age it's too late to learn.

ARTHUR. Didn't you have a son—

JOE. Yes, he went off to Australia. He's a loner. Maybe a reaction to all the theatres and crowds I pulled him through. I have four lovely grandchildren. Like to see their picture? (*There's no reaction to this.*) He asked me to come and live with them.

ARTHUR. Why don't you?

JOE. Arthur, we all tell stories. They think I'm a great success. Somehow I just can't bring myself to write and ask for the fare. So I'll just have to spend the rest of my life with strangers.

ARTHUR. Perhaps you'll enjoy it.

JOE (*hesitating*). Arthur ... I don't suppose. (*Resolution returns.*) No, not that. Well, good to see you. Perhaps we'll run into each other again. (*He holds his hand out.*)

ARTHUR GOOD-BY, JOE. Nice to see you.

(*JOE turns and leaves as MOLLY comes back on*)

MOLLY (*as they pass each other*). Good-by.

JOE. Good-by, Molly. (*He's gone.*)

ARTHUR (*with a laugh*). I told you Joe Salter was on the bum. Handed me a sob story about a son in Australia. He expected me to fall for that one.

MOLLY. But it's true. He's shown me lots of photographs of his grandchildren.

ARTHUR. Joe made plenty in his time. He should have saved some for a rainy day.

MOLLY. Many actors don't—

ARTHUR. Well, I'm not Travelers Aid. And if I start handing out my hard-earned cash to every tramp I run into, everything'll be gone in a month.

MOLLY. Joe's not a tramp.

ARTHUR. He looked like one.

MOLLY. If he's hard up, it's because he's been too generous.

ARTHUR. A better word might be "prodigal." (*Changing the subject.*) Have you got the railroad tickets?

MOLLY (*handing tickets to him*). Yes, here.

ARTHUR (*he counts them*). You're four short.

MOLLY. Yes, I know. Freddie Lowe has a little car. He's taking up three of the cast. He asked for his fare instead.

ARTHUR (*sharply*). You didn't give it to him?

MOLLY. Not yet.

ARTHUR. Well, *don't*.

MOLLY. You'd have to pay it anyway.

ARTHUR (*rudely*). Who's asking you? The contracts say I have to pay coach railway fare. If Freddie can afford a car he can pay for his own gas and oil. Now, are all the contracts here?

MOLLY. Yes, except an understudy for Mrs. Cratchit.

ARTHUR. Oh, yes. (*Abruptly all charm.*) As a matter of fact, I meant to talk with you earlier, Molly. You've been nagging me for a long time to give you a part. Why don't you understudy Mrs. Cratchit?

MOLLY (*quickly*). That's no part. You'll just be saving a salary!

ARTHUR (*moving closer to her*). There, see how you fly off the handle. I thought I was giving you a chance ...

MOLLY (*cutting in*). Let me play the part. It's only two short scenes.

ARTHUR. You've already got too much to do.

MOLLY. Sheila is playing Ellen *and* being stage manager. If she can do that ...

ARTHUR (*cutting in*). Ellen's only a bit part. But if I take out a spring tour I'll find you a part.

MOLLY. You've been saying that for years.

ARTHUR. Molly, please understudy Mrs. Cratchit. For me.

MOLLY. No.

ARTHUR. Molly, this isn't like you.

MOLLY (*crisply*). Maybe it's the way I should have been all along. (*Her resentment rising.*) Better late than never. No, I won't understudy it. I want the part.

ARTHUR. You can't mean you're going to let me down!

MOLLY. If being something besides a doormat is letting you down, then I mean exactly that.

ARTHUR (*turning on the charm full voltage*). Don't say that, Molly, even as a joke. You know how much you mean to me.

MOLLY. I'm beginning to find out how much I mean. I'm not going to understudy just to save you money. I want the part.

ARTHUR (*his hand under her chin*). Molly, dear, please, for me, understudy Mrs. Cratchit.

MOLLY (*brushing his hand away, stepping back*). Arthur, no, not this time.

ARTHUR (*his voice hardening*). All right, then I'll get someone else.

MOLLY. Ohhhh?

ARTHUR. You're going to understudy Mrs. Cratchit or you can find another job.

(He turns and walks out. Blackout.)

SCENE 2

(Backstage at the Opera House in Syracuse. There's a bare bulb hanging down at stage C, and one or two flats are leaned against the back wall. As the cast come on they car-

ry make-up kits or overnight bags. SHEILA enters, followed by DOROTHY.)

SHEILA (*coming on*). So this is the old Opera House.

DOROTHY (*following SHEILA on; she looks around, then out*). It's big. What does it hold, Sheila? Do you know?

SHEILA. Twelve hundred.

DOROTHY. Where are the dressing rooms?

SHEILA. Upstairs, I think.

(FREDDIE comes swinging on, full of high spirits.)

FREDDIE. Well! Well! Look who's here.

DOROTHY. Hello, Freddie!

FREDDIE. What a train ride! That car must have been a hold-over from the Civil War.

DOROTHY. Freddie, weren't you going to drive?

FREDDIE. Dorothy, my car is in the garage in New York. Tight-fisted Felton wouldn't give me the money for the fare, so I made him buy the railroad ticket, if that's the way he's going to be. (*Mimicking Arthur Felton.*) "The contract, Mr. Lowe, says I have to buy a coach railway ticket; it doesn't say anything about gas and oil money." (*Shaking his head.*) I never heard of anyone else kicking up a fuss. If I hadn't had such a punk year, I wouldn't be here.

SHEILA. Oh, there's Mr. Harvey. Over here, Mr. Harvey.

(HARVEY enters R)

HARVEY. I'm not late, am I?

SHEILA. We just got here. And Mr. Felton has called a rehearsal, this morning. He said he wants to make changes.

FREDDIE. In the interest of economy, I bet. Do you know our illustrious company?

HARVEY. No. I'm Richard Harvey. I'm playing Cratchit.

FREDDIE. The lady opposite, wearing the expensive fur coat, is Dorothy Dean. She's playing Mrs. Cratchit! *(He laughs.)*

DOROTHY. You'll get used to him, Mr. Harvey.

HARVEY. Call me "Dick," please.

FREDDIE. Sheila is our stage manager. She also plays Ellen. *(Nasal and affected.)* "Ebenezer Scrooge's former love." And I play Mr. Cheerly, and Sam, not forgetting the Ghost of Christmas Present. How's that for versatility? Three parts for one salary, minimum.

(A telephone rings offstage, R.)

HARVEY. I'll get it. My wife's expecting and.

SHEILA *(cutting in)*. I'll do it, Dick. I'm stage manager. Nice to meet you. *(She exits R.)*

FREDDIE. Sheila is nice. She confuses easily, but nice. Where's Molly?

DOROTHY. I don't know. Something's wrong. Do you think she and Arthur had a fight?

FREDDIE. High time. Why is she so crazy about the old buzzard?

DOROTHY. Don't be cruel.

FREDDIE. He treats her like a dog. *(Playing the part of Scrooge.)* "Folks say I'm a wrenching, grasping, clutching old miser." *(In a normal voice.)* As our dear departed Mr. Dickens put it.

DOROTHY. He's frightfully good in the part.

FREDDIE. Of course! An ideal bit of casting. He just acts natural! *(He roars with laughter.)*

HARVEY. He struck me as being quite pleasant at the audition.

FREDDIE. He turns the charm on and off, like a tap. But wait until you talk money—then you meet the real Arthur Felton.