

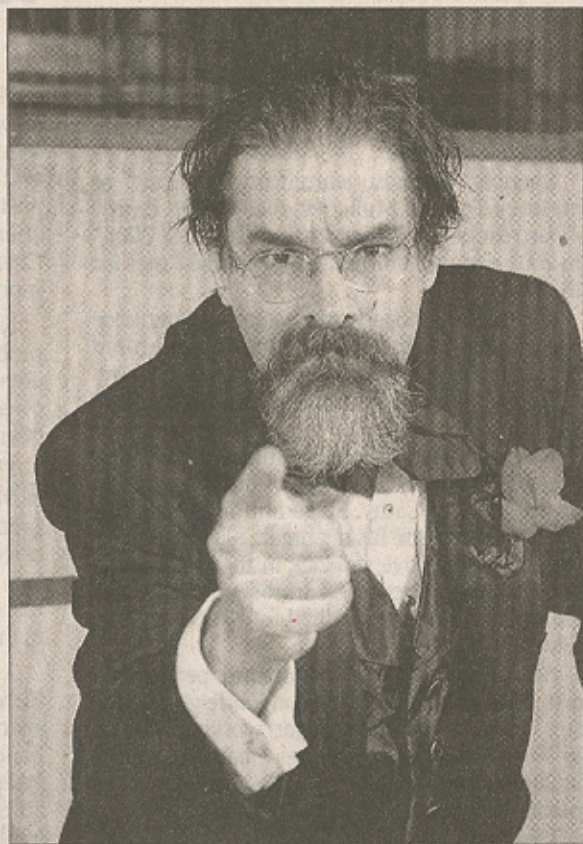
One-man 'Christmas Carol' is a revelation

By **BOB HICKS**
THE OREGONIAN

A funny thing happened on the way to America's umpteenth-thousandth annual production of "A Christmas Carol": Theater companies got so tired of doing it that it began to disappear from the December landscape.

Oh, a fair number of community theaters still pull it out, and the odd professional troupe here and there. But these days, on the United States' professional stages, we're much more likely to see the deliberately *not* Dickens show: "Owen Meany's Christmas Pageant" at Artists Repertory Theatre, "This Wonderful Life" at Portland Center Stage, musical-cabaret concoctions all over the place, dark visions of comic chaos such as "Judy's Scary Little Christmas" and Alan Ayckbourn's "Season's Greetings."

It was the realization that I hadn't actually seen a stage production of Charles Dickens' Christmas tale in several years that drew me to The Old Church, where Portland actor Thom Bray was doing the whole thing by himself, impersonating Dickens giving one of his famous 19th-century barnstorming lecture-



Thom Bray portrays Charles Dickens in his days as a touring lecturer in "A Christmas Carol," a production at The Old Church.

performances of his redemptive ghost story. Helping out the illusion considerably, in addition to Bray's waistcoat and Dickensian bush of beard, was the venerable setting of the 1883 church itself, with its gaily painted pipe organ rising toward the ceiling and the well-worn

wood of its dais, where Bray moved easily between a lectern and a simple table.

Otherwise, everything depended on Bray's flexible baritone voice and the way it wrapped around Dickens' words. No stage fog or spooky sound effects. No ghostly apparitions

floating down from the fly space or up from a trap door. No street-scene crowds or wooden crutches. Just a room, a text, a voice and the audience's imagination.

It's a big load to put on a solo performer, and I confess that in the more than hour-and-a-half telling of the tale, my mind wandered.

But not often, and never for long. Because in his straightforward yet highly accomplished performance, Bray rediscovers the Victorian soul of this Christmas perennial. The secret of his success is his vocal precision, which allows him to distinguish among multiple characters, sweep into dramatic moments and emphasize the dry wit and unembarrassed sentiment of Dickens' rhythms and writing style.

Well, there is Bray's economical but effective body language, too. When, at the end, old Scrooge proclaims the sudden wondrous lightness of his soul, Bray flaps and flounders and takes on a look of such rapt unfettered foolishness that you are utterly convinced that here is a soul redeemed.

The promise of redemption, which after all is at the heart of the Christmas story, is an uncomfortable

topic for a lot of people these days: We live in darker, more ironic, less believing times. At least in its more rampant forms, we don't trust faith: With our young century's holy wars both metaphorical and actual, belief has been tried and found wanting.

Yet in this most famous of his stories Dickens dove unabashedly into the nature and fulfillment of belief (even if Scrooge had to be scared into it), viewing it as a positive force that can inspire generosity of spirit and change the way we live our lives. That's become an old-fashioned message, and maybe that's why the rain forest of "Christmas Carols" on the modern stage has turned into something like a clear cut.

And yet, Bray reminds us that this is a story with teeth, with a good deal of humor but also a clear and sometimes frightening vision of right and wrong, and with an embrace of sentiment as a natural aspect of a whole and well-contemplated world view. It's not a bad place to land on a cold December day.

Final performances 10:30 a.m. and 2 p.m. Thursday, and 10:30 a.m. Friday. The Old Church, 1422 S.W. 11th Ave.; \$8-\$20, 1-800-838-3006 or www.pdxchristmas.com.