

# BLITHE SPIRITS

“...Clive Donner’s lavish version of *A Christmas Carol* is Dickens read by flashes of lightning, a kind of rainbow of death...”

MY HEART SANK ON HEARING THAT George C. Scott would play the part of Scrooge in yet another rendition of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (December 17; 8 P.M.; CBS). Surely he would overact. He has been overacting ever since *Patton*, rattling the rafters with his growl whether he found himself on television as the beast in *Beauty and the Beast* or on Broadway, implausibly, in a revival of Noël Coward’s *Present Laughter* that was about as funny as Doris Lessing. And Dickens brings out the worst in actors, anyway; they tend to fill up the blank spaces in his characters by behaving with a sort of Russian excess, as though the emotions were a Volga and they were rowing against the current.

I was wrong. This sometimes happens. I try not to think about it. As Scrooge, Scott is wonderful. His is not only a Scrooge for our time—Reagan and Thatcher come to mind—but it renders obsolete all the other Scrooges the movies and television have evoked: the pinched miser, the heartless money changer, the capitalist piglet, and so on.

Scott’s Scrooge is expansive and bulky. His years in the warehouse and the countinghouse and on the stock exchange have not diminished him; they have merely left the bulk with nothing to do but calculate. He is, moreover, intelligent. If he drives a hard bargain before he sells his corn, and refuses to subscribe to a relief fund for the poor, and otherwise snorts at the do-gooders and the bleeding hearts, well, why not? He has paid his taxes. He is rather a Hobbesian and takes a dim view of life itself.

And he smiles. It is a smile at once sad and wicked. It flicks up at the corners of the mouth on the famous Scott face that looks sometimes like a walrus and sometimes like a toad and sometimes like Mount Rushmore. It is a smile that appreciates its own black ironies, inside the big whiskered head. The face is a map of his unhappy past—he failed to marry, the sister he loved is dead—and the smile is a critical commentary: Little do they know. And the voice, while still raspy, nevertheless clips its diction. Although the rest of the cast is British, Scott does not affect an accent. Instead, he hurries his words;



**Great Scott:** A Scrooge at once sad and wicked, with a smile of black irony.

they have their marching orders; time is money. You will not notice that Scott is an American; you will be too busy noticing that he is not a cliché.

Altogether, it is a masterly performance. Scott’s Scrooge is more complicated than the Scrooge in Dickens. (This doesn’t bother me. *A Christmas Carol* is not exactly a sacred text in the Western canon. Other small liberties have been taken with it by the screenwriter, Roger O. Hirson, and they don’t bother me, either. They tend to punch up a tale that by now is as tired as Scrooge was on the eve of his afflatus. Hirson even adds some jokes. Because they are good jokes, they wouldn’t have bothered Dickens.) Such a Scrooge, however, puts the rest of the cast at a disadvantage. They spend most of their time being good, and we spend most of our time watching Scott.

I particularly liked Edward Woodward as the Ghost of Christmas Present. (You may remember him from *Breaker Morant*.) Huge, bearded, with a mad gleam in his eye, he is less a phantasm than he is a bully; he menaces Scrooge. Roger Rees as Scrooge’s nephew, Fred, is also fine, and he should be, especially in anything by Dickens; he was the

memorable Nicholas in the memorable *Nicholas Nickleby*. Nigel Davenport has a bit part as Scrooge’s father, which he plays to a thin-lipped perfection: Off to the blacking factory, he seems to be saying to his wretched son with every muscle in his frozen face.

The Cratchits are a problem. The Cratchits have always been a problem. They are so simperingly supergoody, so nobly poor, so insufferably saintly, so nuclear-familial, that one wants to send them a rat instead of a turkey. And Tiny Tim is the most annoying one among them. By the third go-around of “God bless us every one,” I want to kick his crutch. (Then again, I wanted to snuff out Little Nell with a big pillow. Dickens so sentimentalized children in his fiction that it comes as no surprise to learn that in real life he was a rotten father.) Six-year-old Anthony Walters does his blond-waif-cute best to make the tot tolerable; one longs for Dennis the Menace. Only Susannah York as Mrs. Cratchit has some spunk and a nodding acquaintance with mean thoughts.

The production is not mean; it is lavish. And this is odd. I think of Dickens in black and white, on squalid London streets. The poor obsessed him, al-

though he usually managed to solve their problems with the timely and unlikely help of a rich benefactor, thus neatly finessing questions of political reform. We are splashed here with livid color, and the camera spends a lot of its time looking at expensive furniture, old wine cellars, marble columns, trussed geese, top hats, and tubas. And yet the poverty comes across; the social point is made, more emphatically than in any other version of *A Christmas Carol* I have seen. The color somehow enhances the wound. We see, as if for the first time, the ragpickers and the potato stealers and those terrible (abstract) children that so haunted Dickens: Ignorance and Want. We are made cold and hungry, even as the eye feasts.

Director Clive Donner—*The Caretaker*, *Nothing but the Best*, *What's New, Pussycat?*—is equally adept at the necessary "dreadful apparitions": Marley's ghost, complete with chains; the black specter of Christmas Future, silent, hooded, with a skeletal claw for a hand; a city of locks and bolts and banshee shrieks and trundling coffins. This is Dickens read by flashes of lightning, a kind of rainbow of death.

I should say that a sensitive young person watching *A Christmas Carol* on my videocassette recorder worried that the apparitions might be too frightening for small children. Maybe I'm insensitive, but I think not. These are the same children who watch *Halloween 14 1/2* on HBO, *Midnight Blue* on Channel J, the nightly network action-adventure on which there is the inevitable rape, not to mention the nightly news. (I think television is scary in subtler ways. We can't, for instance, get through an hour-long crime drama without somebody's picking a lock and somebody's cutting somebody else's brake cables so a car can hurtle down a mountain. In our homes and in our cars, there is no privacy and no security.) Dickens, at his best and worst, is innocent. Besides, there's Great Scott.

**ABOUT LENA HORNE—Lena Horne: The Lady and Her Music** (December 7; 9 P.M.; PBS)—I must admit a prejudice. I think she is the most beautiful woman in the world except for my wife. That she is a grandmother, that she is, as we speak, 67 years old, that she can still sing up a storm while moving around like a panther, is astounding. And, on the political scene, she has not sold out to the yuppies.

*The Lady and Her Music* is essentially a taping of her 1981 one-woman Broadway show. I was there, too, and on television she is even better, because we are nearer to those haughty cheekbones, those knowing eyes, that wrist action: Hands that were hummingbirds or handkerchiefs suddenly turn into talons

or fists. From the balcony, we knew that she was just as funny and intelligent as she was sexy; on the screen, this knowledge is confirmed close up, and something else is added. She has a steely left that's missing from most of the standards she sings. Thinking about Maud Gonne, William Butler Yeats wrote of "beauty like a tightened bow." That's Lena Horne; she is just about to loose an arrow—maybe to the heart, maybe to the brain.

Of course, she sings gospel and jazz as well as the standards. And, as on Broadway, she sings both versions of "Stormy Weather." (The first, about halfway through these 90 minutes, is Las Vegas smooth, a carefully modulated nightclub act. The second, at the end, tears down the house and would frighten George C. Scott.) But most of the songs are the usual stuff of pop-pulp unrequited love. Mysteriously, Lena Horne manages to transform pretty tunes and banal lyrics into something that is both erotic and political, a fretting of raw edges.

The patter helps. Ordinarily, I am impatient with the patter between songs by entertainers whose voices are more interesting than their minds. I want, say, Liza Minnelli and Shirley MacLaine to shut up and sing or dance. But when Lena Horne patters, I listen. She is telling us about a journey from the chorus line at the Cotton Club in 1933 to an MGM contract that required her to do Hollywood "specialty numbers"—that is, songs that could be snipped from the movie if southern audiences decided they didn't want to watch a "Nigra"—to Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil-rights movement. She didn't used to talk so black on the old Judy Garland television show. I'm glad she can now.

**In brief:** ON DECEMBER 8, RINGO STARR will be the "guest host"—have you ever thought about the internal contradictions of this phrase?—on **Saturday Night Live** (NBC; 11:50 P.M.). On December 15, Eddie Murphy will be host guest. We've already heard from Jesse Jackson, whose serenade to a portrait of Jeane Kirkpatrick was hilarious, but that's not the point. If we can't count on the local talent—Billy Crystal, Mary Gross, Jim Belushi, Rich Hall, Julia Louis-Dreyfus—to carry this show, why should we care about it? Once upon a time, *SNL* was almost as shocking as *That Was the Week That Was*: that is, somebody was going to surprise us with something that might be important at least twice a program. Now simultaneously vulgar and timid, it startles us for two minutes every three weeks. All the celebrity snuggling in the Judeo-Christian world isn't a substitute for the forked tongue of the subversive comedian unleashed and hissing. ■