

How To Guide
for a
Dramatic Reading of Charles Dickens'
A Christmas Carol

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BACKGROUND OF "A CHRISTMAS CAROL"

BY CHARLES DICKENS

The story was written in 1843 and apparently written very quickly; Dickens was seized with the idea and completed the little book in just under six weeks. He interrupted the writing of *Martin Chuzzlewit* to do it.

Dickens got the idea for the story after visiting the northern industrial town of Manchester, England. He made a speech there about the necessity of educating very poor children. Dickens wrote the book because he needed money, but he chose the theme as a response to the notorious poverty of the "hungry forties". A week after publication the Carol had sold an astounding 6000 copies.

"A Christmas Carol" was Dickens' favourite novel, and ten years later he began presenting it in public readings all over Britain, in Paris, and in the United States. Initially, his readings benefitted charities, mostly in aid of education or hospitals. After a few years of sold-out houses, he went professional and began to tour the readings. He was so successful that his rival William Thackeray said Dickens could have earned 20,000 pounds a year if he had gone on the stage. No small sum in those days!

His first public reading of "A Christmas Carol" took three hours. Over time, Dickens reduced it to about 80 minutes.

It was said that particularly receptive audiences would stimulate Dickens to new effects, both histrionic and verbal. The "London Leader" wrote of his first performance in 1857, "We have rarely witnessed or shared an evening of such genuine enjoyment, never before remember to have seen a crowded assembly of three thousand people hanging for upwards of two hours on the lips of a single reader...every fragment of the dialogue was treated dramatically. At the close there was an outburst, not so much of applause as of downright hurraing, from every part of the hall."

THE PRODUCTION INGREDIENTS

A Venue...

Most readings are held in churches because the ambiance is terrific, the seating capacity is usually appropriate and the rental (if any) is modest.

Others are held in local theatres, community centres and high school auditoriums.

Things to consider when selecting the venue:

- Wheelchair accessibility
- Washroom facilities
- Ticket handling
- Reception capability
- Parking

Readers...

You need **five or six** competent, enthusiastic readers who will be energized by a live audience. Go for a mix of men and women, and assign the roles appropriately.

Suggestions:

- Make sure strong readers are chosen especially for the first and last staves.
- I think a man is best suited to do the fourth stave due to its comic references to attractive young women.
- NOTE: the fourth stave can also be split. The second half of that read could begin at the shift from the Cratchits to Scrooge's nephew's house, with the line, "It was a great surprise to Scrooge, as this scene vanished, to hear a hearty laugh." In this case you would need six readers.
- Choose readers who are easy to understand, and entertaining. Those who normally speak in a monotone will find it difficult to inject the inflections required to hold an audience captive.
- **DO NOT** let any readers use a fake English accent; it is unnecessary and inappropriate. The audience will be much more comfortable with a reader using their natural accent.

Host....

The host is an integral component of the reading. Choose someone who can engage the audience, talk about the reading and the charity being supported, introduce the readers and the choir and generally add something extra to the proceedings...but be able to be BRIEF in the introduction and closing remarks.

PRODUCTION INGREDIENTS #2

Choir...

The choir is a group in good voice that can provide about 10 selections of music. Some productions have used other musical performers, such as string quartets, vocal groups, brass bands, pianists, or soloists. I have found that a choir works best, offers the range of music needed to accompany the reading, and can be joined by the audience for a number or two.

Sound...

A microphone for the host and readers is VERY important, but not necessary for the choir. Churches, and most rooms in general, can have odd acoustics. No matter how strong the reader, this script is tricky at times and it's important that each word be heard.

I suggest that you recruit a volunteer who is familiar with microphone set-up, placement and instruction, as not everyone is used to reading with them. However, if no one is available to help, here is a quick overview of solid microphone technique for readings:

- Place the microphone approximately six inches away from the reader's mouth (try not to obscure the audience's view of their face).
- If they have never used a microphone before, take time during the rehearsals to test various positions and find what works best for them.
- At the time of the reading, they should not feel inhibited about adjusting the microphone for their comfort. The audience will wait, and it actually tends to focus their attention.
- Once the microphone is in place, the reader should remain "on mic", which means not moving more than six inches away from it. If they sway back-and-forth or side-to-side too much, words will be lost as the microphone will not be able to pick up their voice.
- It is easiest for readers to stand up. Though a comfy chair may look cozy, sitting sunk into a deep armchair impedes breathing and delivery.

Lighting...

The lighting is also a VERY important part of the production. It provides the cues for the readers and the choir. It also creates a dramatic setting for the evening, allowing the audience to focus exclusively on the reader and choir. Try for a "sparkling" effect (clear & bright but leaving all else in blackness).

A spotlight is required for the host/reader, with special lighting for the choir as well. Expertise can often be borrowed from local cable television, theatre companies, or schools. Avoid directing a spotlight at the reader's face. It can be blinding (And that can make elegant exits tough!).

PRODUCTION PLANNING

The Venue...

Get an early start, as venues are hard to come by during the busy Christmas season. Getting a good rental price, or finding a sponsor to underwrite the cost can take time. Don't be afraid to ask for the venue to be donated, as you are producing the reading as a charitable event.

The Host...

Choose someone with profile, a person who is known and liked in the community (see separate page of instructions for the host).

The Readers...

Line up the readers and host as soon as you have a venue and date set. Remind them of the date again in September. As of 2009, CBC will not be underwriting the costs of travel for any CBC personalities you may choose to invite to participate as a reader. Any costs will have to be borne by the readers or the host organization.

The Choir...

If you are planning to involve a choir, they should also be lined up ASAP. Choirs are often booked early (often by April) for the following Christmas season and coordinating their availability with that of the venue can be tricky.

The Tickets...

Price the tickets to what your community can support. I figure if someone is willing to pay \$10 for an evening at the movies, they should be willing to pay that for a great story! That being said, in the past, tickets have been priced anywhere from \$5 to \$25 dollars.

Have the tickets available for sale one month before the event. Each ticket should include the name, place, date and time. We have found something that fits in a wallet is the best size.

Regarding ticket selling locations, have the charity agree to list their phone number in all promotions of the reading and find out if they handle credit cards, to take reservations. Approach local businesses where tickets are normally sold, such as bookstores and record shops. Hand out blocks of tickets to the readers and choir members to sell. Make sure you number the tickets and keep track of who has what!

PRODUCTION PLANNING #2

The Poster...

Posters must be ready for distribution when the tickets go on sale. Assign a team to help distribute them, including choir members and volunteers at the charity.

Some placement suggestions:

- Inside the venue and around the neighbouring area.
- Libraries
- Community centres
- Grocery stores
- Bookstores, record shops and other locations that feature Christmas goods.
- The Post Office

For the sake of continuity, it's suggested that you use the same artwork for both your poster and programme design. Don't forget - date, time, venue, price and phone number for tickets. You also should include the names of the readers and any sponsors involved (sometimes logo too).

The Programme...

Is for the audience attending the reading and typically include the following elements:

- The order of the program itself, including the musical selections and readers.
- A description of the charity.
- A brief history of the readings and the national scope of the effort.
- Brief biographies of the readers and host.
- Invitation to the reception.
- Thank-you's to volunteers and community sponsors

The programme should be ready approximately two weeks before the show. Notify the charity that they can include flyers about their work in the programme.

PRODUCTION PLANNING #3

The Reception...

Line up donations of foodstuffs, hot cider and cookies.

The Volunteers...

You will need....

- People to form a production committee (coordinator – designer – sound – lighting – media)
- People to distribute posters
- People to sell tickets, both prior to and at the time of the reading
- Ushers to hand out programs and help people to their seats. We suggest that you ensure that the ushers are aware of all fire exits and washrooms and that at least one is familiar with CPR.
- Servers and cleaner-uppers for the reception

The Budget...

Each community finds its own way to organize this reading, and below are some financial costs to consider. **It can't be emphasized enough that you should attempt to get services donated, seeing as the event is for a charity.** You may not get everything for free, but often you'll receive discounted prices, and at least you tried.

- Printing: tickets, posters, programmes
- Advertising: an ad in the local paper
- Venue Rental: this varies from place to place (use of a church is often free)
- Sound: if the venue does not have a sound system, you may have to rent equipment
- Lighting: hiring a lighting technician, plus equipment
- Reception: cider and cookies, other foodstuff
- **Guest Reader: if you have a guest reader coming from a distance, you should provide lodging and meals during his/her stay and possibly travel costs as there are volunteering their time and talent.**

DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT

The following provides a quick chronology of the reading itself, from beginning to end. This is a general guide and you may want to customize your reading based on the venue, audience and presenters involved.

FIRST HALF

- House lights come down; the host comes out to the lectern.
- Some productions begin with the host inviting the audience to join the choir in singing a carol.
- After a welcome and introduction of the players by the host (see notes for host – page 9) lights go down, and spotlights come up on the choir, which performs its first piece.
- Lights cross fade down on the choir and up on the first reader. The reader moves into position as the choir ends its piece.
- The reader should be in a bright beam of light surrounded by darkness.
- When the reader finishes, the lights cross fade down on the reader and up on the choir.
- This system is repeated for the next two readings and music.

BRIEF INTERMISSION

- Only ten minutes, enough time for a stretch break. If the host actually mentions the washroom facilities at this point, the intermission will take LONGER than ten minutes! Some productions take the break by inviting the audience to stand and sing a couple of carols. It's one way of controlling the length of the break. Recently, several readings have dropped the intermission to try to shorten the length of the production. The success of this depends on the layout of the venue. If people have to come to the front to find a bathroom, that is very distracting for the rest of the audience, but if they can unobtrusively exit, it can work. It seems most people go out during the music.

SECOND HALF

- House lights down, stage lights full.
- Choir and Readers return.
- Full light on choir, who perform the first piece of the second half.
- Cross fade of lights to fourth reader.
- Music.
- Fifth reader.
- Most audiences will burst into spontaneous applause at the words "God Bless Us Everyone," but even if it is clear in the program that the choir has one more piece, accommodate this if it happens.
- Again, some productions have the audience join the choir for a carol.
- The host returns to the podium, thanks each reader, who together take a bow, and the choir, then invites the audience to another area for refreshments and a chance to meet the performers.

CHOOSING THE MUSIC

****This Is Important****

Appropriate music sets the tone for the reading and helps to heighten the experience for everyone involved. Choosing songs that relate to the story line, taking into consideration pacing and tempo, makes sense.

English Christmas choral music works well, although the selection needn't be limited to such. Seven to ten pieces are needed in all. Some productions gather all of the performers on stage at the end to sing with the audience, "We Wish You A Merry Christmas".

MUSIC TO BEGIN PART ONE

One piece to set the tone. A quiet selection, possibly in a minor key; it precedes the first reading, a description of Scrooge, Marley's death, the nephew's visit and the alms men.

AFTER THE FIRST STAVE

A minor key song is very good here, not rousing - Marley's ghost is about to visit Scrooge.

AFTER THE SECOND STAVE

The mood can be somewhat upbeat - the Ghost of Christmas Past will look at Scrooge's happier times.

AFTER THE THIRD STAVE

Same as above.

*****INTERMISSION*****

MUSIC TO BEGIN PART TWO

The music should be lively - Scrooge is about to witness the Cratchit family Christmas and his nephew's party, with the Ghost of Christmas Present.

*If you split the fourth stave, you may or may not insert music – again, it should be a lively piece.

AFTER THE FOURTH STAVE

Back to a minor, "eerie" sound here - the Ghost of Christmas Future reveals to Scrooge what's going to become of him if he doesn't change his ways.

AFTER THE FIFTH STAVE

Usually something upbeat.

TO FINISH

Often a group sing, with the host inviting the audience to join in.

NOTES FOR THE HOST

(Give a copy of this to your host)

The host sets the tone for the entire evening. He or she will be BRIEF imparting a sense of occasion and highlighting the important work being done in the community by the charity and reading organizers.

The audience is interested to learn how Dickens developed 'A Christmas Carol' as a reading and how they are being performed right across the country. This, plus any other anecdotal information related to the particular reading, its organizers, and so on, can serve as an introduction to the event.

Generally, the host introduces a representative from the charity to say a few words about its mandate. The host will also perform "housekeeping" duties, outlining the format of the reading and procedural etiquette (for example, mentioning that applause should be held until the conclusion of parts one and two). They will also mention that there is a short intermission, and that everyone is welcome to join the readers for refreshments at the end of the reading.

The host is responsible for acknowledging the organizers and volunteers, the sponsors and special invited guests.

The host then briefly introduces each reader. Have each reader come on stage as they are introduced. (NOTE: Avoid introducing each reader and each choir piece as they happen. Let it unfold. The information is all in the programme anyway!)

In some productions, after the choir sings the last song to conclude the reading, the host then asks the audience to join in a group rendition of a carol.

To conclude, after the final musical selection, the host will ask the readers and choir/musicians to take a bow. Introduce each reader by name, they can stand and when all are named, take a bow together. Finish by inviting the audience to the reception, or thank them for coming.

The host has an important job. Make sure he or she has all the information they need and ask them to be BRIEF. The audience is eager to get to the entertainment.

***Did I mention that the host's role at the beginning of the reading should be brief...less than 15 minutes. It should engage the audience's attention, not make them impatient.

NOTES ON THE SCRIPT

(pass a copy of this page and the appropriate notes to each reader)

IN GENERAL

The readers can't put off familiarity with their script until the last minute. As the producer, you are responsible for selecting which stave each reader performs. You are also responsible for overseeing the delivery of the stave to the reader. When you distribute the script, also include a photocopy of the notes from this guide for that stave. Each reader should read their part out loud at least **three** times before the actual performance.

It goes without saying, the words of this story are important. A key element for a successful read is pacing. Because some of the words are unfamiliar to our everyday speech, the reader must take care not to rush their delivery. It also helps if they sound as if they use the words every day of their life. Again, the only way to become familiar with the words is to read the script out loud at least three times.

Each stave contains many textures and tones for the reader to work with. This is not dry, nor heavy, nor humourless, nor too serious; it is a combination of each and more. It is a lot of FUN once you are confident with it. Advise your readers to use their hands and bodies, and to make facial expressions. It helps the audience immeasurably. Give them time to laugh!

Finally, trust the story to unfold naturally and pull the audience into its web. Again, there's no need for use a fake English accent; it is unnecessary and inappropriate. The audience will be much more comfortable with a reader using his or her natural accent.

***Remember, this is a performance. It is, in Dickens' own words, a 'dramatic reading', so don't be afraid to use your face and your hands. Look at the audience. Know the script so well that you are able to catch their eyes when you look up every now and then.**

NOTES ON THE SCRIPT

STAVE ONE

The reading of this stave sets the tone of the story for the audience and leads the way for the other readers in terms of energy and intrigue. This stave has far more humour in it than most people expect. Leave room for the audience to react. Milk the bits about:

- Cratchit warming himself at the candle (rub your hands near an imaginary candle).
- Being buried with a stake of holly through the heart.
- Scrooge's comments on marrying for love.
- His response to the gentlemen asking for help for the poor, on wanting to be anonymous.
- Point to the ground ("Hell") when Scrooge says to his nephew that "he would see him in that extremity first".

tacitly = tassitly (without having to say something)

Some of the lines are very long. Just take your time, pause at the commas. A note about the humour - be prepared to pause long enough for the audience to laugh out loud.

NOTES ON THE SCRIPT

STAVE TWO

This section can be read in a spooky manner. And keep in mind that Scrooge is a nuts and bolts kind of guy, with no regard for something he can't feel and hold. But remember, there are some funny bits too, as these quotes illustrate:

- "A bad lobster in a dark cellar"
- "Darkness is cheap"
- "His dressing gown, which was hanging up in a suspicious attitude against the wall"
- "That Marley had no bowels..."
- "An undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato..."
- "There's more of gravy than of grave about you."
- "Is that the chance and hope you mentioned, Jacob? I think I'd rather not."

NOTES ON THE SCRIPT

STAVE THREE

A lively stave that is quite a contrast to the two preceding it. The challenge for the reader is to bring the words and descriptions to life, to make them accessible.

- Take your time with the sentence: "...the church-clock tolled, a deep...dull...hollow... melancholy...one. (I have heard some say "One"! with a ringing tone.)
- If you go slowly through the description of the Ghost, it makes it easier to picture it.
- Don't miss the humour in Fezziwig laughing all over himself from his shoes to his organ of benevolence... (his heart)
- Poor Dick. Dear dear. Not said so much with pity for Dick, but sadness for time passed.
- The line "The fiddler tuning like 'fifty stomach-aches'" usually gets a good laugh.
- This next bit is a description of a group dance:
Partners are ranged across from each other in two long rows. Top couple is the first couple...they dance down the aisle to the end, making a new "top" couple. Or at least that's the way it's supposed to be, but not in Fezziwig's parlour! Don't rush. It makes it hard for the audience to picture the scene.
- The fiddler plunging his hot face into a pot of porter is another wonderful image the audience enjoys.
- The bit about Fezziwig who "cut so deftly, that he appeared to wink with his legs" is a description of Fezziwig leaping up and scissor kicking with his legs. I saw one reader use his hands to make the picture clearer.

"Welch" pronounced Welsh.

"Neegus" pronounced (Nee-gus) - is a hot sweetened wine and water.

"Cold Boiled" is ham

"Sir Roger de Coverley" is another group dance. (KUV-er-lee)

NOTES ON THE SCRIPT

STAVE FOUR

The longest stave in terms of pages, this passage also contains many shifts of mood and location. Fear not about its length, the story carries itself beautifully. Don't rush it!

- Sucking pigs...if you feel more comfortable, say "suckling pigs".
- In Scrooge's discussion with this ghost, the ghost asks if he has walked forth with his elder brothers – he is referring to other Christmases in Scrooge's past. "More than 1800" refers to the number of Christmases since Christ's birth. The story was written in 1843.
- Scrooge, peeking around the door, is one of those images you can milk. Pretend to raise the "glowing torch" high as Scrooge appears.
- Also Scrooge's reaction to the number of members in the ghost's family; a tremendous family to provide for!
- In the description of Bob Cratchit's home, a "bob" is a shilling in old English money. (twenty shillings to a pound)
- Bob wears a "comforter"... a long scarf.
- People often used a local bakehouse to cook the goose as their stoves had little capability.
- In the description of the pudding, "bedight" is a real word, not a misspelling. It means garlanded.
- The audience usually likes Bob's comment that the pudding is the greatest success achieved by Mrs. Cratchit since their wedding.
- Be careful not to make light of the "family display of glass", it is used to illustrate their poverty.
- At the nephew's party, a "Glee or a Catch", translates as a round or a little song.
- "Forfeits" is a game; articles are forfeited and can be redeemed only by performing some crazy feat.

Twopence is pronounced "tuppence"

NOTES ON THE SCRIPT

PART FIVE

This is the great "finger" ghost. As you read, "It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand", you can slowly raise your hand to point ahead.

- It takes Scrooge quite a while to realize that the scenes this ghost presents are in fact about him in the future, not someone else.
- “Change” (Exchange) is the equivalent of our stock market, the place where businessmen met to buy and sell.
- “Offal” is garbage
- The scene between the undertaker, the cleaning lady, and the laundress with the owner of the pawnbrokers is somewhat dense. Take your time.
- Mrs. Dilber seems to be a simpering sort, her only characteristic being that she agrees with whatever is being said.
- In the Joe and the bed-curtains scene...emphasize blankets in “His blankets!?” Joe can’t believe the laundress pulled them off the dead man’s body.
- The Cratchit family scene; Tiny Tim has died, and the rest of the family is sitting together, waiting for Bob to return (from arranging Tiny Tim’s funeral). Mrs. Cratchit claims that the colour of the stuff she is working on hurts her eyes. The colour, unspecified, is black. She is sewing Tiny Tim's funeral suit. So, when you read, "The colour? Ah, poor Tiny Tim!", take your time and allow the audience to realize what is happening along with you.
- Bob Cratchit has just returned from visiting the site where Tiny Tim will be buried, and Sunday is to be the day.
- The scene of the little boy who Scrooge wants to send for the turkey, says "WALK-er!" at one point. The word refers to a politician of the day who was not to be trusted.
- “Smoking bishop”, mulled and spiced port.
- Don’t be afraid to show emotion at Bob Cratchit’s line, “My little child, my little, little child.”

ADVERTISING, PUBLICITY AND PROMOTION

You will find on the website graphic images that can be used for your posters, flyers, programmes, and print advertising.

ADVERTISING

Although most reading budgets cannot afford “advertising,” it is important to keep the idea in mind while organizing your production. Check the costs of your local papers and radio stations to decide if it is worth placing an ad.

There are, however, sources of “advertisement” that you don’t have to pay for including:

- Ask the venue (especially if it is a church) to include the reading in any events calendar, newsletter, or church bulletin and to have it announced at other events.
- The same goes for the charity as above.
- Many cities, towns, regions, have newsletters, web sites, information lines that promote local events.
- Arrange a ticket giveaway through a radio station and/or newspaper.

MEDIA SPONSORSHIPS

The CBC has sponsored the Christmas Carol readings for more than twelve of the last twenty years. It provided a budget to cover the cost of hiring a seasonal coordinator, the production and distribution of all Carol communications (including this “how to” guide) and the transportation costs related to CBC Radio readers. In 2009, in the 20th year of these readings Judy Maddren and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation are making a gift of these materials to communities all across Canada.

Bring in your own local sponsors. Try to find a local media sponsor, particularly in print. It will possibly secure an advance interview, listings (maybe a free ad), as well as a follow-up article (reporting how much money was raised for your charity). A coffee shop might provide the reception and keep the event front a center with its customers.

PROMOTIONAL PARTNERS

Part of the trick of picking readers is to try to select people who can help out with advertising! Possibilities include your local radio/television station, as well as other local personalities, who may be able to mention your reading on air. Don’t be afraid to push. The worst answer is “No”.

POSTERS AND FLYERS

Print up posters and flyers which the choir, readers, charity volunteers and church members can distribute. Plaster libraries, churches, notice boards - anywhere appropriate.

If any of your performers own or work at local retail outlets, they can often take a stack of these flyers and give them to customers (some are willing to include them in any bags or parcels the customer takes away with them.)

MAILINGS

Be sure to plan early enough that any mailings going to people who support the church (if that is the chosen venue), or charity, will be alerted to buy tickets.

PUBLICITY

Send a short notice to the local media, including:

- Newspapers in your area.
- Television and radio stations (particularly if they have “events calendars” or “public service announcements”). Some stations will play pre-recorded public service announcements about upcoming charitable events. If you have the facilities to do this, first check with the local radio stations and find out if they will use them. If not, write a 15-30 second script about the reading and send it directly to the public service announcement rep (A couple of quick phone calls should give you this information).
- The community access channel on your local cable provider.
- Internet web site event calendar services. It should be noted that many media outlets (print – radio – television) now have on-line magazines supporting their regular services.

In the notice, include the reading, the “expected attendance” (e.g. “a reading to over four hundred people”), the place, time, names of the readers, a contact person ticket price and the name and purpose of the charity. Make sure you note how people can buy tickets, either in advance or on the day of. If you have any well-known personalities, or a prominent choir, note that near the top. Having publicity photographs available, where possible, may also help. Call the media outlets after sending the information.

Your enthusiasm and persistence will pay off!

Offer the newspaper the opportunity to take photographs of a rehearsal. This should take place at least one week before the actual performance to give them time to run the pictures before the event. The papers will usually confirm their attendance at this “photo op,” but some will just drop by at the time given.

One contact person should be assigned for all media relations, as it helps you and the papers to keep communications simple. If this person does not know the answer to a question, they should find out and call back or conference in the appropriate person, but never bounce a member of the media from person to person, voice-mail to voice-mail.

RECEPTION IDEAS

Some productions offer tea and coffee and hot cider as well as an array of cookies. In fact, hot cider is just fine and one kind of cookie too. If you are putting on a bigger affair, offer wine from a local winery (check about licensing for this). A local chef could prepare hors d'oeuvres.

The audience is coming back to meet the readers and have a social time, so the “drink and eats” part is incidental. Many venues have big coffee urns available to heat the cider with some spices. Try to get the goodies donated, plus disposable cups & plates.

A couple of locations have had booksellers at the reception, giving a percentage of the take for the sale of Christmas books to the charity. Another community offered packages of the cookies (a sort of mini-bake sale).

The reception doesn't usually last more than half an hour, but be prepared for a longer visit, especially with the first production.

OTHER ITEMS: ODDS AND ENDS

Keeping it Fresh

The audience will return year after year if you make annual changes in choir (or musicians) and readers. Each reader brings out a new understanding of the story and each choir brings new audience members and different music. People have commented to me that they are intrigued that we change the script year to year, but it is only because each reader brings new light to different sections.

Costumes...

I always preferred formal dress for the readers, host and choir. Glitzy eveningwear (tuxedo for men, gown for women) combined with the lighting, make for a special event feeling.

Some communities have gone all out with costumes of the era. Still others have simply dressed in office wear, or Christmas sweaters.

I strongly recommend dressing up so that the audience is reminded of the sense of occasion the reading presents.

Note: Many readers prefer formal / office dress over costumes. If a guest reader isn't comfortable in a costume, don't force it. Also, arranging for fittings can be difficult.

Program Length...

With a ten-minute intermission and depending on the reading speed of your presenters, the whole production will take approximately two hours and fifteen minutes, give or take 5 minutes.

Intended Audience...

I recommend you target adults. The language is somewhat difficult and most readings take place in churches (pews are hard). I tell people that minimum age is ten and up, as it is difficult to concentrate on the story if a squirmy five-year-old is sitting beside you. It's a lot to ask of young children.

Decorating for the Reading...

It can be very simple...arrange for the **donation** of a few poinsettias, place them at the base of the lectern and in other prime spots. **Borrow** Christmas wreaths and other seasonal ornaments from the church or community hall.

If you have good lighting, and the readers and choir dress up, you don't need a lot. That being said, some locations go all out and decorate with "Dickensian" theme stuff.

MORE ODDS AND ENDS

Dinner Before the Reading...

If you can, gather the readers and main organizers together for supper before the event. A glass of wine and good food helps bring everyone together in a team focus. Many organizers have told me it's a great way to bring everyone aboard. It doesn't need to be fancy.

Most productions start by heading to the venue a few hours before and doing a choreographic run-through and sound-check, followed by supper somewhere nearby (often an organizer's home). It's usually great fun, as many people are meeting for the first time, and then can head to the show feeling relaxed and part of the team.

To Rehearse or Not to Rehearse...

This depends greatly on your readers and your choir. If you have confidence in their abilities and knowledge of the script, a full rehearsal may not be necessary (most should be rehearsing their parts). However, you will need at least one (maybe more) blocking run-through. It will determine where people will sit, when and how to come on stage, what entrances they'll use, when and how to take bows, and where everyone hangs out during the intermission. And that can easily be done in one half hour before dinner on the day of the reading.

I suggest that you run through the blocking of the reading, having everyone read the first five and last five lines of their stave, exiting the stage as though they were finished.

Also, don't forget that you may have offered up to the media an opportunity to attend a rehearsal, so they will need something to photograph.

Performer Placement

As this is primarily audio entertainment, it's good to give the audience something to look at! I recommend you place the readers and the host on the stage. This also gives the readers a better sense of the continuity. I love hearing how each reader milks their parts.

