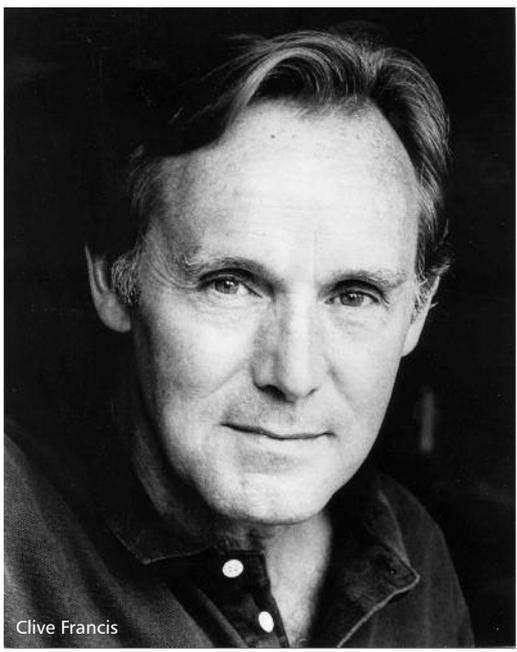


DICKENS OF A TIME

A one-man performance of Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol provides a homely alternative to the usual glitzy panto. Rob Edwards catches up with actor and creator Clive Francis



Clive Francis

I've caught Clive Francis just in time. This year's tour of *A Christmas Carol*, his one-man production now in its 12th year, takes in venues across Ireland before heading for the English stage. Curtain up on the Emerald Isle is only a day away.

"The story is so amazing. I love to keep reviving it," enthuses the 66-year-old actor and caricaturist, whose unique adaptation of the Dickens classic – a homely alternative to the obligatory panto – comes to Guildford for Christmas.

Clive has an enduring fascination with the great Victorian author and philanthropist, the bicentenary of whose birth has been so widely celebrated this year.

"I've tried to remain as loyal as I can to the original, so it's fairly dense," he explains, as though Dickens were a fondly missed colleague. "I even speak from an old lectern very similar to the one Dickens toured with."

The show emerged from a much larger production by the *Royal Shakespeare Company*, which ran from 1994-6, and in which Clive first donned the spiteful nightcap and slippers of Ebenezer Scrooge.

"You can tell how the character is to be played by the name Dickens gave him," he waxes, clearly in his element. "The script gives it to you exactly. Ebenezer Scrooge: it evokes such a strong image of a wizened, cruel, weaselly little man!"

The show is set to grace Guildford's intimate *Mill Studio*, the little sister of the town's beloved *Yvonne Arnaud Theatre*, where *Aladdin* is this year's rather more predictable seasonal fare.

"I've also performed this at the Town Hall in Birmingham, where Dickens did his first ever public reading in 1853. That was a great treat, to follow in his footsteps and perform in such a marvellous place," reflects Clive.

It was in 1966 that Clive made his London stage debut in *There's a Girl in my Soup*, before appearing in the 80s TV series *Yes, Prime Minister*.

On the big screen, he appeared as Joe the Lodger in Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* and co-starred in *Inspector Clouseau* and *Girl Stroke Boy*.

"All the characters come off the page so well"

Until recently, he lived in Hampton, where he played a leading role in the campaign to rejuvenate the once-dilapidated riverside monument *Garrick's Temple to Shakespeare*, built by the great actor-manager David Garrick himself.

"I used to pass it every day and had always wondered what it was, this magnificent

folly," he recalls.

In almost Dickensian philanthropic vein, and with the help of fellow Thespians, Clive raised the funds needed for refurbishment.

His seasonal show, meanwhile, is very well travelled. In 2007, it was featured at the *Théâtre Princesse Grace* in Monte Carlo as part of the British Theatre season. Now plans are under way to take it to the Far East.

"It's always done well against pantos, but I'm not in the business of competing. In America they don't have pantomime, but it's invariably done well there too. I've had really good value from it."

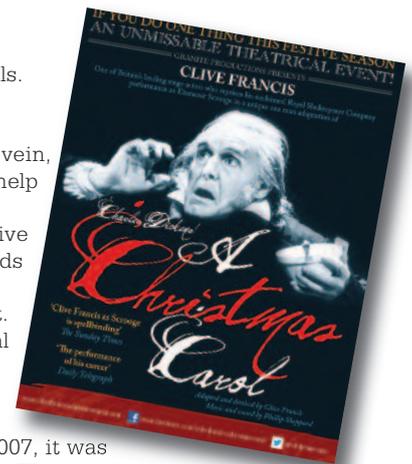
Nor does it end there. "Strangely," chuckles Clive, "Dickens is big in Japan!"

In Dickens, he admits, he has found a kindred spirit. Such superbly embellished characters as Bumble and Miss Havisham fill the caricaturist with delight.

"Dickens was an actor," he explains. "Because of that, all the characters come off the page so well."

"The very first TV I did was *David Copperfield* – my first experience of acting Dickens. And I go back to him time and time again."

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Ashleigh plays Alice Fitzwarren, Dick's love interest, Pudsey at her side. "The bigger the crowd, the more Pudsey performs, so this will be perfect for him," she explained.

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