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A black and white photograph of actor Stephen Hair sitting in a large, high-backed, dark leather chair. He is wearing a dark coat and has his hands clasped in his lap. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a serious expression.

Calgary's Favourite Scrooge

Stephen Hair returns to Theatre Calgary's
A Christmas Carol to reprise his role of
Ebenezer Scrooge for the 15th year

BY LAURA PELLERINE

When we meet at the Kaffa Coffee & Salsa House, the Stephen Hair who showed up wasn't the Stephen Hair I was expecting. Since he first set foot in Calgary after graduating from Queen's University in 1973 when he was 22, Hair has become a much sought after actor in the city's local theatre scene. At Theatre Calgary alone, he's performed in nearly 65 productions, along with numerous shows with Alberta Theatre Projects, Lunchbox Theatre, Stage West, and was the former Artistic Director for five years at Pleiades Theatre (now Vertigo Mystery Theatre). He's won prestigious awards like the Betty Mitchell Outstanding Achievement in Theatre Award, and in 2006 Theatre Calgary created an award for emerging actors named after him. Considering his accomplishments, I was expecting him to be pretentious, have a bit of an inflated head, and to be somewhat narcissistic.

As I waited for him to arrive, I noticed a man walk in with his hands snug inside the pockets of a worn, bomber jacket, wearing faded blue jeans and tortoiseshell glasses. I immediately dismissed him as not being Hair and continued to scan the chalkboard menu. A few seconds later, I heard a voice softly speak my name, "Laura?"

I turned to see who had so politely called me, and came face-to-face with the man I had deemed not my interviewee. Holding his hand out he announced with genuine friendliness, "Hi, I'm Stephen."

So unScrooge-like was the man before me, I had to take a moment to remind myself that yes, this was the man who has played the miserly, grumpy character of Ebenezer Scrooge in Theatre Calgary's production of *A Christmas Carol* since 1993. The same character created by English author Charles Dickens, who coldly refuses alms to the poor and barks at his assistant, Bob Cratchit.

Happily surprised, I tell him the drink's on me, and he orders a black coffee. As we sit and talk about what the show has come to mean to people—what *he's* come to mean to people—his calm demeanour and easy laugh make me feel as if we're two old friends. He tells me that being a part of the public's Christmas tradition is a task he does not take lightly. "It means a lot to people, and that means a lot to me because it's a responsibility that I feel more and more on my shoulders every year," he says. "People get really attached to their Scrooges. I want to be good and different and fresh, and not just do the same thing I did last time."

The show has done very well for Theatre Calgary, which sees an annual average of 24,000 people turn out for the performance. Artistic Director Dennis Garnhum attests to this, "There is a great tradition for families of starting their holiday season with our production of *A Christmas Carol*. Year after year they come back and as their families grow they introduce more of their family to this experience. Knowing that Stephen Hair is 'their' Scrooge is a big part of that tradition."

Hair has definitely won over audience members Barbara and Yukio Kitagawa, who have returned to watch the show every year since he took on the role. "Stephen is the perfect person to play Scrooge," Yukio says, adding that Hair's physical attributes enhance his believability. "He's got an angular face, he's tall, and when he puts on the costume, oh goodness!" Pipes in Barbara, "I can't imagine going to *Christmas Carol* and seeing anyone else play Scrooge." Hair admits to

getting “tons” of cards and letters year after year from children, families and fans of the show, expressing their love for the production.

And to think, he almost didn't get the part.

After playing the roles of the narrator, the Ghost of Christmas Future, and then Jacob Marley for three consecutive years, Hair decided it was time for a bigger challenge: Scrooge. The Artistic Director at the time however, told him he was too young, and didn't have the life experience to play the part. Hair countered that he'd played characters of up to

chosen by Garnhum when he first came on with the theatre company three years ago. It's a script with accessible language, and one that is character-driven. “Dennis must have read about 40 to 50 scripts and this is the one that touched him,” Hair says. “When he first directed it we were aiming for a much more heartfelt, deeply emotional story. Usually it ends back in the office, but in this one, the story ends in his nephew's house where they're having a Christmas party, and Scrooge comes to join them. It's family, and that's a wonderful, warm way to end.”

Stephen Hair and Sam Duke



Kevin Rothery and Stephen Hair



90 years old and that one of the world's most iconic Scrooges, Alastair Sim from the 1950s' film version, was only 51 when he played the part, but to no avail. Hair decided to walk—it was a risky move that paid off. After taking a few weeks to mull it over, the Artistic Director decided to give Hair the part in the end. “After the first year he said ‘You could be playing this part forever if you wanted to.’” Hair says laughing. “And I thought, ‘Oh, yeah right.’”

When asked about his first Scrooge, he quietly chuckles. “It was horrendous! It was what I call the ‘Farce Scrooge’—I had a big white pompadour wig, huge makeup, and it was really over the top. It was bad, bad, bad.” Since that first interpretation, Hair has been trying to find the human core of old Ebenezer. “People expect him to be mean and grumpy, but you need to figure out why he is that way. That's what the story is about. You go back in time and you look at what turns the man,” Hair explains. “He was a brilliant business man, but in his personal life he took some wrong turns, and it hardened his heart and made him cynical. Nobody's totally good or totally evil. He does have a good side to him, and it gets found at end of story.”

As Hair gets older, he has been finding it easier to relate to Ebenezer. “I was 44 when I started Scrooge, and I'm going to be 58 this year. I'm not the same person I was. Things happen to you. Usually you have about three weeks to create a human being, and then it's over. But I've had 15 years of trying to unravel the layers of an onion to find the soul of this character. I take my experience as I get older and think, how do I fit this into Scrooge?”

Hair says the current version of *Christmas Carol* has also helped him to evolve the character. This is the theatre's third year running L.A. playwright Jerry Patch's adaptation of the Dickens' classic—one that was

The current version has been lauded for its elaborate Broadway-sized set, period costumes and huge musical score. Knowing that the show will be the first theatre experience for many young audience members, Hair says that ensuring that the production is magical is important. He's equally quick to tell me about the importance of the show's “Toonies for Turkeys” program. Since 1997, at the end of each performance, Hair appears onstage after all the other actors have left to talk about contributing to the Calgary Food Bank. Hair says they only asked for coin the first night, and wound up with \$500. Now, they average more than \$2,000 a show. In the last 10 years they've raised almost \$800,000, and hope this year to bring the total up to \$1 million.

Hair says that the program has had a huge impact on him. “[The Food Bank's] become a part of my life, and it's part of reason I want the show to be so good and why I want to do it. Sharing with those who are less fortunate is what the show's about.”

Hair says he isn't sure how long he'll be playing Scrooge, joking that he'll do it “as long as Theatre Calgary asks”—but until he dons the top hat no longer, he's happy to continue playing everyone's favourite workaholic.

“He does such a great job being miserly at the beginning,” Barbara jokes, “but then at the end, he almost becomes giddy. There's more step in his dance, and every year he jumps a little higher off the ground.”

As our conversation comes to an end, Hair and I walk together towards the bus stop. He tells me about *The Baroque Cycle*, a series of period drama novels he's currently into, and how he likes to read in between acts during performances. He's definitely nothing like the Scrooge he plays at the beginning of *Christmas Carol*. But with his sympathetic nature, generous spirit and charm, I don't think he has to act too much as the reformed, happy Scrooge at the end. ☺