



Morse perfected Scrooge

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London Free Press
Thursday, February 14, 2008

CFPL-TV director John Sommers looked puzzled when I told him I had a great idea, "Why don't we tape an interview with Ebenezer Scrooge?"

I explained Barry Morse was playing Scrooge at the Grand Theatre. Sommer's response was that there was no way he had the budget to pay the famous man and Morse probably would not agree because he was appearing every night on stage as well as matinees.

It was December 1982 and the actor was starring in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol. Londoner Tom McCamus, an Oakridge graduate, was playing Bob Cratchit and Bernard Hopkins was directing. It had been a very successful run scheduled to close Christmas Eve.

Sommers reluctantly agreed we might approach Morse. We went to the Grand and timidly knocked on the star's dressing room door and were delighted by the warm welcome we received. Bravely I blurted, "Mr. Morse how would you feel about letting us interview you as Scrooge?"

Slowly as Sommers explained what we had in mind, the actor began to warm to the idea. His agent said, "If Mr. Morse wants to do this . . ." Sommers immediately negotiated the fee, union scale then was \$50 for a local appearance and that got a big laugh. Morse was making all sorts of suggestions about how the interview should be shot and we agreed on a date and when the interview would be aired.

I was apprehensive as we were setting up at the Grand awaiting the arrival of our subject. I was about to interview an actor whose career spanned five decades playing a few thousand roles on radio, television, stage and in movies. As I waited nervously I thought of how he had perfected the role of Police Lt. Philip Gerard in the classic television series The Fugitive that ran four seasons and 120 episodes. Morse carried that part off speaking in a perfect American accent, not easy I thought for one born a Cockney and trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

Many years later I am amazed at that same skill, as British actor Hugh Laurie becomes American physician, House M.D. a creation of Londoner David Shore.

So brilliantly did Morse play the TV part of the relentless pursuer of the falsely accused Dr. Richard Kimble that he was despised by viewers and became known as "the most hated man in America."

Then he walked into our improvised studio in the second floor lobby at the Grand. Morse warmly greeted Sommers and me and made a point of shaking hands with the crew and everyone else nearby.

Yes, as we had hoped, he was wearing a long frock coat, black scarf and a well-worn top hat --- he was Ebenezer Scrooge.

He settled in a big, old chair, looked at me, smiled and said, "I don't think we need to talk about this, do we? Let's just do it."

I deliberately asked brief questions hoping his completely extraneous responses would tell the Dickens story and oh how they did. I vividly remember his dramatic reaction when I asked how Scrooge felt when the ghosts appeared. Now in complete character, he said he had been alarmed and I watched fascinated as he spoke of his terror and here this gifted actor actually began to tremble at the very thought.

Too soon the interview ended with the once vilified miser now having morphed into a gleeful man imbued with the joy of Christmas. The TV camera shooting out the Grand's windows showed LTC buses traveling on snowy Richmond Street as Barry Morse, AKA Ebenezer Scrooge, made us believe we were in an English town and the year was 1853 -- pure magic.

The interview ended but Morse's job in London went on, A Christmas Carol was held over until Dec. 31 then again until Jan. 7, 1983, when the theatre had to move on to another scheduled show.

On Dec. 23 last year, I stood on the Grand's stage inadequately playing the part of Scrooge in a benefit performance. As I read Dickens's words I remembered Barry Morse standing on that very spot exactly 25 years before.

And that memory returned two Saturdays ago when I heard of Morse's death in England at the age of 89.