

THEATER

On stage it's all 'bah humbug,' but not off for Scrooge

Meadow Brook Theatre, on the campus of Oakland University, Rochester, presents "A Christmas Carol," through Sunday, Dec. 28. Performances 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 6:30 p.m. Sundays. Tickets range from \$21 to \$43.50 depending on performance day, call (248) 377-3300.

BY ANDREA BURMANN
SPECIAL WRITER

Ebenezer Scrooge is a mean and nasty Grinch. Despite his unpopularity, everybody loves Booth Colman who portrays the old miser in Meadow Brook Theatre's annual production of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol."

This season marks the 600th time this veteran stage, Broadway, movie and TV actor will portray Scrooge at Michigan's largest regional theater.

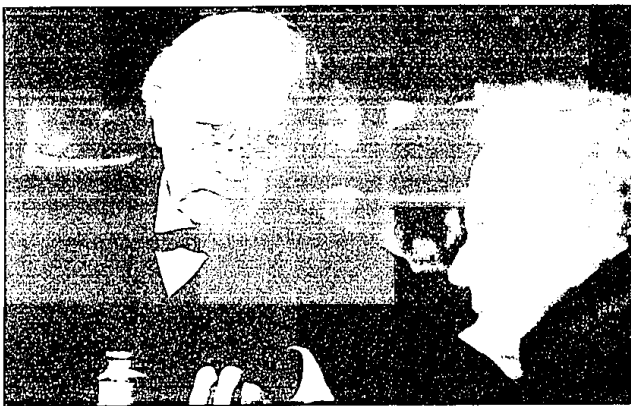
"Mr. Colman is as appealing on-stage as he is off," said Mike Vigilant, Meadow Brook Theatre's public relations manager. "If he wasn't, the audience wouldn't demand that he come back every year."

After playing crutchy old Scrooge every year except one since 1982, Colman has become synonymous with the part for area theatergoers. But, like Scrooge, this is more to the 74-year-old Los Angeles resident than meets the eye.

He's acted in 50 motion pictures ranging from MGM's "Julius Caesar" to a John Wayne western. There have also been featured roles in several hundred episodes of TV series such as "Bewitched" and "I Dream of Jeannie." Most recently he did an episode for "Star Trek Voyager."

Colman has also made a slew of TV commercials and has doubled in the soap operas. For many months he was a professor on "General Hospital" and a doctor on "The Young and the Restless."

Colman looks like a grandfatherly type, save the distinguished air about him. He wears



Christmas classic: Booth Colman (left) and Paul Hopper in Meadow Brook Theatre's 16th annual production of "A Christmas Carol."

a jacket and tie, his gray hair is neatly combed, and he sits with his legs crossed. His hands are folded neatly in his lap, except when he uses them to talk animatedly. He is alert, relaxed, peaceful.

"If I'm in a play that I don't like much, I would rather in a picture, or even on junk TV," said Colman. "And vice versa. But usually when you're an actor you have to take what comes to you, unless you're a great professional."

Terry Carpenter, Meadow Brook Theatre's stage manager for nine years, said Colman usually plays a doctor, a lawyer, or a scientist.

"He always plays an educated man," said Carpenter. "He's never played the truck driver."

Colman began his acting career when he was 9 years old

with, ironically, Charles Dickens' "David Copperfield." He read the part of Copperfield for a radio show in Oregon where he was born and grew up.

Colman studied acting at the University of Washington and Japanese for a year at the University of Michigan. It wasn't until after serving in the army during World War II that he moved to New York City to act on Broadway.

He made his Broadway stage debut in Irwin Shaw's war drama, "The Assassin." During his stay in New York from 1943-1951, Colman acted on Broadway with the likes of Sir Noel Coward, Fredric March and Basil Rathbone.

Yet despite all the charming and talented actors of his day, Colman's most admired actor is not one of his contemporaries. It

is silent film star Lon Chaney, Sr.

"He was an American original," said Colman, his eyes sparkling behind gold-rimmed spectacles. "And a great artist."

Colman often reminisces about roles he has played and the people he has worked with. Vigilant describes Colman as a "walking treasury of entertainment information," and said he's a great storyteller.

"Mr. Colman is extremely congenial," he said. "People just wait for him to start telling stories. But he is also interested in what other people are doing. His relationships are not one-sided. It's give and take."

Most of Colman's long-term friendships have come from people he's worked with in the theater, either on tour or on stage. "But you really can't make long-

term friendships working on a movie," he said. "Pictures are things of the moment."

It was through one of his friends, Terry Kilburn, that Colman landed his first job at Meadow Brook Theatre in 1971. Colman acted with Kilburn in "The Andersonville Trial" in Los Angeles in 1961. Ten years later, Kilburn was Meadow Brook Theatre's Artistic Director, and he sent for Colman to play Captain Wirz in the Meadow Brook production of the same play.

During one of the show's performances there was a man with a gun in the audience. Someone sitting next to him noticed the fun and the man was escorted out of the theater before he could do any harm.

"As it turned out, he was a Civil War buff, a Union supporter, who was not particularly fond of Captain Wirz," said Colman laughing, the smile lines around his eyes deepening. Save that episode, no other attempt has ever been made on his life.

Carpenter said it's evident Colman is from the "old school" of acting.

"He shows up for work every day in a jacket and a tie, even for rehearsals," said Carpenter. "He's always done that. Booth has an old black and white picture of him on the set of 'Casablanca' with the film's stars, and there is Booth, in his jacket and tie, standing off to one side."

Colman likes the way things were in the past, but he adapts to the present.

"I enjoy what I'm doing today, instead of reliving the past," said Colman. "There is no profit in that. You have to deal with what's happening now. You can't live in the air. That's dreamland," he clarified.

There is one thing Colman has not adapted to however, driving in Michigan.

"He drives in LA all the time, but he simply refuses to drive in Auburn Hills," said Carpenter. "If he wants to go somewhere when he's here, he relies on the

kindness of strangers."

When Colman is in town for "Christmas Carol" he usually stays on Oakland University's campus, along with the other out-of-town actors. He usually fills in his free time reading in the campus library or listening to public radio. Colman enjoys reading biographies of theatrical subjects and mystery stories.

Though an avid stage actor, Colman does not go out to see many plays, he does, however, watch a lot of movies, especially in January, February and March. He is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture of the Arts and Sciences and votes for the Academy Awards.

Colman may judge a lot of movies, but he does not consider himself judgmental of the actors he works with.

"I'm fair," said Colman. "I approach people slowly and try not to make snap judgments." He does admit, however, that he is impatient.

"He is impatient, but he gets more upset with himself than with other people," said Carpenter. "For instance, if he forgets a line or something, he'll get mad at himself for messing up."

Vigilant said that the kids on the set of "A Christmas Carol" love Colman.

"After they've grown up, they still remember and talk about their experiences with Mr. Colman," he said.

Colman has spent the last 16 Thanksgivings and Christmases with Meadow Brook Theatre crew and actors. Many of them always spend Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day together.

"People become a family after a certain length of time," said Colman. "We feel we're a family."

Carpenter likens Colman's presence in the "family" to that of Ebenezer Scrooge's "awakening" at the end of "A Christmas Carol."

Scrooge comes alive in the end. That is the same sort of life that Booth brings to our family at Meadow Brook.

Welcome 1998 enjoying some 'staged' theatrics

Approaching the year 2000 is a dramatic turning point, and the theater's a great place to contemplate what lies ahead.

Local theater groups will be staging spectacular productions to welcome in 1998.

■ For 20 years the Detroit Repertory Theatre, 13103 Woodward, Detroit, has hosted a New Year's Eve gala and this year isn't any different.

The evening begins at 8 p.m. with unlimited champagne, homemade soup, and appetizers, and follows at 9 p.m. with the comedy "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," featuring Bloomfield Hills resident Dorry Peltyn. The story is about a country woman named Jessie who has a penchant for becoming emotional at local funerals. After the show, a buffet dinner with music and cham-

pagne in the theater's lobby and art gallery. Tickets are \$50. (313) 858-1347

■ The Jewish Ensemble Theatre, 6600 W. Maple Road, West Bloomfield, will wind-up its world premiere of "The Shiva Queen" by award-winning playwright Rebecca Ritchie, at 7 p.m. and 10 p.m. New Year's Eve. Tickets are \$35 and \$50. (248) 788-2900

■ The Village Players is offering a special presentation of the children's theater production of "Little Red Riding Hood" at 4 p.m., 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. at the theater, 752 Chestnut, Birmingham. (248) 644-9667 or (248) 644-2075. \$5.

■ Celebrities can laugh their way into 1998 at a variety of comedy clubs throughout the area. The Second City, 2301

Woodward Ave., Detroit, is offering two packages with dinner and a presentation of its latest show "Generation X Files." The early show with dinner at 5:15 p.m. and the show at 7:30 p.m. is \$70 and includes tax and gratuity and a complimentary glass of champagne with dinner. The show only is \$25. The late show package is dinner at 8:15 p.m. and the show at 10:15 p.m. The

show will end just before midnight at which time the cast will do the countdown to the New Year. The dessert buffet afterglow begins at midnight in Rista. There will also be live band and dancing. The \$90 tickets include tax and gratuity. The cost is \$40 for the late show only. Packages with the Crowne Plaza Pontchartrain hotel are available. (313) 965-2222.



Rich is about to join the 3-2-1-SOLD! club.

Rich was up in the attic the other day and saw his old bowling gear. He'd like to sell it along with his wife's Vaughn Monroe record collection and a couple of other things, but doesn't want to spend a lot on an ad. Who does?

Our 3-2-1—SOLD! offer is just what you need when you have things to sell for under \$200.

Here's how it works:

1. You get 3 lines to describe your item (remember, you have to be asking less than \$200)
2. You get to run your ad for 2 days (one week)
3. You get 1 low price—just \$19.26. That's only \$3.21 per line!

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Rich did.

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