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One-man show

DICKENS HEIR PERFORMS CLASSIC TALE



Gerald Dickens, the great-great-grandson of Charles Dickens, signs a book yesterday for David K. Friedrich of Methuen. (FERRARONE Photos)

By **Bill Fortier TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF**

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SUTTON — Gerald Charles Dickens is adding a generous helping of Christmas spirit this weekend at Vaillancourt Folk Art in the Manchaug Mills.

Mr. Dickens, whose great-great-grandfather was Charles Dickens, is traveling throughout the United States through Christmas performing "A Christmas Carol," and judging by the long, loud standing ovation he got after yesterday afternoon's 85-minute, one-man show in the 159-seat theatre dubbed Blaxton's Hall, he's a big success.

The actor, who was cast in a school play at the age of 9, is 47 and lives near Oxford, England, where he performs on stage during the year. Mr. Dickens is scheduled to give two more performances today, and a limited



number of tickets are available. Gary Vaillancourt, who started the business that makes Christmas collectibles with his wife, Judi, 26 years ago, said Mr. Dickens was scheduled to perform again last night and that a Friday night show was sold out.

"That was really good," Mr. Dickens said of the Friday night show. "There was a nice enthusiastic crowd at the show."

"His performance is riveting. It's a mesmerizing show," Mr. Vaillancourt said.

The stage that Mr. Dickens performed on was designed by Mrs. Vaillancourt, her husband said, while noting she has done considerable research on Charles Dickens. The entranceway into the theatre was also designed by Mrs. Vaillancourt.

This is the second consecutive year that Mr. Dickens, who portrays about two dozen different characters in the show, has performed at Vaillancourt Folk Art. Both Mr. Vaillancourt and Mr. Dickens hope to make the performances an annual event. Vaillancourt Folk Art employs 20 people and Mr. Vaillancourt said having Mr. Dickens perform is a way to increase business.

"We would like to make it an annual event," Mr. Vaillancourt said. "It's really a great way to kick off the Christmas season."

Mr. Dickens said he loves the collectibles that are made at Vaillancourt Folk Art, as well as its Christmas atmosphere. Workers at the business spent about five weeks decorating it for the Christmas season, both Mr. Vaillancourt and Mr. Dickens said.

"I really love it here," said Mr. Dickens, who signed copies of his great-great-grandfather's Christmas classic between shows.

While the basics of the show don't change, each show is different, said Mr. Dickens, who was dressed in clothes Charles Dickens most likely wore in performing "A Christmas Carol" on stage.

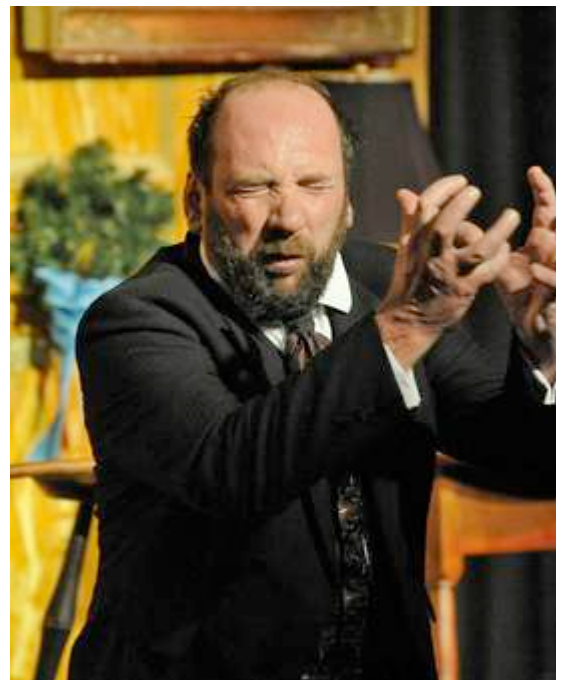
"It never gets boring. There is always something different," he said.

For example, Mr. Dickens humorously chided the audience that didn't react with a gentle murmur during part of the show that called for such a reactor



Mr. Dickens grimaces as he recounts the death of in his performance of "A Christmas Carol" at Vaill Folk Art.

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Mr. Dickens performs in another scene during the

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“ Portraying all the character did has to be really hard to do.

-- JEANNE FISETTE
OF GERALD CHARLES DICKENS

"It's too late," he said with mock indignation. "You had your chance."

After the show, Geraldine Capotosto of Warwick, R.I., said she sensed that the audience was so enthralled by Mr. Dickens' performance that they didn't pick up the cue to react with a murmur.

Mr. Dickens said he tries to convey the magic of Christmas during his performance that saw him soaked in sweat at its conclusion. He also said he tries not to think about his great-great-grandfather's classic version of the story.

"It's really extraordinary. It is so big, it is so universal" he said of "A Christmas Carol."

It can also be very intimidating, Mr. Dickens added.

"The fact that it was written by my grandfather's grandfather, if you start thinking about that it is easy to be intimidated by yourself."

After the show ended, Mr. Vaillancourt led the audience in a spirited rendition of the Christmas carol "A Merry Christmas."

Jeanne Fiset of Sutton said she was very impressed with Mr. Dickens' performance.

"Portraying all the characters like he did has to be really hard to do," she said.

Joanne Marsh-Thompson, who studied acting and performed in New York City, said portraying many different parts in a production is extremely difficult.

"I think he's fabulous," she said after the show. "His acting is really, really top-notch."

Ms. Marsh-Thompson saw the show last year and she said she jokingly told Mr. Dickens she has become his groupie.

"I was anxious to see if he could pull it off again," she said. "He did."

Mr. Dickens has been offering his one-man performance of "A Christmas Carol" since 1993, when he was asked to give a reading to note the 150th anniversary of its publication. He began touring in 1996, and since then he has performed in large halls and in front of families in their homes.

For ticket information for today's shows, call (508) 476-3601.

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