



Charles Dickens: Celebrity Author

Dickens The Performer

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Charles Dickens's first love wasn't writing – it was acting. And he seems to have been born with the desire to perform. As a child he entertained the crowds in the pubs of Portsmouth, where he grew up, and put on plays with his toys. As a young man he enthralled his co-workers with impersonations, and as a father put on conjuring shows at his children's parties. Throughout his life he remained fanatical about showmanship and the stage.

Dr Paul Schlicke is a past president of the International Dickens Fellowship and author of *Dickens and Popular Entertainment*

PAUL SCHLICKE CHARLES MATHEWS

When Dickens was a young man he went to the theatre frequently every night for three years and the person he went to see most often was a man named Charles Mathews, a comedian known primarily for his one-man shows, which involved appearing as a variety of characters in quick succession known as monopolilogues, and Dickens just loved them.

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These solo pieces in which Mathews played many different characters were a huge influence on the young Dickens.

Actor and author of *Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World*, Simon Callow

SIMON CALLOW – Charles Mathews

It was that thing about different people speaking to each other that excited Dickens beyond anything and he learned them and performed them himself at home and would perform them for anybody who wanted to hear them and it's clear that his novels are constructed in the same fashion. It is as if Dickens himself was there doing all these voices for you and you can hear that in the novels themselves.

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While working as a young clerk in a solicitor's office in Lincoln's Inn, Dickens not only went to the theatre all the time but also appeared in what were called 'minor theatres' – he appeared to be hooked.

SIMON CALLOW AUDITION

I've described this as a kind of theatrical karaoke, you could go in and you could pay them to let you play Hamlet if you knew the part, there would be other actors who knew the other parts in Hamlet and you could just go on and do it and he did a bit of that but then he actually applied Covent Garden theatre for an audition to sing a song, his sister Fanny was a musician and was going to play the piano for him and he got a terrible cold and so he cried off the audition, they said well that's fine, come at the beginning of next season and we'll give you the audition- but in the interim he was offered a job as a reporter on his uncle's parliamentary paper called the *Mirror of Parliament* and then he was away, he was on into writing and he sort of forgot about being an actor for a while.

FX: readings atmosphere

READING ONE: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Mr Wopsle's performance

It was in the fourth year of my apprenticeship to Joe, and it was a Saturday night. There was a group assembled round the fire at the Three Jolly Bargemen, attentive to Mr. Wopsle as he read the newspaper aloud. Of that group I was one.

A highly popular murder had been committed, and Mr. Wopsle was imbrued in blood to the eyebrows. He gloated over every abhorrent adjective in the description, and identified himself with every witness at the Inquest. He faintly moaned, "I am done for," as the victim, and he barbarously bellowed, "I'll serve you out," as the murderer. The coroner, in Mr. Wopsle's hands, became Timon of Athens; the beadle, Coriolanus. He enjoyed himself thoroughly, and we all enjoyed ourselves, and were delightfully comfortable. In this cozy state of mind we came to the verdict Wilful Murder.

FX: fade

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The fashion for public readings and lectures in Victorian England appealed to Dickens. Not only as a showman looking for a place in the limelight, but as a way of personally reaching people, moving, uplifting and uniting them.

PAUL SCHLICKE – ENTERTAINMENT UNITES

Dickens firmly believed from the outside of his career that entertainment, amusement and leisure activity were essential parts of being human and his values were largely based on love of people one for another. He is concerned above all with gregariousness, sociability rather than with introspection and inward looking development.

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Dickens saw his age as uncongenial to popular entertainment. Opportunities for leisure were fewer as working hours grew longer. The prevailing economic philosophy held that idleness was unproductive and leisure unnecessary, while the evangelical movement thought the theatre and acting were immoral. It was a cultural crisis Dickens wanted to remedy.

PAUL SCHLICKE – firing the imagination

When he writes about circus and theatres as often as not, what he is really interested in, not the performance but the spectators, and the way that they are given leisure, an escape from their everyday activities. They're given stimulus to their imaginations and an opportunity for sharing their pleasures with those around them.

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You can imagine the young Dickens at the theatre - one eye always on the crowd and its characters, lit up by the barely dimmed gas lights. He was not just storing character sketches to use as material. These were the ordinary working people he wanted to reach. And through entertainment was how he wanted to do it.

PAUL SCHLICKE - theatregoers

Families, often very young families, would go with their children and with a picnic hamper to the theatre and would spend an entire evening there, sometimes two or three times a week. The doors would open at about 6 o'clock in the evening often it was past midnight when they closed. There was a great deal of emphasis on song of melodrama and on spectacle, so it was hugely entertaining

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Dickens wrote many short stories for the magazines he edited – Household Words and All the Year Round – and a couple he adapted as readings.

Doctor Marigold, a monologue following the lonely fortunes of a travelling salesman, was one of his best-loved.

FX: readings atmosphere

READING THREE: DR MARIGOLD

Me and my dog were all the company left in the cart now; and the dog learned to give a short bark when they wouldn't bid, and to give another and a nod of his head when I asked him, "Who said half a crown? Are you the gentleman, sir, that offered half a crown?" He attained to an immense height of popularity, and I shall always believe taught himself entirely out of his

own head to growl at any person in the crowd that bid as low as sixpence. But he got to be well on in years, and one night when I was convulsing York with the spectacles, he took a convulsion on his own account upon the very footboard by me, and it finished him.

Being naturally of a tender turn, I had dreadful lonely feelings on me after this. I conquered 'em at selling times, having a reputation to keep (not to mention keeping myself), but they got me down in private, and rolled upon me. That's often the way with us public characters. See us on the footboard, and you'd give pretty well anything you possess to be us. See us off the footboard, and you'd add a trifle to be off your bargain. It was under those circumstances that I come acquainted with a giant.

FX: theatre atmosphere

DENNIS WALDER – THEATRE

He spent a lot of his time actually going to the theatre, Dennis Walder is emeritus professor of English literature at the Open University. He also put on private theatricals, he liked to perform in plays that he and others had put together. It was an intermingling of theatre interest and fiction. He also enjoyed making fun of characters in the theatre, Nicholas Nickleby has the Crummies, theatre people, a lot of the other novels pick up aspects of the theatre and performance and make fun of them or show great enjoyment in them. So clearly Dickens and the theatre, Dickens and the stage are part of the same thing, the same phenomenon.

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Throughout his life Dickens put on amateur theatricals, especially at Christmas. He was, most agreed, an actor with flair.

Simon Callow.

SIMON CALLOW – DICKENS ACTING

Charles Dickens as an actor first of all was incredibly engaging, incredibly personable, very quick, very quick in his thinking and very good at mercurial changes, but also later in his career as an amateur actor he took on a couple of roles written for him by Wilkie Collins, this was a sort of very dark period in his life when he was deeply unhappy, in which he played, in one a man who had murdered somebody or had been involved in a murder and the other a man who wanted to murder somebody but out of sort of nobility decided not to and here Dickens took everybody by surprise. He presented such a vivid sense of inner anguish and horror of these men in their lives so vividly conveyed, both had death scenes which he performed incredibly with the most terrifying realism that people literally were stunned and wept and bit their handkerchiefs and strong men trembled and all the rest of it.

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One of those productions was of the Frozen Deep. Dickens had spent six months growing a beard for the part and learned his lines in a single 20-mile walk. As well as taking the leading role, Dickens stage-managed the production – as committed to this as he was to his starring role.

Dr Paul Schlicke

PAUL SCHLICKE – FROZEN DEEP

The initial production of the Frozen Deep was done in Tow Stock house where he lived at the time and what he did was to have carpenters come and transform the children's nursery into a theatre. He had the back wall removed so he could simulate snowfall behind and fundamentally wrecked his house in order to turn it into a theatre.

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Simon Callow again.

SIMON CALLOW – DICKENS'S LOVE OF THE THEATRE

Theatre was many things that suited Dickens very well as a person of extraordinary practical effectiveness and he loved the art and craft of putting on a play. He loved talking to the carpenters, talking to the designers, looking at the costumes. Productions were very innovative, they were rather ahead of what was going on in the current British stage in the 1860s when he was doing all of this. But the other thing that he loved beyond anything was the camaraderie and the sense of all these people pulling together in one direction and he loved the preparation for the show, he loved doing the show, he loved the aftermath of the show, he loved providing one for meals for his companies, brewed punch especially for them a very special kind of punch which was absolutely lethal and so everybody had the most glorious memories of all this time and then he hated it when it was all over and right at the end of his life he said that that's what my great ambition really was, to run a great national theatre and write all the plays, tell everybody what to do, bend them to my will and put on these extraordinary plays and that's what I really wanted to do with my life.

READING TWO: NICHOLAS NICKLEBY

A play he retold

At last, it came out that the patriarch was the man who had treated the bones of the outlaw's father-in-law with so much disrespect, for which cause and reason the outlaw's wife repaired to his castle to kill him, and so got into a dark room, where, after a good deal of groping in the dark, everybody got hold of everybody else, and took them for somebody besides, which occasioned a vast quantity of confusion, with some pistolling, loss of life, and torchlight; after which, the patriarch came forward, and observing, with a knowing look, that he knew all about his children now, and would tell them when they got inside, said that there could not be a more appropriate occasion for marrying the young people than that; and therefore he joined their hands, with the full consent of the indefatigable page, who (being the only other person surviving) pointed with his cap into the clouds, and his right hand to the ground; thereby invoking a blessing and giving the cue for the curtain to come down, which it did, amidst general applause.

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Dickens's production of *The Frozen Deep* precipitated a dramatic change in his life. The following year, 1858, heralded a new chapter for Dickens, and the beginning of his professional career as a reader of his own works.