Charles Dickens: Celebrity Author
From Novels to Readings 1858

LINK
Dickens did a series of readings for charity before turning professional and reading for his own profit on 29 April 1858, initiating a new and brilliant phase in his career.

He had been entertaining the idea of doing paid public readings for years. He was already in the habit of 'performing' his characters into life as he wrote them, so why not get paid for doing it in front of an audience?

Professor Malcolm Andrews is the author of Dickens and His Performing Selves, and editor of The Dickensian.

MALCOLM ANDREWS – WHAT HE READ 1
As he said at one point acting being up on stage was like writing a book in company and feeling the effect coming back to you instead of sitting solitary in his study writing and not hearing how the audience is responding up there on the platform he could read it and he could know how people responded and he could sway them one way or the other so i think that that power is very important in the whole enterprise. Whenever he arrived at a new venue, he would very often open the series of two or three nights of readings with A Christmas Carol, about an hour and a half then a short ten minute break and then the trail scene from Pickwick Papers, the ludicrous trial for my Pickwick for breach of promise of marriage.

FX: readings atmosphere

READING ONE: PICKWICK PAPERS – THE TRIAL SCENE
Sergeant Buzfuz now rose with more importance than he had yet exhibited, if that were possible, and vociferated "Call Samuel Weller."

"What's your name, Sir?" enquired the Judge.

"Sam Weller, my Lord," replied that gentleman.

"Do you spell it with a 'V' or a 'W?'" enquired the Judge.

"That depends upon the taste and fancy of the speller, my Lord," replied Sam. "I never had occasion to spell it more than once or twice in my life, but I spells it with a 'V.'"

Here a voice in the gallery exclaimed aloud, "Quite right too, Samivel: quite right. Put it down a we, my Lord, put it down a we."

"Who is that, that dares to address the Court?" said the little Judge, looking up, "Usher."

"Yes, my Lord."

"Bring that person here instantly."

"Yes, my Lord."

But as the usher didn't find the person, he didn't bring him; and after a great commotion, all the people who had got up to look for the culprit, sat down again. The little Judge turned to the witness as soon as his indignation would allow him to speak, and said—

"Do you know who that was, Sir?"

"I raythe suspect it was my father, my Lord," replied Sam.

"Do you see him here now?" said the Judge.

"No, I don't, my Lord," replied Sam, staring right up into the lantern in the roof of the Court.

"If you could have pointed him out, I would have committed him instantly," said the Judge.

FX: fade

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Lucinda Hawksley, Dickens's great great-great granddaughter and author of the book Charles Dickens

LUCINDA PERFORMANCE
Dickens was very professional and theatrical about the way he did he readings and he had a whole crew with him. He had a special lighting person, he had a special backdrop that was made, he had his own special reading desk, a type of lectern that was made to be collapsible, so that he could take it travelling with him and from this he did the readings in a spectacular one man show. He would perform all the characters, he would do all the different accents and the voices and he was extremely precise in the way that he did his readings, he didn't always read the full extracts from his novels, he had special reading copies made that he wrote out himself and he marked up so it really was a huge theatrical performance.

SIMON CALLOW PERFORMANCE 1
We know exactly how he performed everything, when he was quiet, loud, quick, slow, how he inflected thing rhythmically and so on.

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Simon Callow has performed many of Dickens's readings on stage.

SIMON CALLOW – PERFORMANCE 2
He was a small man Dickens, about 5'7 and he had a very light voice, but he had an incredible ear and a genius comedian and people were thrilled by the way he could change his whole body just by thinking himself into different character. His Fagin famously just suddenly appeared before your very eyes and then was gone again and there was Oliver, or Bill Sikes or Nancy.

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His public readings were a huge success. People famously queued for hours in order to get tickets, and he played to packed town halls and theatres around Britain and America.

Professor Malcolm Andrews again.

Malcolm Andrews – EDITING THE READINGS
He has a repertoire of about 14/15 readings overall, they would be either single episodes from the novel that he would work up to reading, two or three scenes linked together or it would be a kind of a character performance such as Mrs gamp, a great favourite, or it would be a Christmas story which was short anyway and you could trim down. He would have specially prepared editions of his readings, cut and paste jobs initially and then they were printed out. With wide margins so that he could put little stage directions to himself so that for example when Scrooge is beginning to realise his mistakes and beginning to thaw as it were, his iceyness is beginning to thaw. Dickens scribbles in the margin 'scrooge melting, at this point', scrooge melting, melting again'.

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Dickens chose extracts from his books that would have the maximum impact, episodes of high comedy or pathos. He wanted his audience to be moved to laughter or to tears – and he knew how to pick a scene that pulled at the heart strings, such as the death of little Paul Dombey in Dombey and Son.

READING TWO: DOMBEY AND SON
Floy!' he said. `What is that?'
`Where, dearest?'
`There! at the bottom of the bed.'
`There's nothing there, except Papa!'
The figure lifted up its head, and rose, and coming to the beside, said: `My own boy! Don't you know me?'
Paul looked it in the face, and thought, was this his father? But the face so altered to his thinking, thrilled while he gazed, as if it were in pain; and before he could reach out both his

hands to take it between them, and draw it towards him, the figure turned away quickly from the little bed, and went out at the door.
The next time he observed the figure sitting at the bottom of the bed, he called to it.
`Don't be so sorry for me, dear Papa! Indeed I am quite happy!'
His father coming and bending down to him--which he did quickly, and without first pausing by the bedside--Paul held him round the neck, and repeated those words to him several times, and very earnestly; and Paul never saw him in his room again at any time, whether it were day or night, but he called out, `Don't be so sorry for me! Indeed I am quite happy!' .

DENNIS WALDER – DOMBEY DEATH SCENE
What is truly amazing about the way in which the scene is told is that it is told from the child's point of view, from a dying child's point of view. Dennis Walder is emeritus professor of English literature at the Open University. And we don't know exactly how the father reacts, but the son tries to in effect 'There, there' to his father and having that told from the point of view of the son makes it hugely effective.
He used to read Paul's voice in high treble which he would put on for that reading, some people didn't like this, but presumably others loved it and were terribly moved and there's lots of evidence of grown men bursting into tears and so on at these various readings.

SIMON CALLOW
Dickens had a phrase, he said assumption has such charms for me, meaning assuming another character.

LINK
Simon Callow again.

SIMON CALLOW
Escaping into another character, but being liberated into another principle of being really enchanted and enthrawled him and of course that is one of the primary qualifications of an actor. You have to enjoy that, you have to enjoy stepping into someone elses shoes and he absolutely loved that. He felt incredible exhilarated, he felt the power surging through him, like you do when you're really inhabiting a character and also the power he had over the audience. He loved that.

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Dickens liked to think of himself as a conductor, creating and controlling the sympathies and emotions of his audience. And forging an intimate connection with the public was a vital part of his life and his work.

Dr Paul Schlicke is the author of Dickens and Popular Entertainment.

PAUL SCHLINKE AUDIENCE 2
when he first started giving his readings he would prefice things by saying he wanted the audience to feel as if they were sitting round a fire side while he talked to them, he wanted this kind of intimacy and he said now if you feel like crying or laughing or jumping up and down by all means do so. He encouraged his audiences to enter into the spirit of what he was doing and they tended to deal with him, as he asked, as a personal friend who was entertaining just them

LINK
The working people of Victorian Britain felt Dickens understood them. He, in turn, needed, and was nourished by, their love and appreciation. Dickens cared deeply for his public – and made sure his performances always ended on a comic scene so they wouldn't leave feeling too terrified or sombre.

Here is David Copperfield dining with the Micawbers.

FX: readings

READING THREE: DAVID COPPERFIELD

I suppose - I never ventured to inquire, but I suppose - that Mrs. Crupp, after frying the soles, was taken ill. Because we broke down at that point. The leg of mutton came up very red within, and very pale without: besides having a foreign substance of a gritty nature sprinkled over it, as if it had had a fall into the ashes of that remarkable kitchen fireplace. But we were not in condition to judge of this fact from the appearance of the gravy, forasmuch as the 'young gal' had dropped it all upon the stairs - where it remained, by the by, in a long train, until it was worn out. The pigeon-pie was not bad, but it was a delusive pie: the crust being like a disappointing head, with nothing particular underneath. In short, the banquet was such a failure that I should have been quite unhappy if I had not been relieved by the great good humour of my company, and by a bright suggestion from Mr. Micawber.

'My dear friend Copperfield,' said Mr. Micawber, 'accidents will occur in the best-regulated families; and in families not regulated by that pervading influence which sanctifies while it enhances the - a - I would say, in short, by the influence of Woman, in the lofty character of Wife, they may be expected with confidence, and must be borne with philosophy. If you will allow me to take the liberty of remarking that there are few comestibles better, in their way, than a Devil, and that I believe, with a little division of labour, we could accomplish a good one if the young person in attendance could produce a gridiron, I would put it to you, that this little misfortune may be easily repaired.'

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Charles Dickens’s reading career came at a time of great upheaval in his life and he threw himself into a series of exhausting tours, feeding from the approval and adoration of his public. Having conquered Britain, the next stop was America, on what was to be a gruelling five-month tour.