



Charles Dickens: Celebrity Author

The Farewell Tour

In the last four years of his life, Charles Dickens spent continuous months travelling on tour. The first tour, in 1866, lasted three months and covered Scotland, the north, Birmingham and Clifton. The following year, a four-month tour added Ireland, Wales and more northern cities. In December 1867, Dickens was on the road for five months on his American tour. And then, in October 1868, his farewell tour began. It had to be cut short in April 1869 on account of Dickens's failing health.

The long, massively popular, hugely lucrative reading tours had taken their toll.

Actor and Dickens author and enthusiast, Simon Callow

SIMON CALLOW – INTRODUCING NANCY

When he came back from American to everyone's complete astonishment and bewilderment he went out on another tour and this time he was exhausted from the beginning. He was basically running on adrenaline, which is a very very dangerous drug indeed because when you are fully adrenalized you aren't aware of the damage you are doing to your body. But when he got really tired – this is Dickens for you all over – when he got really really tired so tired he could hardly act, he decided the answer was to put in another new piece and the piece he would put in was the death of Nancy.

READING: OLIVER TWIST – DEATH OF NANCY

"Bill," cried the girl, striving to lay her head upon his breast, "the gentleman and that dear lady, told me to-night of a home in some foreign country where I could end my days in solitude and peace. Let me see them again, and beg them, on my knees, to show the same mercy and goodness to you; and let us both leave this dreadful place, and far apart lead better lives, and forget how we have lived, except in prayers, and never see each other more. It is never too late to repent. They told me so--I feel it now--but we must have time--a little, little time!"

The housebreaker freed one arm, and grasped his pistol. The certainty of immediate detection if he fired, flashed across his mind even in the midst of his fury; and he beat it twice with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own. She staggered and fell: nearly blinded with the blood that rained down from a deep gash in her forehead; but raising herself, with difficulty, on her knees, drew from her bosom a white handkerchief--Rose Maylie's own--and holding it up, in her folded hands, as high towards Heaven as her feeble strength would allow, breathed one prayer for mercy to her Maker. It was a ghastly figure to look upon. The murderer staggering backward to the wall, and shutting out the sight with his hand, seized a heavy club and struck her down.

MALCOLM ANDREWS NANCY 1

When he was clubbing Nancy to death he was smashing his reading table with his fist bang, bang, bang again and again and again, and the Dickens family still have in their possession his gold cufflinks dented where they had hit the desk while he was murdering Nancy.

Professor Malcolm Andrews, author of Dickens and His Performing Selves.

MALCOLM ANDREWS NANCY 2

He said he wanted to make a huge impression on people, so it was almost a kind of technical challenge to him. He wanted to make the, the maximum kind of impact, emotional impact on people and so he rehearsed and rehearsed it. He was overheard here in Gad's Hill on one occasion by his son who was writing in the form room and then heard what he thought was couple of tramps having row outside, and a woman screaming when the tramps started to hit

her and so in some alarm he went out of the house and what he found was his father murdering Nancy.

For Dickens, striking terror into people was compelling, and he went further in those performances than in any other.

Lucinda Hawksley the author of the book Charles Dickens.

LUCINDA NANCY

It was said in America and in the UK that women would faint in the audience with fear as he read about the murder a loud, and he would be extremely passionate, he would look almost apoplectic and his family would say to him please don't do that reading anymore, please don't read sites from Nancy as they were really scared he was going to have a heart attack and die on stage. They did eventually persuade him to give up the readings and he gave his very last farewell reads just a couple of months before he died in London and that was one of the readings he did.

On Tuesday 15th February 1870 at St James's Hall in London, Dickens performed three readings – the death of Nancy, Boots at the Holly-Tree Inn, and Mrs Gamp – a popular finale in the farewell tour.

READING: MRS GAMP

"Ah!" repeated Mrs Gamp; for it was always a safe sentiment in cases of mourning. "Ah dear! When Gamp was summoned to his long home, and I see him a-lying in Guy's Hospital with a penny-piece on each eye, and his wooden leg under his left arm, I thought I should have fainted away. But I bore up."

"You have become indifferent since then, I suppose?" said Mr Pecksniff. "Use is second nature, Mrs Gamp."

"You may well say second nater, sir," returned that lady. "If it wasn't for the nerve a little sip of liquor gives me, I never could go through with what I sometimes has to do. "Mrs Harris," I says, at the very last case as ever I acted in, which it was but a young person, "Mrs Harris," I says, "leave the bottle on the chimley-piece, and don't ask me to take none, but let me put my lips to it when I am so dispoqed, and then I will do what I'm engaged to do, according to the best of my ability." "Mrs Gamp," she says, in answer, "if ever there was a sober creetur to be got at eighteen pence a day for working people, and three and six for gentlefolks-night watching," said Mrs Gamp with emphasis, "being a extra charge--you are that inwallable person."

It has been said that Dickens's relationship with his audience was the most important love affair of his life. But did the energy he put into entertaining the public distract him from his calling as a writer?

The author of Dickens and Popular Entertainment, Dr Paul Schlicke.

PAUL SHLICKE – END

Most modern commentators would agree that it's a great pity that he wrote only two novels in the last decade of his life whereas in the first five years of his writing life, he wrote five full length novels. But Dickens loved performing he saw the kind of entertainment that he was providing as something which was valuable and necessary and it was the foremost way he could directly provide the kind of amusement, release, delight and gregariousness which he thought was the basis of entertainment.

Contact with his readers in the halls and theatres of Britain and America fulfilled Dickens in a way that writing couldn't. It gave him a sense of belonging, and communion with the public that became more important as he got older.

SIMON CALLOW

I don't think it would be right to say that he found writing lonely, I don't think he did because he was surrounded by his characters you know they were pouring through his head and all of

that but nonetheless, it's just you, and I think the sense of collaboration and this family feeling that they had, it's very akin to what he felt about society at large, having been as a little boy dispossessed and thrown out and feeling himself to be rejected and low and unregarded and uneducated and hungry and desperate and all of those things, he was always looking to heal that and to cure that and the theatre was a great place, can be a great place to feel that. Everybody pulling together but also that's what he was trying to do in his books, was to say we are all part of the same thing, society is a one big body, all limbs of the same thing, it's very neatly clipped in a Christmas Carol, where Scrooge's nephew Fred says Christmas is the one time when men and women open their shut up hearts freely and look on those below them as fellow passengers to the grave.

READING THREE: A CHRISTMAS CAROL

The Phantom slowly, gravely, silently approached. When it came, Scrooge bent down upon his knee; for in the very air through which this Spirit moved it seemed to scatter gloom and mystery.

It was shrouded in a deep black garment, which concealed its head, its face, its form, and left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand. But for this it would have been difficult to detach its figure from the night, and separate it from the darkness by which it was surrounded.

"I am in the presence of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come?" said Scrooge.

The Spirit answered not, but pointed downward with its hand.

"Ghost of the Future!" he exclaimed, "I fear you more than any spectre I have seen. But as I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart. Will you not speak to me?"

It gave him no reply. The hand was pointed straight before them.

"Lead on," said Scrooge. "Lead on. The night is waning fast, and it is precious time to me, I know. Lead on, Spirit."

On Tuesday the 15th of March 1870, Dickens performed A Christmas Carol for the last time before an audience of 2,000. He came on to the stage – so frail he needed walking sticks – to a standing ovation and cheers. At the end he gave a speech:

Ladies and Gentlemen, it would be worse than idle, for it would be hypocritical and unfeeling, if I were to disguise that I close this episode of my life with feelings of very considerable pain. For some fifteen years in this hall, and in many kindred places, I have had the honour of presenting my own cherished ideas before you for your recognition, and in closely observing your reception of them, I have enjoyed an amount of artistic delight and instruction which perhaps it is given to few men to know. From these garish lights I vanish now for evermore, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, and affectionate farewell.

The crowd exploded in a roaring ovation, everyone waving their handkerchiefs at their beloved author. Dickens blew them a kiss and left the stage, with tears rolling down his face. It was over.

Twelve weeks later, aged only 58 but looking like an old man of 78, Dickens died at his home in Gad's Hill, Kent.

So what do we learn of Charles Dickens through his reading career and public performances?

Professor Dennis Walder is emeritus professor of English literature at the Open University.

DENNIS WALDER END

I think it does open a window for us today on the nature of the man, the kind of genius that he was, which had many sides, it allows us to understand better I think the intimacy of his understanding of his relationship with his audience and the audiences understanding with him. You know the famous anecdote of the child who said of Dickens's death "has Father Christmas died too then."

From the beginning to the end of his life, Dickens had a unique sense of theatre. His characters jump off page as if in a clamour to get on to the stage. For that reason, the great

author's works are still performed to this day, as much as they ever were. A fact that would no doubt delight Charles Dickens, the actor, director, stage manager and showman.