

The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English

Volume 5

Article 3

2003

"Heartbreaking to me": Adapting Dickens's Novels for the Stage Great Expectations and David Copperfield

Thomas Larque

University of Kent Canterbury, England

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Larque, Thomas (2003) ""Heartbreaking to me": Adapting Dickens's Novels for the Stage Great Expectations and David Copperfield," *The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English*: Vol. 5 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/tor/vol5/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you by the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Oswald Review: An International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Criticism in the Discipline of English by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

"Heartbreaking to me": Adapting Dickens's Novels for the Stage Great Expectations and David Copperfield

Keywords

Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, David Copperfield, Victorian Literature

**"Heartbreaking to me":
Adapting Dickens's Novels for the Stage—
Great Expectations and *David Copperfield***

Thomas Larque
University of Kent
Canterbury, England

From the moment that they were written, and in many cases while they were still being written and publication was not complete, the novels of Charles Dickens were adapted for the stage. Dickens's opinion of this transformation of his stories into stage plays was almost universally negative and, although occasionally "more or less satisfied [. . .] with individual performances" (Forster), he loathed these adaptations, which were "the subject of complaint with him incessantly" (Forster). A large part of his objections rested on the lack of reasonable copyright protection for his work (he had no control over

the number or type of adaptations and gained no share in their profits), but he also objected to the way in which his work was transformed. He declared a particular *Christmas Carol* to be "heart-breaking to me" (Forster) and took his revenge upon one theatrical adaptor by caricaturing and maligning him as the "literary gentleman" in a section of *Nicholas Nickleby* (Pemberton 142). In Dickens's opinion, at least, the vast majority of the contemporary dramatisations of his novels seem to have been both literary and theatrical failures.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, stage adaptations of Dickens's novels remain popular and numerous, and while few have achieved long runs on prestigious stages or great critical acclaim—with exceptions, such as Patrick Stewart's one man Broadway *Christmas Carol* and, more distantly, West End musicals of *Oliver!* and *Pickwick*—many have been very popular with the audiences for which they have been designed. This essay will examine a number of theatrical adaptations of Dickens's *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* and will suggest that modern dramatisations of these novels are often more

successful than the adaptations that Dickens himself knew, as a result of major changes in theatrical techniques that allow a more accurate reproduction of novelistic conventions than was possible in Victorian theatre.

One of the major motivations for adapting Dickens's works for the stage is the author's iconic status, and this has an important influence on the way in which Dickens's works are presented theatrically. In the same way that Shakespeare is considered the most important English dramatist (and general writer) and a national icon, Dickens is regarded as "(t)he most popular and internationally known of English novelists" (Wynne-Davies 459). The attraction of dramatisations of Dickens's famous novels is similar to the attraction offered by Shakespeare's plays. Dickens's literary reputation seems to offer a guarantee of 'Classic' entertainment with a story of high literary quality, and this tends to attract larger audiences than unknown new plays or adaptations of less well known novels. Despite their sharing an iconic status as 'Classic' writers, however, there are important differences in the way that Dickens's and Shakespeare's works are presented

theatrically, and these contrasts— not entirely based on the contrasting genres of the original works— provide a useful starting point for considering the way in which Dickens's novels are usually adapted for the stage.

The most obvious difference between modern adaptations of Dickens's novels and performances of Shakespeare's plays is the relative faithfulness to the period and setting of the original work. All of the theatrical adaptations of Dickens's novels that I have looked at are firmly set in the period of the original story, with such great attention to historical detail that one writer feels the need to apologise in the published script for using the word "snob" (Leonard ii) when the word was first used ten years after the story supposedly took place. Shakespearean performances over the past forty years, on the other hand, have tended to set the productions in modern dress or in a historical period completely different from that in which the play was written or in which the story was originally set.

Theorists, seeking to explain and encourage these

ahistorical adaptations, have described them as an expression of the universality of Shakespeare's stories; "(s)uddenly contemporary events relate absolutely to the matters with which the play is concerned" (Elsom 19) and this can be expressed by, for example, drawing links between Hamlet's speech about the battle for "a barren piece of ground" and the Falklands War (Elsom 18), or by putting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a Second World War setting, using Shakespeare's works as a lens through which to see the present day or an alternate historical period (Larque 21). There have been modernised transformations of Dickens's novels of this kind—including a theatrical *Nicholas Nickleby* set in the 1950s, which was touring Kent in England when this essay was written, and film adaptations based on *Great Expectations* and *Christmas Carol* set in the modern day—but such adaptations of Dickens are very rare, while for Shakespeare they are now almost the norm.

Why are theatrical adaptations of Dickens's novels so firmly fixed in the Dickensian period? One answer might be that Dickens's original works, being novels,

present much more detailed and therefore more fixed descriptions of people and places. Shakespeare's plays, by contrast, offer a famously flexible background and environment (less prescriptive than the vast majority of novels and even than many stage plays). A person familiar with the text of *Macbeth* knows little more than that the action is set in a barely defined castle near a wood and knows next to nothing about the appearance of the characters since Shakespeare as a dramatist leaves such issues to be defined by the actors, costumes, and settings of a particular production. Persons familiar with *David Copperfield*, on the other hand, are given intimate physical descriptions of places and people and are therefore more likely to be disappointed if the theatrical presentation of these places and characters is markedly different from their own mental image drawn from the text. In the most conservative Dickensian adaptations, such as Reg Mitchell's *Great Expectations*, the stage directions are frequently drawn verbatim from the novel, forcing the director and actors to base their production exactly upon Dickens's original text (Magwitch is "(a) fearful man, all in coarse grey,

with a great iron on his leg' "[Mitchell 3] and "Pip 'raised the latch of the door and peeped in' " [Mitchell 4]) offering virtually no leeway at all for inventive or original directorial decisions that might alter the spirit or atmosphere of the original text. This attempt to reproduce exactly the traditional images associated with Dickens's original works is still more obvious in Southworth's usually more inventive adaptation of *David Copperfield* when one stage direction carefully details a scene as described by Dickens ("DANIEL PEGGOTTY, his arms held open for EMILY [. . .] to run into" [Southworth 66]), setting out every gesture and facial expression, and concludes "See Phiz illustration" (Southworth 66)—encouraging the twentieth-century director to recreate exactly, in tableau, the illustration first attached to the text in the 1850s.

This impulse among Dickensian adaptors to try to recreate the original work rather than giving an inventive theatrical rereading of the work from a new perspective (as is more common with modern performances of Shakespeare) creates two major difficulties that any successful adaptation of this kind must avoid. On the one hand, the writer must not

concentrate on faithfully recreating the novel to such an extent that the necessary theatricality of a stage work is lost (any stage play must above all seek to offer an entertaining theatrical experience for its audience), but, on the other hand, if the author is attempting a reasonably faithful recreation of the novel, the stage play must offer at least the spirit, atmosphere, and a large part of the plot of the original work—allowing those who have read the novel to feel that they have seen its major elements recreated in the stage version. John Brougham's nineteenth-century adaptation of *David Copperfield* (performed within a year of the book's original publication) seems to offer good examples of both of these failings in what, to modern eyes at least, seems to be a remarkably unsuccessful attempt to transfer Dickens's novel to the stage.

The first problem with Brougham's adaptation is his failure to give any theatrical structure to the elements of the plot that he uses in his stage version. Ignoring David's childhood and the stories of his marriages, he focuses on Emily's seduction by Steerforth and Uriah Heep's manipulation of the Wickfields and exposure by Micawber. Apparently

unable to find a way of recreating the long sweeps of narrative that lead up to these events in Dickens's novel he begins *in medias res* with Uriah established as a villain by his behavior and asides in his first scene and with Steerforth showing clear signs of his "animal spirits" (Brougham 5) and amoral interest in young women from his first appearance. The context and suspense established in Dickens's original work is almost all removed, and Brougham's narrative advances in a number of unlikely leaps and revelations without any sense of a smoothly developing plot. Emily's disappearance is forgotten about for a number of scenes and then suddenly reintroduced by David's perfunctorily revealing to Peggotty—without any explanation of intervening events—that she has left Steerforth and will return home, a declaration that he concludes by revealing the presence of Emily herself as if from nowhere.

Brougham fails not only to present a satisfactory stage play but also to deliver any real sense of the novel he is adapting. The character of David Copperfield himself becomes almost entirely incidental to the plot of Brougham's play. David's own story—including his childhood and marriages—

is not referred to at all. His role as narrator and observer is reduced to brief declarations, asides, that Heep is a "serpent" that he would "like to strangle" (Brougham 9). Apart from his unexplained role in Emily's reappearance, his bringing Steerforth into the Peggotty household, and brief explicatory conversations with Agnes and Micawber, David has no significant role in the play that bears his name (a fact that Brougham seeks to conceal by having the last words of the play a Micawber toast to David as if he had been the central character after all). Richard Fulkerson suggests that all Victorian adaptations of *David Copperfield* faced the same difficulties—being unable to cope with the "carefully unified *Bildungsroman*" (Fulkerson 263) basis of the novel, or the "complex and changing" nature of David's "character and his growth" (Fulkerson 263), and so being forced to ignore the novel's central themes and character in order to focus on subplots. Fulkerson concludes that "the only way to make an effective play from the novel [...] is to ignore David [...] the only way to stage *Copperfield* is not to stage *Copperfield*" (Fulkerson 263).

Fulkerson seems to believe that his conclusion on the impossibility of dealing with the character of David in stage adaptations of *David Copperfield* holds true for all plays based on the novel, but the modern adaptations of *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* that I have looked at (all published after Fulkerson's dissertation) seem to suggest that the problems that Fulkerson refers to were specifically attributable to the methods and traditions of Victorian Theatre and that modern authorial and theatrical techniques have allowed more recent writers to solve the problem of dramatising *Bildungsroman* novels—allowing them to restore the central characters to their proper place. The occasional theatrical aside apart, Brougham's dramatisation follows the Victorian tradition of trying to appear entirely naturalistic (in the theatrical sense of realistic representation). Although gaps between scenes can last weeks, months, or years, the action seen on the stage takes place in real time and the play is dramatised in such a way that the audience seems to be watching and eavesdropping on real conversations. Conventions of this kind depend upon dialogue or physical

action and offer no way of staging the elements of a novel that cannot be physically performed on a stage. As a result there is no place for the novelistic narration, which is a major part of both *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*.

Modern dramatists, on the other hand, frequently make use of a convention of theatrical narration—allowing characters or narrators to speak directly to the audience in a non-naturalistic fashion—which is ideally suited to the dramatisation of novels such as *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield*, which rely, in their original format, so heavily upon the narrative commentary of major characters (and equally well with novels like *Christmas Carol* which depend upon the narrative commentary of the author). Almost all of the dramatisations that I have examined make use of this convention, generally having the adult Pip or David comment upon the story of his younger self. This makes it possible, for example, for the audience of Hugh Leonard's *Great Expectations* to understand Pip's thoughts and feelings when he stands in the churchyard looking at his parents' grave—a

scene that would have been all but impossible to stage with purely naturalistic speech since Pip has nobody to declare his feelings to and little motivation for a monologue. By retaining Pip and David's narratorial voice, the authors of these adaptations ensure the primacy of the eponymous character and return him to his central position as observer and commentator upon his own life — bringing the adaptations closer to the text and spirit of the original novel than Brougham and his Victorian contemporaries found possible.

Modern theatrical conventions also allow a greater flexibility in staging and setting. While Brougham's play was apparently performed in front of realistic scenery (probably a combination of painted backdrops and extensive props), restricting the action to a small number of fixed locations, modern productions usually use minimalist and flexible stagings, drawing extensively on the imagination of the audience and allowing smooth and rapid movement from place to place and time to time without the necessity for cumbersome breaks to change scenery. This means that, in Matthew Francis's *David Copperfield*, for example, David can move

within seconds from Blunderstone Rookery to a journey by cart with Barkis to Salem House (represented by David and Barkis simply “jogging along” to a soundtrack of “(t)he trotting of hooves” [Francis 15]), reproducing the swift movement between these locations in Dickens’s novel, an effect that Brougham’s adaptation—hampered by naturalism—was unable to reproduce. Similarly while Brougham’s naturalism demands that each actor have only one role and each role be played by only one actor, the modern flexibility between actors and characters allows modern dramatists to begin with a young actor playing David’s childhood and adolescent self and move on to an adult actor to play him when he has grown up. This offers a simple theatrical solution to the problem that Fulkerson notices in portraying the “growth” of a “complex and changing” character (Fulkerson 263), allowing David physically to change and grow onstage. Together these modern theatrical conventions allow a more accurate reproduction of the sweeping *Bildungsroman* story of a life within the novel, making it possible to stage the many alterations of time and place that are essential to Dickens’s narratives.

Modern adaptors, then, are able to use current theatrical techniques to reproduce the complex flow of the plots of the original novels and the narrated spirit of their narrative structure, but how successful are these adaptations as works of theatre? Reg Mitchell's *Great Expectations* and Guy Williams's adaptation of the childhood section (up to David's adoption by Aunt Betsy) show that very effective stage plays can be created simply by abridging Dickens's novels, staging appropriate sections of dialogue and action from the original novel and adding only a few new bridging lines and stage actions invented by the adaptor. The skill involved in this type of adaptation is very much like that used to produce abridged readings of the novels, of kind commonly transmitted on radio or recorded on audio books. It is possible to transform Dickens's novels into plays this way simply because Dickens writes in a naturally theatrical manner, with a concentration upon the reader's mental image of the physical appearance of place and person, with detailed descriptions of posture and gesture, and with a dialogue designed to be read aloud,

encouraging the reader to imagine the action of the novel in his own mind as a sort of performance presented to his imagination. It is a relatively simple matter, therefore, physically to stage the scenes that Dickens plays out in his novels since the key scenes in his works depend upon an almost overtly theatrical dialogue between characters to drive the story forward. The cruxes and the climaxes of particular plots and subplots, including virtually all of the most memorable and important scenes in the novels, are almost invariably based around direct conversation and small-scale physical interaction between characters, in which all of the most important information is given through spoken words or descriptions of action. Although the linking material between these key scenes may cause greater difficulties to a straightforward stage adaptation—since Dickens uses more specifically genre-based techniques such as novelistic narration and swift movement between times and places—most of the difficulties created by these sections are smoothed out by the abstract techniques of modern theatre which, as described above, allow novelistic narration and swift movement between times and

places when these are demanded by the novel's text.

As a result, therefore, once the problems with the linking material have been resolved, the key scenes of Dickens's works are ideally suited to adaptation for stage performances, which similarly rely upon spoken dialogue and physical action. Reg Mitchell's staging of Pip's second visit to Miss Havisham, for example, is quite simply produced by taking all of the dialogue written by Dickens, snipping out any that is unnecessary for the progression of the scene (such as the reference to the "bride-cake" [Dickens, ed. Mitchell 74] and Pip's willingness to play cards, which Miss Havisham does not actually make him do), moving small sections to make a clearer dramatic structure (Miss Havisham's command to be walked is moved to an earlier section of the scene so that Pip and Miss Havisham will have something to do physically while onstage) and adding as theatrical narration some of the novel's description of the room and feelings about it. Although a large section of Dickens's original passage is removed — more physical description, and some physical actions, such as moving between rooms — none of this is actually necessary

to the audience's understanding of the scene, and some at least can be represented by the physical appearance of the stage setting and the costumes and physical actions of the actors. The resulting play, while almost entirely faithful to Dickens's original work, also proves to be very effective theatre.

The main criticism which can be made of these deliberately faithful adaptations of the novels (effectively nothing more than abridgements) is that they do not take full advantage of the possibilities of the new medium, the theatre. The alternative, in the selection of plays that I have examined, is to write an adaptation with original and specifically theatrical elements added to the events of the novel, giving the text new shape and meaning but not going so far as to change the basic plot or setting of the original. This is often done by taking a theatrical convention (such as the doubling of parts or the use of songs and music) and making it an integral part of the play's text. For example, Hugh Leonard — like most of the other adaptors — uses a child actor to play the young Pip and an adult actor to play him as a grown

man, but he dramatises the lasting influence that Pip's childhood has over him and the conflict between his old "country boy" self "and the young man he becomes" (Leonard ii) by having the two Pips interact throughout the play. Leonard begins the play with a prologue that shows the adult Pip settling into and enjoying the benefits of his new gentlemanly status, but he is confronted and shaken by the appearance of a mysterious figure who has apparently been following him repeatedly and who disappears back into the shadows before Herbert can see him — a young boy in "Sunday best, country style" (Leonard 1) who is later revealed to be Young Pip himself. Young Pip then enacts Pip's childhood, with narrative descriptions of his thoughts from the adult Pip. Pip's growth to adulthood is then represented by the adult Pip taking over the role from Young Pip in the middle of a sentence, during a conversation with Biddy. While most adaptors abandon Pip and David's roles when they reach adulthood, the actor playing the adult character having taken an onstage role, Leonard simply exchanges the roles of the two Pips with Young Pip becoming "the observer" (Leonard 26), altering the spirit of

Dickens's text. While Dickens has the adult Pip observe his childhood, looking back and writing out his experiences, Leonard also has the child Pip observe his adulthood, with some disapproval, hinting that the adult Pip has betrayed his childhood origins. Young Pip becomes a narrator himself at the point at which the adult Pip's childhood reaches out to touch him and the death of his sister forces him to return to his childhood home. When adult Pip decides to support Herbert, Young Pip helps him to list the gentlemanly qualities that Herbert has instilled in him, adding the reproof "I learned that all by myself" (Leonard 50) when Pip says that Herbert did not teach him snobbishness—a reproof that Leonard's staging suggests is tied up with Pip's memories of his more humble and innocent origins, which haunt him in the person of Young Pip. The night that Magwitch arrives is given added emphasis as the night that Pip really grows up. Young Pip establishes a gap between him and his older self by saying "I was—he was - [. . .] twenty-three" (Leonard 53). Finally, when Pip is reduced to poverty and comes to terms with his tainted background—deciding to stay with the formerly repellant

Magwitch—Young Pip appears “no longer scowling” (Leonard 64) to suggest that Pip has managed to reconcile himself to his humble and confused childhood and to lay his ghosts to rest. While devout purists might object to such additions as alterations of Dickens’s original text, in the theatre they offer a way of introducing modern ideas and relating critically to the text without altering the presentation of the text to the extent that modern dress productions of Shakespeare routinely do.

Modern theatrical techniques, therefore, seem much more firmly suited to the adaptation of Dickens’s novels than were the techniques used by Brougham and others writing during Dickens’s life. Thus, twentieth- and twenty-first-century adaptations of *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* seem most often to be very successful both as works of theatre and as representations of the original plot and spirit of Dickens’s novels, with some using additions to the text based on theatrical techniques to produce a more modern reading of the text in question and a specifically theatrical response to Dickens’s work.

Had Dickens lived to the present day, modern adaptors might have convinced him that his works *could* be represented on the stage without damaging their original spirit or literary integrity.

Works Cited

- Brougham, John. *David Copperfield*. London: Samuel French, 1851.
- Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Ed. Jeremy Tambling. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966.
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Ed. Robin Gilmour. London: Everyman, 1994.
- Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. Ed. Charlotte Mitchell. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.
- Elsom, John, ed. *Is Shakespeare Still Our Contemporary?* London: Routledge, 1989.
- Forster, John. *The Life of Charles Dickens*. London: Cecil Palmer, 1872-74. 17 Feb. 2003.
<[http:// www.lang.nagoya-u.sc.jp/~matsuoka/CD-Forster.html](http://www.lang.nagoya-u.sc.jp/~matsuoka/CD-Forster.html)>.
- Francis, Matthew. *David Copperfield*. London: Samuel French, 1999.
- Fulkerson, Richard. *The Dickens Novel on the Victorian Stage*. Diss. Ohio State U. 1970. Ann Arbor, MI. UMI 1970. 7026286.

Larque, Thomas. Rev. of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, dir.

Matthew Francis. *Shakespeare Bulletin* 20.1 (2002):
20-21.

Leonard, Hugh. *Great Expectations*. London: Samuel
French French, 1995.

Mitchell, Reg. *Great Expectations*. Unpublished. 1994.

Pemberton, T. Edgar. *Charles Dickens and the Stage*. Lon-
don: George Redway, 1888.

Southworth, John. *David Copperfield*. London: Heinemann
Educational Books, 1981.

Williams, Guy. *David Copperfield*. London: MacMillan,
1971.

Wynne-Davies, Marion, ed. *Bloomsbury Guide to English
Literature*. London: Bloomsbury, 1989.