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Dickens' Interest in the Theatre

Alberta M. Speicher

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DICKENS' INTEREST IN THE THEATRE

by

Alberta Marie Speicher

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in English in
the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Alberta Speicher

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PREFACE

In this study I have not been concerned with Charles Dickens as the man, or humorist, or novelist; but I have confined my investigation to Charles Dickens' interest in the theatre. I shall show how he tried to express his theatrical ambitions by acting, producing, and directing plays though he was really a novelist; and how his entire career was colored by his interest in these various aspects of the theatre.

I wish to acknowledge my appreciation to all who have so kindly assisted me in my efforts. To Dr. John S. Harrison, I am particularly grateful for his untiring patience and many valuable suggestions which have made possible this work in its final form. To those friends and students who have helpfully given hints and aided by critically reading my paper I offer my sincere thanks.

Alberta Speicher

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DICKENS' INTEREST IN THE THEATRE

Chapter I

DICKENS' EARLY NATURAL LEANINGS TOWARD THE THEATRE

Most people, in thinking of Charles Dickens, associate him with the field of the novel, a field in which he did gain renown. They are generally unaware of the fact that this field was not the one which held his greatest interest. A careful study of his works as well as the writings about him shows clearly that he was, from early childhood, interested in acting and other theatrical pursuits.

Several authorities, including his biographers, tell us that Charles Dickens was constantly entertaining people. On many occasions in his childhood he was placed on a chair, for a stage, to recite for guests his little ditties; or he and his sister Fanny were scheduled on the family's entertainment list to sing a funny song.

We see that young Charles came by his love for the theatre very naturally through the influences of his father. Charles tells us of many instances in which his father would organize the whole family in to a veritable stock company. It would be Charles' part to speak and sing, along with his sister Fanny, curious songs and ditties taught him

1. Forster, John, The Life of Charles Dickens, p. 11.

by his father. They would change their living room into a stage and invite friends to be their audience seated in the next room. Charles was quite a favorite even during these young days and he took his acting seriously. Sometimes he would go for weeks impersonating a certain character. "I have been Tom Jones (a child's Tom Jones, a harmless creature) for a week. I have sustained my own idea of Roderick Random for a month at a stretch. I have a greedy relish for a few volumes of voyages and travels — I forgot what, now — that were on the shelves: and for days and days I can remember to have gone about my region of our house, armed with the centre-piece out of an old set of boot-trees: the perfect realisation of Captain Somebody, of the royal British Navy, in danger of being beset by savages, and resolved to sell my life at a great price."¹ When he played his part in these home theatricals he is said to have been so small that it was necessary to elevate him on chairs and tables, the more effectively to display ^{his} talents.

He also had a turn at the private-theatricals sponsored by his father and Mr. Lamert in Ordinance Hospital. This was a great rambling place that gave him ample opportunity to display his talents. A few times during these years Dickens would be granted the opportunity of going to the real theatre, and "to be taken out for a walk into the real town, especially if it were anywhere about Covent Garden or the Strand;

1. Forster, John, The Life of Charles Dickens, p. 11.

this perfectly entranced him."¹ It was always a great treat to him, when visiting his mother's elder brother, and his Godfather in London, to see the London nights with their lights and merriment. While on these London visits he frequently was given opportunities to participate in theatricals. It was on one of these that he so well displayed his accomplishment at comic song that a guest of his Godfather who heard his performance, pronounced him to be a "prodigy".

One of the most memorable occasions of Dickens' young life was his visit to the theatre. He tells us that as well as he can remember, James Lamert, who was at the time courting his aunt, took him "at a very tender age" to the theatre for the first time. We have no way of knowing what this exact age was, but we assume it to be somewhere around six years; at any rate Charles Dickens was old enough to remember his reactions. In his own words he says: "How my young heart leapt with terror as the wicked king Richard backed up and bumped against a box in which he was."² Dickens also tells us how on subsequent visits to the same sanctuary "wondrous secrets" were revealed to him. Not the least terrific of these secrets were the witches in Macbeth, who in his child's eye "bore an awful resemblance to the thanes and other proper inhabitants of Scotland."³ He was also greatly disturbed by the "good king Duncan, who couldn't rest in his grave, but was constantly coming out of it, and

1. Ibid, p. 7.

2. Ibid, p. 7.

3. Ibid, p. 7.

calling himself someone else."¹ James Lambert, who later became his uncle, also built for young Charles a small theatre. Charles Dickens says it was the only fanciful reality to his life up to that time and he cherished it highly. As we understand it, it probably would be comparable to a marionette theatre of today.

Dickens was liked among his boy chums because he was always putting on some kind of a small show for them, for instance, reciting some poem, or singing some silly song. Dickens says: "I made some efforts to entertain them over our work with ... some of the old readings, which were fast perishing out of my mind."² Even at this early age and in the dark circumstances that encompassed him, Dickens usually followed the theatre's art whenever possible. He tells us that his usual way home from the warehouse on Saturday evening was "over the Blackfriars-bridge, and down that turning in the Blackfriars-road ... I have been seduced more than once in that street on a Saturday night, by a show-van at a corner; and have gone in, with a very motley assemblage, to see the "fat-pig," the "Wild-indian," and the "Little-lady."³

We can very readily understand what Charles Dickens meant when he wrote in a letter to Mrs. William Howill: "I was a great writer at eight years old or so, — was an actor and a speaker from a baby."⁴

1. Ibid, p. 7.

2. Ibid, p. 29.

3. Ibid, p. 32

4. Von Amerongen, J. B., The Actor in Dickens, p. 3.

Chapter II

DICKENS AS ACTOR- DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER OF PLAYS

A. Actor

Had not gates with more favorable opportunities opened to him Dickens would no doubt have become an actor instead of "Boz" the writer. Dickens, we see, was always interested intimately in the theatre even during his school days at Wellington (boarding school) house. There he took the lead in getting up amateur theatricals, a pursuit and a hobby of which he never tired.¹

From youth to age everything dramatic fascinated Charles Dickens. In his boyhood he haunted the cheap and popular theatres of London. Throughout the Doctor Common's days as a reporter, Dickens' mind was constantly on the stage. "He went to the theatre almost every night for a long time; he studied and practiced himself in parts of the older Mathews, who was at the time leading man for the Covent Garden Company. Then he resolved to make his first plunge in the direction of securing the leading role for himself, and finally wrote to make an offer of himself to Covent Garden. He says: 'I wrote to Bartley, who was stage-manager and told him how young I was, and exactly what I thought I could do; and that I believed I had a strong perception of character and ability,

1. Leacock, Stephen, Charles Dickens, p. 18.

and a natural power of reproducing in my own person what I observed in others.... There must have been something in my letter that struck the authorities, for Bartley wrote to me almost immediately to say that they were busy getting up the Hunchback (so they were), but that they would communicate with me again, in a fortnight. Punctual to the time another letter came, with an appointment to do anything of Mathews' I pleased, before him and Charles Kemble, on a certain day at the theatre. My sister Fanny was in the secret, and was to go with me to play the songs. I was laid up when the day came, with a terrible bad cold and an inflammation of the face; the beginning of the bye, of that annoyance in one ear to which I am subject this very day. I wrote to say so, and added that I would resume my application next season."¹ The date of this occurrence was approximately 1831 during Dicken's Doctor Commons' days when he was a writer for the journalism office. In the words of Dickens: "the newspaper business wasn't a very good living and wearily uncertain; which fact made me think of the theatre in quite a business way. I went to some theatre every night, with very few exceptions, for at least three years, really studying the bills first, and going to the theatre where I might see the best acting, and especially to see Mathews whenever he played. I practiced immensely (even such things as walking in and out, and sitting down in a chair); often four to five or six hours a day: shut up in my own room or walking about in the field. I prescribed to myself, too, a sort of Hamiltonian system for learning parts and learned a great number."²

1. Forster, John, pp. 59-60. *Arthur in Dickens*, pp. 8-10.
 2. Ibid., p. 380.

When Charles Dickens was twenty-one he wrote and performed with members of his family and circle of acquaintance The O'Thello, a burlesque of Shakespeare's tragedy. Since the various parts of the play were written and distributed in loose leaf form to the actors, they have forever been lost to posterity. Of special interest to us are the theatricals he got up in April, 1833. The earliest of his play-bills we possess is dated this time, 1833, and on it are the names of the whole Dickens family except the mother. Charles Dickens at this time not only played the principle part but also managed the whole affair. "As early as 1836, during the publication of Pickwick, he took part in his own farce, The Strange Gentleman, at the St. James Theatre. Again in 1838 when Nickleby was in the making and Dickens was at Portsmouth with Forster, he asked for a small part at the theatre there. It also seems to be a generally accepted fact that at one time he was a member of the company of T. D. Davenport, a theatrical manager on the southern circuits who is said to have uttered the words to Dickens, 'Young man, get back to your scribbling'. This taunt may have saved Dickens for literature."¹ However at this same time we have from an "old supernumerary": "Ah, Mr. Dickens, if it hadn't been for them books, what an actor you would have made." Also from the master carpenter at one of the theatres when Dickens had performed we have: "'Ah, Sir, it's a unversal observation in the profession Sir, that it was a great loss to the public when you took to writing books.'"²

1. Von Amerongen, J. B., The Actor in Dickens, pp. 9-10.

2. *Ibid.*

Dickens, likewise believed in his ability. To Bulwer he wrote (May 1st 1851): "Assumption has charms for me so delightful that I feel a loss of, ah! I can't say what exquisite foolery, when I lose a chance of being some one in voice, etc., not at all like myself".¹ Perhaps Dickens was more of an impersonator, or an inspired impressionist than he was an actor. "Dickens," say his friends, "had a power of projecting himself into shapes and suggestions of his fancy which is one of the marvels of creative imagination, and what he desired to express he became." Forster adds; "His strength was rather in the vividness and variety of his assumptions than in the completeness, finish, or ideality he could give to any part of them." Dickens here was perhaps improvising rather than acting. An actor is a man who can do a thing not once but again and again, who can lose himself in his part and stay lost. So it was not, perhaps, as an actor that Dickens came into his own, but rather when he appeared on the public platform in the dramatic reading of his written works. Coming from one of his fellow actors we have the statement: "When acting with Dickens," Mrs. Compton says, "I felt perfect confidence and I believed that his tact and talent would have enabled him to surmount all sudden difficulties arising during a performance." "Robert Bell wrote to Forster, 'Dickens was glorious as Babadil. He literally floated in braggadocia'. ... It was a capital conception and acted to its height!"²

These and other quotations like them give us some notion of the

1. Ibid., pp. 53-54

2. Ibid., p. 20.

relative success of Charles Dickens as an actor. In The Actor in Charles Dickens, Mr. Von Amerongen tells us that "by far the greatest success was Dickens' and Lemans' joint work, Mr. Nightengale's Diary. Nowhere did he prove himself an apter pupil of the great 'quick-change' actor than in this piece, alternately assuming five different characters with marvellous rapidity." The remark was made after the performance that "never had been seen such changes of face and form".

"An altogether different side of his talent as an actor did he show in Collins' melodrama. In 'The Lighthouse', in this play we have three old men cut off from the mainland by a month's storm. Awakened by want of food, one of them, Aaron Gurnock, becomes wholly possessed of the idea that he is guilty of a murder to which he has passively consented. In the end the party is relieved and the old man's innocence is established. Professor Morley gives a graphic description of the masterly way in which Dickens portrayed the various changes in the old conscience-stricken man. Mrs. Cowden Clark calls it, 'a wonderful impersonation, very imaginative, very original, very wild, very striking; his grandly intelligent eyes were made to assume a wondering look, a sad, scared, lost gaze, as of one whose spirit was away from present objects.'¹ Another comment which is very complimentary to an actor, is the ability to extemporize in times of stress. For instance, it is said that toward the end of A Good Night's Rest Mark Lemon once lost his cue. Dickens came to the rescue and turned the loss into a triumph. ... And now, in taking a review of his work as an actor, we find that he had an especially strong relish for farce, in which, as has been observed, Mathews was his model. On the few occasions when he appeared

1. Ibid., p. 24.

to a gain. With rueful countenance Dickens had said, "He must be in an awful state of mind, his memory is going now." It saved the day for Mr. Lemon and even brought a laugh from the audience.

Here and there, however, scattered between his praises are a few less favorable notes and we may as well know these too. The comment was occasionally made that he had a "rather hard voice and angular gestures". Godfrey Turner speaks of a "dry conventional exaggeration which sometimes checked the natural flow of his humour". On another occasion we hear that Lord Melbourne said: "I knew the comedy was dull, but I did not know it was so d--d dull". The comedy he refers to here is Everyman in his Humour, in which Dickens played the part of Bobadil. Mr. Von Amerongen comes to the rescue by saying that "it is very likely that this falling-off of interest was due to the play and not to the players." Be this as it may we are aware of the fact that Charles Dickens "had an instinctive feeling for what was scenic and effective in the stage sense. When he appeared as a reader of his own works, he was an impersonator; and noticeably careful to have the stage accessories exactly right."

The year 1857 probably saw Dickens for the last time as a public actor. Collins, in his preface to the published edition of The Frozen Deep in narrative form, writes of this last appearance, when he played Richard Wardour, that Dickens surpassed himself. "The trite phrase is the true phrase to describe the magnificence of his acting. He electrified the audience. ...And now, in taking a review of his activities as an actor, we find that he had an especially strong relish for farce, in which, as has been observed, Mathews was his model. On the few occasions when he appeared

in more serious parts he reminded his critics strongly of the great French actor, Frederic Lemaiter in his best days."¹

Dickens always loved the stage, and acting. "In a letter to Mrs. Cowden-Clark (1859) he reminds her with enthusiasm, not unmixed with melancholy of the heydays when they used to act together in Shakespeare's Merry Wives. At the close he writes; 'I begin to think that the real world, and this the sham, that goes out with the lights'. ... After a successful amateur performance at Glassglow he observed to this same fellow-player, 'Blow domestic hearth! I should like to be going all over the country and acting everywhere. There is nothing in the whole world equal to seeing the house rise to you, one sea of delighted faces, one hurrah of applause.'²

Charles Dickens did not confine his acting to the stage alone, it was so much a part of his being that he carried it over into his everyday life. He lived the character he wished to portray. As an example: Dickens thoroughly enjoyed his part as Bobadil-- he even talked it, and wrote it long before he acted it on the stage. "His letters to his friends are full of oaths a la Bobadil, such as 'by the body of Caesar', or by the foot Pharoah! ... To Forster he wrote, 'The player Mac hath bidden me to eat and drink with him. An' I go not, I am a hog, and not a soldier. But as thou goest not Beware! citizens! Look at it. Thine as though merriest, (signed) 'Bobadil', addressed Unto Master Kately."³ The part which Forster

1. Von Amerongen, J.B. The Actor in Dickens, p. 25.

2. Ibid. 29

3. Ibid. 29

was to play in the same play.

To give another example of a little different nature, to show the facts of his living in The Theatrical realm of Make-believe, I cite the following: So complete was this realm of make-believe that the characters of his novels even took on flesh and blood in his eyes. The story is told that one day while out walking with some friends, he suggested to them that they all cross the street "that Micawber was coming down that side and he didn't want to meet him."

"Woolcott calls Dickens a 'side-tracked' or 'thwarted' actor".¹ Of course, we know it is true that he did tend definitely toward the theatrical in dress. Some of his friends even "called his attire foppish, with the dash of a show-man about it ... He was extremely vain, as witnessed by his habit of constantly quoting expression from his ideal of the 'poseur' in him. He repeatedly gives himself names like the 'sparkler', or the 'Inimitable' ... Even his eldest daughter speaks of his gorgeous waistcoat and his love of gay and bright colours; and his friend Firth, who painted his well-known portrait, calls his taste 'very curious'."²

It was part of Charles Dickens' personality to clown and impersonate people at inopportune places. ... "Talking about Byron to a gentleman present, Dickens suddenly rose up, pushed his hands through his flowing locks, turned down his shirt collar, slapped his brow and exclaimed: 'Stand back! I am suddenly seized with the divine afflatus. Don't disturb me any philanthropic stranger is slapping him into a straight-waistcoat with

1. Ibid., pp. 55-56.

2. Ibid., p. 50.

till I have given birth to my grand conceptions!' There being no paper in the room he stalked with grotesquely melodramatic air to the window and wrote on the white shutter:

'O, Maiden of the amber-dropping hair,
May I, Byronically, thy praises utter?
Drunk with thy beauty, tell me, may I dare
To sing thy paeans borne upon a shutter?'

Mr. Woolcott tells us that one of the reasons for the close friendship between Dickens and Macready was, in his opinion, the mere fact that Macready represented an achievement that Charles Dickens half consciously envied, that of being a great actor.

B. Director

Dickens' work in the theatre did not stop at acting alone. He was more; he was the director, and as I shall show you a little farther on he was, in some instances, the producer. The entire show centered around him.

Dickens was always the life and soul of every performance he was connected with. He was actor, stage-manager, producer, and autocrat at large; and always gave himself to the play with exuberant enthusiasm. There can be no doubt that the theatre was one of his great loves. He describes himself with his coat off, "the stage-manager and universal director urging impracticable ladies and impossible gentlemen on to the very confines of insanity, shouting and driving about to an extent which would justify any philanthropic stranger in clapping him into a straight-waistcoat without further inquiry! ... Any amount of times he goes over the various

parts with his performers (who are to obey him implicitly, even when they

Ibid., p. 17.

happen to be professionals), till gesture and pitch of voice are as he wants them."¹ Dickens did not stop with instructing his actors in character portrayal; he even gave them the most minute directions about their costume. In this way we see that Dickens had a wonderful feeling for stage effects. In a letter to Mary Boyle he writes: "Kately's dress is a very plain, purple gown, like a Blue coat boy's. Downright's dress is also very sober, chiefly brown and grey. All the rest of us are very bright. I (Bobadil) am flaming red". This trait, of minutely designing his color scheme for his stage effects, he carried into his work as a reader, for he was always very conscious of his color effect on his reading platform. Again Mrs. Cowden Clark helps us out by describing her work with Charles Dickens in an article she wrote for the "Gentlemen's Magazine" (December, 1876) saying: "Charles Dickens was ever present [at all rehearsals] superintending, directing, suggesting with sleepless activity and vigilance; the essence of punctuality and methodical precision himself, he kept incessant watch that others should be unfailingly attentive and careful throughout. The rehearsals under Charles Dickens were strictly devoted to work -- serious, earnest work. The consequence was that when the evening of performance came, the pieces went off with a smoothness and polish that belong only to finished stage-business and practiced performers. He was always there among the first arrivals at rehearsals. He had a small table, placed to one side of the stage, at which he generally set when scenes in which he took no part were rehearsed. ... He never seemed

¹-Ibid., p. 27.

to overlook anything but noted the very slightest point that conduced to the 'going well' of the whole performance."¹

Dickens in fact took his managerial duties so to heart that he had a set of rules printed which were hung in plain view at the theatre. Forster gives these to us in his biography of Charles Dickens and states that they were followed with minute exactness by the actors.

A copy of these rules together with Mr. Dickens' introductory note is given below:

"I hope everybody concerned will abide by the following regulations and will aid in strictly carrying them out.

1.-Silence on the stage and in the theatre, to be faithfully observed; the lobbies, etc., being always available for conversation.

2.-No book to be referred to on the stage; but those who are imperfect in their lines are to take their words from the prompter.

3.-Everyone to act as nearly as possible, as on the night of performance.

4.-Everyone to speak out as to be audible through the house.

5.-Every mistake of exit, entrance, or situation to be correct three times successfully.

He closes thus: "All who were concerned in the first getting-up of Everyman in his humor, and remember how carefully the stage was always kept then, and who have been engaged in the late rehearsals 'Of Merry Wives, and have experienced the difficulty of getting on and off: of being heard or of hearing anybody else; will, I am sure, acknowledge the indispensable necessity of these regulations."¹

This production of Everyman in his Humour for the Leigh Hunt benefit

1. Forster, p. 468.

must have provided quite an undertaking to Dickens, the general management and supreme control being left in his hands. He wrote to Forster, one day during rehearsals, of some of his difficulties which would sound very natural to any director today. The letter reads: "Good Heavens! I find that A. hasn't twelve words, and I am hourly in expectation of rebellion! ... You were right about the green baize that it would certainly muffle the voices; and some of our actors, by Jove, haven't too much of that commodity at the best. ... I made a desperate effort to get C. to give up his part. Yet in spite of all the trouble he gives me I am sorry for him, he is so evidently hurt by his own sense of not doing well. He clutched the part, however tenaciously; and three weary times we dragged through it last night. ... The infernal E. forgets everything. ... I plainly see that F. when nervous, which he is sure to be, loses his memory. Moreover, his asides are inaudible, even at Miss Kelly's; and as regularly as I stop him to say them again, he exclaims (with a face of agony) that he'll speak loud on the night! as if anybody ever did without doing it always! ... G. was not born for it at all, and is too innately conceited, I much fear, to do anything well. I thought him better last night, but I would as soon laugh at a kitchen poker. ... Fancy H., ten days after the casting of that farce, wanting F's part therein!"¹ All these above quotations are taken from letters written to John Forster during rehearsals. The play came off at last, despite all of Dickens worry and fretting, and it was a very good performance, it would have done credit to any enterprise. It was here and put it on unexpectedly! ... The play came off last night.

1. Ibid., p. 456.

given first on Monday, July 26, at Manchester: Wednesday, July 28, at Liverpool, the comedy being accompanied the first night by A Good Night's Rest and Turning the Tables and on the second night by Comfortable Lodging or Paris in 1750.

While Dickens visited in Canada he was asked to take part in a play there. In his own words: "In Canada I have promised to play at the theatre with the officers for the benefit of a charity." It was this play which he directed and ^{in which he} also carried the leading role; also Mrs. Dickens was in the show. Mr. Dickens mentions the fact that "Katie played a part and played it admirably;" he seemed very proud of her venture.

During Mr. Dickens' trip to Canada he wrote to Forster about his experience in the theatre there. He says, "The theatricals (I think I told you I had been invited to play with the officers of the Coldstream guards here) are, A Roland for an Oliver; Two o'clock in the Morning; and either the Young Widow, or Deaf as a Post. Ladies (unprofessional) are going to play, for the first time: I wrote to Mitchell at New York for a wig for Mr. Snobbington, which has arrived, and is brilliant. If they had done Love, Law and Physick, as at first proposed, I was already 'up' in Flexible having played it of old, before my authorship days; but if it should be Splash in the Young Widow, you will have to do me the favor to imagine me in a smart livery-coat, shining black hat and cockade, white kneecards, white top-boots, blue socks, small whip, red cheeks and dark eyebrows. Conceive Topping's state of mind if I bring this dress home and put it on unexpectedly! ... The play came off last night. The

audience between five and six hundred strong, were invited as a party; a regular table with refreshments being spread in the lobby and saloon. We had a band of twenty-three. ... The theatre was lighted with gas, the scenery was excellent, and the properties were all brought from private houses. ... We 'went on' splendidly; though with nothing very remarkable in the acting way."¹ Dickens was appointed by the group to be their stage-manager and he must have been a good one. In his own words, Mr. Forster tells us, he said; "I am not, let me tell you, placarded as stage-manager for nothing. Everybody was told they would have to submit to the most iron despotism. ... Oh, the pains I have expended, during the last ten days, exceeds in amount anything you imagine. I have regular plots of the scenery made out, and lists of the properties wanted; and had them nailed up by the prompter's chair. Every letter that was to be delivered was written; every piece of money that had to be given provided; and not a single thing lost sight of. I prompted myself when I was not on; when I was, I made the regular prompter of the theatre my deputy; and I never saw anything so perfectly touch and go, as the first two pieces. ... I really do believe I was very funny; at least I know I laughed heartily at myself, and made the part a character.. ... It went off with a roar, all through; and as I am closing this letter, they have told me, I was so well made up that Sir Charles Bagot, who sat in the stage-box, had no idea who played Mr. Snobbington, until the piece was over. ... On Saturday we repeat the first pieces to a paying audience,

1. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 300.

1. Forster, p. 275.

for the manager's benefit."¹

C. Producer

Acting led to directing and directing plays led to producing them. Many of Dickens own works were being produced, and there were even some attempts to dramatize his novels at this early date.

The Christmas Tales of Dickens lend themselves beautifully to being dramatized and Dickens seemed to enjoy seeing performances of them, when they were well given. Sometimes those who were producing the play would call him in rehearsal for suggestions while they were still in rehearsal. Dickens always enjoyed this supervising. Anything that smacked of the theatre interested him and this supervision was practically like a chance at directing the play; this he thoroughly enjoyed. In a letter to John Forster he writes; "I saw the Carol last night, at the Adelphi. Better than usual, and Wright seems to enjoy Bob Cratchit, but heart-breaking to me. Oh heavens! if any forecast of this was in my mind. Yet O. Smith was drearily better than I expected. It is a great comfort to have that kind of meat under done; and his face is quite perfect. Of what he suffered from the adaptations of these books, multiplied remorselessly at every theatre ... it was a subject of complaint with him incessantly."² In successive presentations of these plays Dickens became more and more irate with the incompetence of the performers and

1. Ibid., p. 276.

2. Ibid., p. 320.

1. Ibid., p. 320.

directors. If he could have stopped them he would have done so, but that being impossible he did the next best thing which was to attend rehearsals. Here he offered suggestions for improvement. As a result of his assistance the producers attempted to capitalize by advertising their plays as being "the only dramatic productions sanctioned and personally supervised by Charles Dickens Esquire." To illustrate some of his activities in connection with these shows, the following quotation is submitted:

"Thinking to make Tiny Tim (a pretty child) more effective, I ordered a set of irons and bandages for his supposed weak leg. When Dickens saw this tied on the child, he took me aside: 'No Sterling, No; this won't do! remember how painful it would be to many of the audience having crippled children.'"¹ Despite Dickens disapproval of the dramatization of his work, they nevertheless met with great popular approval, as is evidenced by their popularity during the Christmas season even in the present day.

Seeing these productions of his works, and already having found himself to be a good director, he saw the possibilities of producing plays. He was never very successful in producing his own simply because of the fact that his plays were so very poorly written; but he did succeed in producing Ben Jonson's Everyman in his Humor and others which I shall mention a little later.

Dickens wrote — but at every possible excuse he was on the stage. He organized companies and put on plays for any worthy purpose that needed

1. Ibid., p. 328. Charles Dickens, p. 129.

money. On one of the occasions he staged Everyman in his Humour for the benefit fund of the widow of a fellow writer, Leigh Hunt. Another time he produced a play, the proceeds of which were to go to the family of Douglas Jerrold. He also contributed his share by producing a play for the Guild of Literature and Art. In all of these productions Dickens played a part, acted as manager or director, and frequently even as stage-hand. He was always the life and soul of the entire affair. Friends say he took everything upon himself and seemed to do it without any effort. He was stage-director, very often stage-carpenter, scene-arranger, property-man, and bandmaster; and without offending anyone he kept every one in order. "His correspondence abounds with the indication of the deep interest he took in the proceedings, even in the minutest details. 'Once in a thing like this,' he wrote to Bulwer (3/14/50), 'once in everything, to my thinking, one must be carried out like in a mighty enterprise, heart and soul.' ... He facetiously observes that nature intended him for the lessee of a national theatre, and that pen, ink and paper had spoiled a manager."¹

Both Forster and Leacock speak of the Merry Wives of Windsor, as the play which the Dickens' company gave as a benefit performance for the Shakespeare fund. There were at this time springing up in England certain Dramatic Schools, schools of acting. Dickens' fortune was by now (1846) enlarging rapidly and so, taking time off, he talked with his friends about getting up a play. The production took shape in 1846 in the Dean street theatre; it was Every Man on His Humor, by Jonson. It was given as a

1. Leacock, Stephen, Charles Dickens, p. 129.

benefit production, Charles Dickens playing the part of Bobadil. With Stanfield of the Royal Academy to paint the scenery, and with such illustrious names as those of Douglas Jerrold, John Leach, and Mark Lemon, billed for the cast, the play was an enormous success even though two academicians got frightened and dropped out of the play. This should be cheering to amateurs of lesser note to know that such an illustrious company as this should be disrupted by stage-fright. Nevertheless "the performance, to an invited audience, on September 21st, 1846, was a tumult of success, and was twice repeated as a benefit show for the paying public."¹ This success of this play decided the company not to disband but to give another play with Dickens still their leader and sponsor. Again a benefit drive served as an excuse for the production; the Shakespeare Society was in need of additional funds. A Beaumont and Fletcher play was given with success similar to the first. "Indeed for a moment London seemed to have been agog with interest in Charles Dickens' players. So in the next year (1847) the enterprise was reorganized on a bigger scale. The 'troupe' appeared in aid of certain literary charities before crowded houses in public theatres in Manchester (July 26th) and Liverpool (July 28th). As before, they played Everyman in His Humor, following it up with each night a minor piece as a conclusion. The receipts ran over nine hundred pounds for the two nights. As is usual, with amateur enterprises, the expenses ate up nearly half of the proceeds. ... A still larger opportunity occurred the next year (1848) for the troupe to play again because a

1. *Ibid.*, p. 239

2. *Farmer*, p. 489

3. *Ibid.*, 184

1. Leacock, Stephen, Charles Dickens, p. 129.

national question had sprung up in the mind of the people with reference to buying Shakespear's house."¹ So the Dickens' troupe on the pretext of creating a Shakespearian fund, gave Shakespear's own play, The Merry Wives. "Dickens appeared as Justice Shallow in The Merry Wives, with Mark Lemon as Falstaff."² Love Law and Physick, in which Dickens took the same part he had had before his authorship days, was given on the same production. The success of these were undoubtedly very great at Manchester, Liverpool and Edinburgh. In Birmingham and Glasgow the troupe played two-night stands, as well as in London at the Haymarket Theater. At one of these performances the King and Queen were present. "The gross receipts from the nine performances were two thousand five hundred and fifty-two pounds and eightpence."³

It is a known fact that Dickens leased the Lyceum Theatre out of his admiration for Mr. Fleckers, who acted there. He, (Dickens) became a helper in disputes, adviser on literary points and referee in matters of management.

"Of much less distinction but of more human interest were the children's Theatricals which Dickens organized after he moved into his new London home, Tavistock House (1851). Here a large room (the school-room) was especially converted into a theatre for such occasions and announced on the printed playbill as the 'smallest theatre in the world!'"⁴ There was

1. Ibid., p. 129

2. Ibid., p. 219

3. Forster, p. 469

4. Ibid., 156

a famous performance by this children's group in 1854, when Thackeray is actually said to have "rolled off his seat with laughter."¹ There were both grown-ups and children in this group. "The play-bill of 1855 states that the performance is in the theatre Royal Tavistock House. It presents the slightly disguised names of seven little Dickenses and three little Lemons, along with their respective fathers and Wilkie Collins and Marcus Stone. The announcement draws attention also to the first appearance on any stage of Mr. Ploormeskmaroontgoonter, who was kept out of bed at a vast expense. This was the baby of the household, the last of ten children, Bulwer Lytton Dickens (born March 13, 1852). There were refreshments - 'Miss Hogarth will preside at the piano' - and 'God save the Queen'. There was everything except the name of Mrs. Dickens."²

1. Ibid., p. 156.

2. Ibid., p. 156.

There is also a play, The Strategem of Revenge, of which Forster makes no mention, but which is mentioned by J. B. Von Amerongen in his book, The Actor in Charles Dickens, which Mr. Von Amerongen claims to have been written by Dickens at sixteen years of age. We must take the authority of Mr. Von Amerongen when he tells us that this play exists in manuscript form, and runs over hundred-thirty-two pages of eleven lines

Chapter III

DICKENS AS A PLAYWRIGHT

Playwriting was one of the minor accomplishments of Charles Dickens, which he began very early in his life and which lasted until very late in his career. Although in this art Dickens was never a success, he was not daunted by his failures; rather he was spurred on in the hope of future success. This "success" in Dickens' case, unfortunately never materialized.

Two of the plays supposedly written by Dickens are not extant. One of these was written in his very early childhood, Misnar or the Sultan of India, as it was named, written when Dickens was eight years old. The play was based on one of the chapters in Tales of the Genii, so John Forster tells us. The other play, now lost to posterity, is his travesty written some years later, when Dickens was almost twenty-one, the O*Thello, based no doubt on Shakespeare's tragedy, Othello.

There is also a play, The Strategems of Rozana, of which Forster makes no mention, but which is mentioned by J. B. Von Amerongen in his book, The Actor in Charles Dickens, which Mr. Von Amerongen claims to have been written by Dickens at sixteen years of age. We must take the authority of Mr. Von Amerongen when he tells us that this play exists in manuscript form, and runs one hundred thirty-one pages of close long-

hand, written out for Dickens by his mother. The plot, he tells us, strongly bears the mark of immaturity, and suggests nothing of the hand of a master. It is concerned with the loves and adventures of cosmopolitan characters gathered together in an inn in Venice. The description of the place, however, closely fits that of Vauxhall-Gardens, the famous amusement place of Dickens' boyhood.¹

If we except the above mentioned youthful efforts, we may say Dickens has written six plays which, though they have long been out of print, are to be found in a few rare editions of his works in pawnshops or bookstalls today. The plays are: The Strange Gentleman, 1836; Is She His Wife, 1836; Village Coquettes, 1836; The Lamplighter, 1838; a one act farce entitled Mr. Nightingale's Diary (written in collaboration with Mark Lemon), 1851; and No Thoroughfare, his last play published in his All Year Round, 1867.²

Of this last group of plays we have the exact production dates for each with the exception of The Lamplighter. For that play no production date nor cast of players is given, so it is doubtful whether it was ever performed.

The Strange Gentleman

This was the first play from the pen of Charles Dickens to be given at a professional performance. The date of its opening was September 29, 1836, at the St. James' Theatre, London. It is a comic Burletta in two acts written by Dickens. It took the form of a comic opera, with music by

1. Von Amerongen, J.E., The Actor in Charles Dickens, pp. 115-116.
2. Wilkie Collins is said to have contributed to the writing of No Thoroughfare and a joint authorship is given for the play.

acts. The scene is "a small town, on the road to Gretna... in a room at the St. James' Arms hotel." We have such an illustrious name in the cast of characters as that of John Forster who plays the role of Charles Tomkins (an incognito at the St. James Arms). The plot, which deals with the old, old story of a mistaken identity follows: A Mr. Strange Gentleman comes to the St. James' Arms hotel (an inn on the way to Gretna Green) where he is secretly awaiting the arrival of a young lady with whom he is to elope; however, Mr. John Johnson is in the same position and so also is Mr. Charles Tomkins. The ladies arrive in due time and the meeting arrangements of the three couples are completely confused. The comedy of these circumstances is further heightened by the ignorant help at the hotel. One of the supposed grooms poses as a madman, and throughout the course of the play the characters are so completely confused that each of the grooms in his turn is accused of being hopelessly mad. The play, like most of Dickens' novels, has his characteristic "happy ending" when all the couples are sorted out, and the groom and bride, who have each been jilted by their respective suitors, propose to go to Gretna Green along with the rest of the couples to "be married and live happily ever after."

The Village Coquettes

The Village Coquettes, 1836, was the second play of any consequence written by Dickens. It took the form of a comic opera, with music by John Hullah. It consists of two acts and eight scenes and was performed for the first time at the St. James' Theatre, on December 6, 1836. Here again John Forster is listed in the original cast as playing the part of The Honourable Sparkins Flam, friend to Squire Norton. The scene is "an

English village in the year 1729." The plot is as follows: Squire Norton and his supposed friend Mr. Flam feel that they are very superior to the ordinary villagers in this locality because of a higher social rank. They decide to have a little fun and carry on a flirtation with the farmer's daughter Lucy and her cousin Rose. It happens that both of these girls are already betrothed to farmer boys in the vicinity.

Since this performance is an opera, the action, of course, is dotted by many solos, quartets, duets, and rounds, most of which are very bad poetry. The play is very melodramatic, using all the known devices of that type of play: eavesdropping listeners, abductions by the villain, loss by the noble farmer of his farm to the powerful Squire. Then, at the last minute, comes the return of the farm through the graciousness of the Squire. The right person gets the wrong letter, which further reveals the villain; and, of course, in the happy ending, all couples are united, the villain is found out and turned out of doors, the farmer's land is returned, and all live happily ever after.

Is She His Wife? or Something Singular!

Next in order came Is She His Wife, 1837. It took the form of a comic Burletta in one act. This play had an opening on March 6, 1837, at St. James' Theatre, London, and again had Mr. John Forster's name leading the list of original players as Alfred Lovetown, Esq. The plot for this Burletta is as follows: A man and wife are living in the country. The husband is dissatisfied and wants to move to the city; the wife is pettish and obstinate, and will not leave the country. She feels that her husband, Mr. Lovetown, no longer loves her, or he would be more content. Mrs.

Lovetown schemes to flirt with one of the gay bachelors, Mr. Felix Topkins, to test her husband's affections. Lovetown has likewise been carrying on a flirtation with a Mrs. Timburry. Mr. Timburry learns of Mr. Lovetown's affection for Mrs. Timburry, and Mr. Lovetown becomes aware of Mr. Topkin's affections for Mrs. Lovetown. The climax is reached when each realizes that he is wrong and asks forgiveness. All is forgiven, and Mr. and Mrs. Lovetown live on, content, in the country.

Mr. Willis Collins played The Lamplighter, based on the play

The Lamplighter is a one act farce, written in 1838. No original cast of players is given for this play nor is there any performance data given; so it is very likely that it was never performed. However, to my way of thinking, this is the most interesting, and could be acted very easily. As the scene opens, we see a young Lamplighter lighting lamps. His attention is attracted by Mr. Stargazer who is at a window with a telescope. Mr. Stargazer at once recognizes in Tom, the Lamplighter, the answer to his astronomical scheme, and the promised husband for his niece, Fanny. Fanny is in love with Galileo, Mr. Stargazer's son. Mr. Stargazer takes Tom into his workshop and introduces him to Mr. Mooney, a half-crazed astrologer who deduces Tom's future. Tom is told that he has only two months to live, so he consents to marry whomever they choose. After Mr. Stargazer has Tom's promise to marry, he tells Tom that he was wrong about the two months and that Tom will live long. Upon this news Tom very curtly gets out of his marriage arrangements and pledges himself to a long life of service as a lamplighter. The plot, of course, is very mediocre; but the dialogue seems to run more smoothly than ⁱⁿ the preceding

plays.

Mr. Nightengale's Diary

Charles Dickens and Mark Lemon collaborated in 1851 to write a one act farce, which they called Mr. Nightengale's Diary. It was given for the first time on Tuesday, May 27, 1851, at Devonshire House. Charles Dickens was playing the role of Mr. Gabblewig of the Middle Temple; Mr. Mark Lemon played the role of Slap (professionally, Mr. Formiville); and Mr. Wilkie Collins played the role of Lithers, landlord at the "Water-Lily". Mr. John Forster is not listed as having played in this play.

The plot is a farce and very improbable. Mr. Nightengale imagines himself a cronic invalid. He keeps a very elaborate, sedret, diary of all his remedies and when he has taken them. As the play opens, we see him arriving at a summer health resort where he will drink spring water and recover. He is accompanied by two very charming ladies, Rosina and Susan. Mr. Nightengale, because he feigns illness, is the prey of all quack doctors. Mr. Formiville, or Slap, poses as one of these, with a bottle of cure-all which he sells to Mr. Nightengale. Mr. Gabbloiwig, nephew to Mr. Nightengale, has come to the "Water-Lily" resort too, and poses as a health expert, thus gaining the good graces of his uncle and being allowed to share in his fortune and thereby marry Miss Susan. Mr. Nightengale is brought to his senses and decides to burn his Diary and be a well man after this.

No Thoroughfare

No Thoroughfare is a five act drama written in collaboration with Mr. Wilkie Collins in 1867. This was Charles Dickens' last attempt as

playwright. It was enacted for the first time on December 26th, 1867, at the New Royal Adelphi Theatre. There are no names familiar to us in the original cast, though Dickens and his friends may have appeared at subsequent dates.

The plot concerns a certain Walter Wilding who is taken to a charity home when a month old. Twelve years later his mother comes to claim him; however, there has been a change in the children's room, and she claims the wrong son. After a lapse of several years, we see Walter, now a successful business man, wishing to employ a housekeeper. The lady who applies for the position was Walter's nurse at the home. She tells him the truth, that he had been wrongly chosen as a son. Walter is completely heartbroken but he sets out to find the rightful son and make amends. Everyone tries to thwart his desire, saying that he won't be able to find the boy—that there are "no thoroughfares"; but Walter persists. He is taken ill, however, and dies. Then the search is carried on by his servants, and by a curious set of forced incidents it is found that Mr. Vendale, Walter Wilding's closest friend in life, is the lost Walter Wilding. Mr. Vendale inherits the fortune, is free to marry his lady love, Marguerite, and all ends happily.

These plays are all we have from Charles Dickens. They were not what one would consider a success; and although most of them were staged, it is clear that he either did not make the trouble, or was at a loss as they did not "run" very long. They were all very stiff in structure, loose in plot, and melodramatic in technique. In my estimation the reasons for Dickens failure as playwright are as follows:

1. Dickens very often published his works in installments; he usually

had no idea what turn the story would take in his next number. This method has a most disastrous influence on the logical structure of the whole. A playwright must of a necessity follow a logically connected story. Here Dickens failed.

2. He found himself confused in intricate subplots, with florid descriptions, and talked on for several pages before he recalled that he had a central plot and should return to it.

3. Dickens was extremely awkward in theatrical technique. "One of the greatest difficulties besetting the path of the playwright is to make his audience acquainted with what took place before the curtain rises, in a natural, unobtrusive way. Dickens had not yet learned this part of the playwright's technique."¹ A further illustration of awkward technique is to be found in the difficulty with which Dickens got characters on and off the stage. In order to bring in a character, he is forced to ludicrous devices. "Extremely old-fashioned is the absolutely irrelevant duet in which two girls sing, in the first act, without any other provocation than that they want 'to make a little noise', to attract the attention of the supposed lover in the next room."²

4. Another fault that would most certainly inhibit Dickens from being a successful playwright is the use of "clumsy construction." Often it is clear "that he either did not take the trouble, or was at a loss as

1. Von Amerongen, J. B., pp. 244-245.

2. Ibid., p. 245.

to how to solve a technical difficulty in a natural, logical way."¹ And so, we find, due to these short-comings which I have mentioned above, that while Charles Dickens was a great novelist, he was a miserably poor playwright, and at the time he lived "the British stage was strewn with Dickenson wreckage."²

1. Ibid., p. 244.

2. Ibid., p. 244

imaginings. But about these both, the contemporary half-praising Carlyle shall say the last word long as Carlyle who, under date of April 22, 1853 made this report: "I had to go yesterday to D's readings, W. F. B. Harver Room, to the complete upsetting of my evening habitus and spiritual composure. D does do it cogitally, such as it is; it is better than any Elocution in the world; a whole tragic, comic, heroic imagination visible performing under one hat, and keeping on laughing - in a surly way none of us thought - the whole night. He is a good creature too, and asked fifty or sixty pounds by

Chapter IV

DICKENS THE PLATFORM READER

It was not as an actor that Charles Dickens came into his own in the theatre, but rather as one proficient in the side art, a public reader. In our day "readers" are more common; but in Dickens day he was a trail blazer and a most outstanding success. "His readings were not quite like anything the world had seen before, or anything the world has seen since those readings, which literally, were not readings at all. A little like courtyard or hearth-side performances of the old jongleurs, perhaps and more than a little like the latter-day appearances of Ruth Draper, who, as Dickens could, can by virtue of her own vivid self and her extraordinary mimetic gift crowd an empty sceneless stage with a host of her own imaginings. But about them both, the half-admiring, half-grudging Carlyle shall say the last word here,— Carlyle who, under date of April 29, 1863, made this report: "I had to go yesterday to D's readings, '8 P.M., Hanover Rooms, to the complete upsetting of my evening habitudes and spiritual composure. D does do it capitally, such as it is; acts better than any Macready in the world; a whole tragic, comic, heroic theatre visible performing under one hat, and keeping us laughing - in a sorry way some of us thought - the whole night. He is a good creature too, and makes fifty or sixty pounds by

each of these readings."¹

"The career that really began with the reading of The Chimes to the little circle in Lincoln's Inn Field, brought him large sums of money and reestablished his friendship with America. Doubtlessly, it measurably shortened his days on earth but it satisfied at last the thing within him which had remained unsatisfied ever since that broken appointment between the debonaire young reporter and the manager of Covent Garden, long before."² First came the transition from private readings to public programs given for charities; and later on, these same public readings became a source of income for himself, and a very lucrative income at that. The progress was slow but inevitable and at last it led to a bottomless purse for Charles Dickens' own use.

"Dickens' first public readings were given at Birmingham during the Christmas week of 1853-54."³ These dates correspond very closely with those marking the close of his career as an actor. His career as a reader was now going to occupy his entire time, aside, of course, from his old faithful career as novelist. This program at Birmingham was "in support of the New Midland Institute.... He also gave a trial reading of the Christmas Carol to a smaller public audience at Peterborough."⁴ Following this program he was so well liked that his days were busy ones reading repeatedly for all types of benevolent purposes.

Pinak, Mr. Dickens, or Page in the Joe. Dickens had power of compelling

1. Woollcott, Alexander, Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play, p. 28.

2. Ibid., p. 28.

3. Ibid., p. 151. nation and what he desired to express to America.

4. Ibid., p. 151.

Must write that Dickens' Schönil (in Jensen's Everman in His Days)

Progressing rapidly, the die was cast; by April of that year he entered into new relationships with the public. He was offering on the twenty-ninth of the month the first of an organized series of public readings. He took his materials from Carol, Household Words, Pickwick (the trial), Martin Chuzzlewit (Mrs. Gamp), and Dombey and Son (Paul Dombey). Of this series probably the most popular was Pickwick. Dickens was absolutely delighted with his first successful series and was preparing for his second group before the first closed. Now, at last, Dickens had found, at least in part, the answer to his cravings to read his manuscripts aloud. As soon as Dickens had some writing completed he tried to find someone to read it to, to get the listener's reaction. It was his laughter or his tears Dickens hoped to invoke. Mr. Woolcott says, "Indeed, all this aspect of Charles Dickens is back of a single sentence he once wrote as a postscript to a letter dispatched from London to his wife at the time when the Carol was still in Manuscript. 'If,' he said, 'you had seen Macready last night, undisguisedly sobbing and crying on the sofa as I read, you would have felt, as I did, what a thing it is to have power'."¹ To Dickens his characters really lived. "There was no character created by him into which life and reality were not thrown with such vividness, that to his readers the thing written did not seem the thing actually done, whether the disguise put on by the enchanter was Mrs. Gamp, Tom Pinch, Mr. Squeers, or Fagin the Jew. Dickens had power of projecting himself into shapes and suggestions of fancy which is one of the marvels of creative imagination and what he desired to express he became. Leigh Hunt wrote that Dickens' Bobadil (in Jonson's Everyman in His Humor) had

a spirit in it of intelligent apprehension beyond anything the existing stage had known Victoria, who worked up a considerable trepidation over his performance of Wardour in Wilkie Collins' The Frozen Deep, declared that no professional actor then living could match him. But somehow one distrusts Her Majesty's aesthetic judgments. However, it is not a bad guess that Dickens was an excellent actor, eloquent, picturesque, moving."¹

Dickens officially began his career as a platform reader in 1858 and did not close it until the spring of 1870, the year of his death. Apparently too much for Dickens' constitution, the enormous strain incidental to this work impaired his health and hastened his death. He realized this, as we know from a letter to Miss Hogarth in which he writes, "with a different place very night, and a different audience with its own peculiarity every night, it is a tremendous strain."²

In many cases Dickens had practically to rewrite his novel to adapt it to stage use as a reading. "When adapting his Copperfield reading, he wrote to Macready, 'It has been quite a job so to piece portions of the long book together as to make something continuous of it, but I hope I have something varied and dramatic.'³

Mr. Woolcott says that "Macready represented an achievement that realization to his hearers, by one who had the soul of a poet, and the

1. Ibid., p. 22.

2. Von Amerongen, J.B. The Actor in Charles Dickens, p. 35. Aug. 25, 1858.

3. Ibid., p. 46.

2. Von Amerongen, J. B., The Actor in Charles Dickens, p. 35

3. Ibid., p. 46.

Dickens half-consciously envied; and that Dickens within himself felt that he was born to act. One, on studying his portraits, cannot fail to see these traits in his countenance. ... There visible enough, were genteel comedy in his walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in his eye, and touch-and-go farce in his laugh. The fact that Dickens had made one bid for a place in the ranks at Covent Garden is a matter of record."¹

Dickens tells us in a letter to Bulwer, "When I first entered upon this interpretation of myself I was sustained by the hope that I could drop into some hearts, some new expression of the meaning of my books, that would touch them in a new way. To this hour this purpose is so strong in me, and so real are my fictions to myself that after hundreds of nights I come with a feeling of perfect freshness to that little red table, [the stand from which he was always accustomed to speak] and there laugh and cry with my hearers, as if I had never stood there before."² He had also expressed the opinion many times, before he had launched himself on this career as a reader, that he felt there could be a sum of money made by "one's having readings of one's own books."³

That he was successful cannot be denied. "Kent says that the success achieved was more than an elocutionary triumph; it was the realization to his hearers, by one who had the soul of a poet, and the

1. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

1. Woollocott, Alexander, Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play, p. 17.

2. Von Amerongen, J. B., The Actor in Charles Dickens, p. 49

3. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

gift of an orator, and the genius of a great and vividly imaginative author, of a convulsion of nature, when nature wears an aspect the grandest and the most astounding.' Dickens once owned to a little girl in America that he cried himself when he read about Steerforth. Indeed the vividness of his delivery was often so great that even foreigners who could not understand English did not fail to catch his meaning."¹

As to technique, we have reports that "his articulation is generally admitted to have been perfect; whatever disguise his voice assumed, it reached every listener in a closely packed hall."² Dickens has one rule which he is said to have followed in behalf of his articulation. "A spoken sentence will never run alone in all its life, and is never to be trusted to itself in its most insignificant member. See it well out with the voice and the part of the audience is made surprisingly easier."³ Kate Field sums up her verdict of Dickens as a reader as follows: "He has shown us that the art of reading means a perfectly easy, unaffected manner, a thoroughly colloquial tone, and an entire absence of the stilted elocution that has before passed off for good reading."⁴ It is true that like all sensitive artists he largely depended upon the sympathy of his audience for inspiration; even Kate Field was sadly disappointed at his first rendering of David Copperfield. After reading it at Norwich he complains to Miss Hogarth that the

1. Ibid., p. 43.

2. Ibid., p. 45. [the audience] laugh, he did not see them cry. All

3. Ibid., p. 45.

4. Ibid., p. 47.

5. Ibid., p. 41.

audience was "not magnetic" but "lumpish", and that "the great big place was out of sorts somehow". "His Scrooge and Cratchet in the Carol are universally praised; Kate Field remarks that when he did the Miser's clerk he simply took off his own head and put on Bob's. In the Copperfield reading Mrs. Crupps was a finished piece of farce-acting, but also Mr. and Mrs. Micawber, Traddles, Dora and Julia Mills come in for high eulogy."¹ It is remarkable how in rewriting his novels for "readings" he often elevated characters of minor position to those of prominence for his platform purposes.

Dickens' writing career never completely satisfied him; he was never quite happy in it. "It is impossible to explore far into the half-shrouded by-ways of Dickens' life without repeatedly meeting the situation that again and again his secret heart cried that he wanted to be an actor. Dickens himself used to speak lightly and a little sheepishly of his youthful theatrical aspirations, as of something boyish and amusing enough when viewed in kindly retrospect. Yet these aspirations, or rather the sources of them, never really left him; and that they were fermenting away inside him always is readable between the lines even of that eminently discreet, but only half-comprehending, Man Friday of his, John Forster. It would have been idle to expostulate with him that through his novels he could and did reach a far wider audience than any actor might aspire to He knew it. But he did not feel it. He did not hear them [the audience] laugh, he did not see them cry. All

1. Ibid., p. 41.

the genius poured into Copperfield, or the tale of Tiny Tim could not bring him the warm human satisfaction of visible and audible appreciation which was his friend Macready's nightly portion; that really precious reward which only in their more toplofty moments do the actors affect to disprize."¹ Mr. Woollcott also suggests that it is very probable that, had Mr. Dickens lived in the twentieth century, "the Freudians, taking one shrewd, amused, infuriatingly suspicious look at him, would have analyzed him on the spot. They would have noted his clumsy efforts at playwriting, his adoration of Macready, his wistful loiterings at the stage door, of which the faint, unmistakable aroma was ever the breath of his nostrils, and his disarming readiness to laugh and cry at the most ordinary performances in any theatre. They would have noted his pantomimic gyrations when in the throes of composition. They would have known that the young novelist who walked the night-mantled streets of Paris in an agony of sympathy for the dying Paul Dombey was a side-tracked actor. They would have noted his own incongruous capacity for self-pity, his grotesque sensitiveness to the most piddling of criticisms, his comically transparent excuses for appearing in amateur dramatics, his gallant and undeniably Thespian appearance and his flamboyant raiment, geranium in the buttonhole, brilliantine on the hair, rings on the fingers and all, which distressed his sedate friends but satisfied

1. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

2. *Lawrence, Stephen, Charles Dickens*, p. 236.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 236.

1. Woollcott, Alexander, Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play, p. 12.

something within him. They would have noted all these things and published in some obscure journal an article written to demonstrate that Mr. Dickens was suffering from an exhibition complex."¹ Be this as it may, at the separation of Charles Dickens from his wife, he did turn to his theatrical work. "It is doubtful whether anyone before or since has ever given the same kind of 'performance' as Dickens in his public readings. They were not 'readings' in the strict sense; still less were they recitations; nor were they 'monologues', such as flourish in the world today; nor was Dickens 'acting', because he was not appearing in character, and was portraying not one personage but half a dozen. Moreover he was talking to his audience; a thing done only by actors who cannot act. What Dickens did may be called "interpretations", a sort of mesmeric art which combined acting with reciting, direct appeal with histrionic detachment, and above all contained a sort of hypnotic power of suggestion. Dickens' audiences were quite truly carried away. And Dickens controlled them with hand and voice and eye - like a magician."²

"The public reading which Dickens gave fell into four great series, or tour; in England, Ireland and Scotland, with a trip to the United States in 1867-68."³ The subjects of the readings actually

1. Ibid., p. 14.

2. Leacock, Stephen, Charles Dickens, p. 224.

3. Ibid., p. 226.

given by him are listed for us in Forster as: -

A Christmas Carol
The Trial from Pickwick
David Copperfield
The Cricket on the Hearth
Nicholas Nickleby
Bob Sawyer's Party
The Chimes
The Story of Little Dambey
Mr. Chops, the Dwarf
The Poor Traveller
Mrs. Gamp
Boats at the Holly Tree Inn
Barbox Brothers
The Bay at Mugby
Doctor Marigold
Sikes and Nancy

Besides these Forster tells us four others were prepared and printed but never performed. They were:

Mrs. Tirriper
The Haunted Man
The Prisoner of the Bastile.

And one was adopted from Great Expectations, for which a name evidently had not yet been found.¹

These reading occupied nearly three hours, we are told. During his later trip his first few programs were not that long. "If the lecture began at 8:00 p.m. Dickens was sure to be in the hall by 6:30 p.m. ready to get dressed to familiarise himself with the place beforehand, and to see that everything was in order. Considering the elaborate design for rendering his platform as effective as possible, we cannot wonder at the long time it took him to make a proper inspection. Everything was done with the closest attention to stage-effect, thus he used

1. Von Amerongen, J.B., The Actor in Charles Dickens, p. 40.

a very light table covered with velvet without any drapery, that gesture as well as facial expression, might be fully displayed. The background consisted of a large screen of cloth, somewhat darker in colour than the velvet of the little table. The whole was framed by an ingenious appliance of gaslight so that not the slightest detail in the action of face or body was lost, and he was always trying to make improvements so as to enhance the effect."¹ His attire during these occasions is said to have been "neat, though on the verge of foppishness". Mr. Von Amerongen reminds us that "in speaking of Dickens' love of effect, the following curious, almost incredible anecdote, told by Sir William Treloar, ex Mayor of London, was published by the Leeds Mercury Sir William remembers how during the 'murder scene in Oliver Twist, a gentleman rose in the stalls and exclaimed against Dickens for daring to read the scene before Ladies. He was hissed and turned out. The ex-Mayor was told afterwards that the reader had, himself, arranged for the protest to be made to see what the effect would be on the audience."²

Dickens worked very hard and very constantly in his paid public performances once he got started in that profession. He gave his readings in rapid succession with short intervals between them. These readings were given during the following years: 1858-59; 1861-63; 1866-67; 1869-70. The first series was under Mr. Arthur Smith's management, the second under Mr. Headland's, and the third and fourth under the manage-

1. Ibid., p. 39.

2. Ibid., p. 40.

ment of Mr. George Dolby. First there were sixteen nights at St. Martin's Hall, the first night being the twenty-ninth of April, the last the twenty-second of July, 1858. Dickens, it seems, followed this first series by a tour through the provinces, during which time he gave a total of eighty-seven readings. This trip began at Clyton on the second of August, ending at Brighton on the thirteenth of November, and taking in Ireland and Scotland as well as the principal English cities. In London, during the Christmas season he added three Christmas readings to his series. He gave three readings in January, two in February in the provinces. Beginning at Ispwich and Norwich, he gave fourteen taking in Cambridge and Oxford, and closing with Birmingham and Cheltenham. This series comprised altogether one hundred and twenty-five readings when ended, on the twenty-seventh of October, 1859.¹ On December twenty-eighth, 1854, he wrote from Bradford concerning a program he was to give there: "The hall is enormous and they expect to seat thirty-seven hundred people tonight! Notwithstanding which, it seems to me a tolerably easy place - except that the width of the platform is so very great to the eye at first."² Again from Folkestone, on his way to Paris, he wrote in the autumn (September 16, 1855), "I am going to read for them here, on the fifth of next month and have answered in the last fortnight thirty applications to do the same thing all over England, Ireland and Scotland. Fancy my having to come to Paris in December to do this, at the trial to recover it again would make the power. Dickens 1855

1. Forster, John, The Life of Charles Dickens, p. 661.

2. Ibid., p. 512.

3. Ibid., p. 707.

Peterborough, Birmingham and Sheffield - bold promises."¹ After he had been on his tour he wrote back to Forster: "Enthusiastic crowds have filled the halls to the roof each night, and hundreds have been turned away. At Belfast, the night before last, we had two hundred and forty-six pounds and five shillings. In Dublin tonight everything is sold out, and the people are besieging Dolby to put a chair anywhere in doorways, on my platform, in any sort of hole or corner. In short the readings are a perfect rage at a time when everything else seems beaten down. ... Last Monday evening (fourteenth of May) I finished fifty readings with great success. You have no idea how I worked at them, finding it necessary, as their reputation widened that they should be better than they were at first. I have learned them all, so I have no mechanical drawback in looking after the words. I have tested all the serious passion in them by everything I know; I have made the humorous points more humorous. I have corrected my utterance of certain words; cultivated a self-possession not to be disturbed; and made myself master of the situation. Finishing with Dombey (which I have not read for a long time) I learned that like the rest; and did it to myself often twice a day, with exactly the same pains as at night, over and over again."²

Dickens, we are told by Forster, often lost his voice in these early days, having still to acquire the art of husbanding it; and in the trial to recover it again would waste its power. Dickens says:

1. Ibid., p. 572.

2. Ibid., p. 707.

"I think I sang to myself half of all the Irish melodies as I walked about, to test it."¹ He wrote to Forster again of his enormous crowds saying: "An audience of two thousand three hundred people greeted me at Liverpool on my way to Dublin, and, besides the tickets sold more than two hundred pounds in money was taken at the doors!.. This, he says, 'taxed his business staff a little. 'They turned away hundreds, sold all the books, rolled on the ground of my room knee-deep in checks, and made a perfect pantomime of the whole thing. Here I had to repeat the reading thrice."²

Dickens loved his work very much. He tells how once "he felt brought very near to what he sometimes dreamed might be his Fame," when he was stopped on the streets of New York (during his reading series there) by a lady whom he had never seen who said to him: "Mr. Dickens, will you let me touch the hand that has filled my house with many friends." He had no room to complain of greetings given him in any of the English towns in which he played; . . . at Sheffield there were great crowds in excess of the places in which he spoke. "At Leeds the hall overflowed in half an hour. At Hull the vast concourse had to be addressed by Mr. Smith on the gallery stairs, and additional readings had to be given day and night, "for the people out of town and for the people in town."³ Charles Dickens counted the net profit to himself, thus far, as being upwards of three hundred pounds a week; but a higher figure was

1. Ibid., p. 662.

2. Ibid., p. 662.

3. Ibid., p. 665.

reached in Scotland, where his profits, with all expenses paid, were said to have been five hundred pounds a week. Dickens was showing the strain of this enormous task and even before his trip to America he began to complain; but he would persist in making the trip. Dickens was a "trouper," as is seen by the following quotation from a letter to his friend: "After the tremendous strain of fifty-one readings, I am wonderfully fresh." It is touching to hear, however, what he wrote at the same time to his daughter: "I am tremendously 'beat' but I feel really and unaffectedly so much stronger today, both in my body and in my hopes, that I am much encouraged. I have a fancy that I turned my worse time last night." (The Sikes and Nancy reading from Oliver Twist seems to have taxed his strength most.)

His American tour was among his most successful. On December eleventh, from New York, he wrote his daughter: "An amazing success. A very fine audience; far better than at Boston. Carol and Trial on first night great! Still greater Copperfield and Bob Sawyer on second. From all parts of the States, applications and offers continually come in."¹ "Dickens read at Boston on the twenty-third and twenty-fourth of December, and on Christmas Day travelled back to New York, where he read the twenty-sixth. The last words written before he left were of his illness. "The low-action of the heart, or whatever it is, has inconvenienced me greatly this last week. On Monday night after reading, I was laid up on a bed, in a very faint and shady state; and

1. Ibid., p. 776.
2. Ibid., p. 720.

1. Ibid., p. 768.

on Tuesday I did not get up until afternoon."¹ Dickens tells us something of the size of his troupe when he writes to John Forster: "We have now a traveling staff of six men, in spite of Dolby, who is leaving me today to sell tickets in Philadelphia to-morrow morning.... American people are so accustomed to taking care of themselves, that one of these immense audiences will fall into their place with an ease amazing to a frequenter of St. James' Hall."² Along with these good reports always came the fact of Dickens failing... "I have so severe a pain in the ball of my left eye that it makes it hard for me to do anything after one-hundred miles shaking on a train since breakfast. My cold is no better, nor my hand either."³ It was his left eye, it will be noted, that it was also his left foot and hand; the irritability or faintness of heart was also of course on the left side; and it was on this same left side he had felt most of the effect of that Staplehurst railroad accident."³

A little later on, from America, he writes again with regard to his trip, or reading tour: "Well, the work is hard, the climate is hard, the life is hard; but so far the gain is enormous. ... My cold steadily refuses to stir an inch. It distresses me greatly at times, though it is always good to leave me for the needful two hours. I have tried allopathy, homoeopathy, cold things, warm things, sweet things,

1. Ibid., p. 774
2. Ibid., p. 776
3. Ibid., p. 703.

bitter things, stimulants, narcotics, all with the same result, nothing will touch it."¹ Dickens was heard to say that "if all went well (as no doubt it did) and he worked off his series triumphantly, he should have made of all his readings in that series twenty-eight thousand pounds in a year and a half's time." Not at all a bad income, even for 1938.

Dickens made millions of friends through his readings and had offers to perform for almost all the known literary world of his day. He even tells us that he received an offer from the Australian government, which had a representative in London ready to pay Dickens ten thousand pounds for a eight months' tour.² Dickens' health, however, prohibited him from doing this. Dickens again tells us of his popularity in a letter to his home. Mr. Woollcott quotes him as saying: "I have read in New York City to forty thousand people and am quite as well known in the streets there as I am in London. People will turn back, turn again and face me, and have a look at me, or will say to one another 'Look there's Dickens coming.'"³ Dickens was a success, but he was thoroughly spent and we hear that when Dolby, one of his managers, on the night before his last reading, tried to cheer him with a review of the success, he told his manager that he was too far gone and worn out to realize anything but his own exhaustion. It is not hard to believe, then, the reports that, when the passengers on board the "Russia",

1. Ibid., p. 777

2. Ibid., p. 693

3. Woollcott, Alexander, Mr. Dickens Goes to the Play, p. 27.

his ship home, asked for a reading, "the illustrious novelist unconditionally and absolutely declined" their request.

Dickens rounded his career off well; he forecast his last reading, and as he finished that evening's performance Stephen Leacock says, "He closed the volume of Pickwick and spoke a moment as himself, a farewell to his last audience. 'From these garish lights,' he said in conclusion, 'I vanish now forevermore, with a heartfelt, respectful, affectionate farewell.'"¹

1. Leacock, Stephen, Charles Dickens, p. 292.

1. Woolcott, Alexander, Mr. Dickens Goes to the Fair, pp. 80-81.

Chapter V

DICKENS AS A THEATRICAL CRITIC

Dickens was not a theatrical critic in the sense in which we speak of "theatrical critics" today. He never, in all his writing, has given us any formal dissertation, or essay on theatrical techniques but he has left in his letters many informal critical comments relative to acting and about plays which he observed during his travels. Such may be cited as proof of his critical interest in the theatrical art.

While in France in 1847, Charles Dickens writes to his biographer John Forster concerning a comparison of the French and English stage as he saw it. The English actors he thought were immeasurably the best; the French were too stiff, and allowed their own customs and personalities to dominate the characters they were attempting to portray, thus weakening the performance. He tells us that the French actors, in their attempt to play English parts were wholly unable to portray English character in a way acceptable to Englishmen. They were very unconvincing; their accents were so French, even when reading English names, that it was quite evident that they were not from "Merry England". Mr. Alexander Woollcott gives us some examples of their pronunciation in his book entitled Mr. Dickens Goes to the Show.¹ The costumes, too, were definitely

1. Woollcott, Alexander, Mr. Dickens Goes to the Show, pp. 60-67.

1. Woollcott, Alexander, Mr. Dickens Goes to the Show, pp. 60-67.

a Frenchman's version of English style. Dickens says: "I saw a Lord Mayor of London at one of the small theatres here [in Paris] ... wearing a hat such as a dustman wears."¹

There was one actor in France, however, for whom Dickens held great admiration. This was Frédéric Lemaître. In a letter which Charles Dickens wrote to John Forster in 1855 concerning this actor's work in a melodrama entitled Thirty Years of a Gambler's Life, he says that Lemaître's make-up as the gambler was very good. In the first act he was very young and airy. Then came change and degeneration, which Lemaître portrayed very well. The greatest acting, Dickens tells us, came in Lemaître's portraying the murderous, thieving, old tramp which he became after his degeneration. Dickens says he thought that Lemaître gave the most artistic performance possible in the power of an actor. Dickens tells us that two or three times Lemaître's characterization was so horribly awful that a cry of anguish and horror went all around the audience. His pantomime must also have been very real. Dickens mentions the way in which he looked over his clothes for blood spots after the murder so that he could keep his guilt secret from his inquiring little daughter. Later in Charles Dickens' own acting career he patterned his technique on that of this Frenchman who remained his constant ideal. Dickens also admired Lemaître's inflection on certain phrases. Dickens says: "Lemaître, in this performance, said two things in a way that alone would put him far apart from all other actors. One to his

1. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

1. Woolcott, Alexander, Mr. Dickens Goes to the Show, pp. 60-67.

wife, when he was exultingly showing her the stolen money and she has asked him how he got it - 'I found it!' - and the other to his old companion and tempter, when he was charged by him with having killed that traveler, and he suddenly went headlong mad and took him by the throat and howled out, 'It wasn't I who murdered him - it was 'Misery'.'"¹

Dickens mentions one or two other French actors in his letters. "Richardson is no great favourite of mine, and never seems to me to take his top-boots off, whatever he does."² "Rose Cheri plays Clarissa in Clarissa Harlowe very admirably, and dies better than the ordinary, to my thinking."³

In writing from Italy he makes no comment upon the Italian actors or their acting; he ignores them completely and seems to be entirely interested in the marionettes he saw. These were novel and fascinated Dickens thoroughly. In 1853 he writes to Mr. Forster from Rome; "I never saw anything more amazing than the marionette performance altogether only an hour long, but managed by as many as ten people, for we saw them all go behind at the ringing of the bell. The plot concerned the saving of a young lady by a good fairy from the machination of an enchanter; this was coupled with the comic business of her servant Pulcinella (A Roman Punch). A scolding old peasant woman, who always leaned forward to scold and put her hands in the pockets of her apron, was incredibly natural. Pulcinella, so airy, so merry, so life-like, so

in conversational French, was most interesting. The lady was performed

1. Ibid., p. 68.

2. Ibid., p. 60.

3. Ibid., p. 60.

4. Ibid., p. 60.

graceful, was irresistible. To see him carrying an umbrella over his mistress's head in a storm, taking to a prodigious giant whom he met in the forest, and going to bed with a pony, were things never to be forgotten. And so delicate are the hands of the people who move them, that every puppet was an Italian, and did exactly what an Italian does. If he pointed at any object, if he saluted anybody, if he laughed, if he cried, he did it as never Englishman did since Britain first at Heaven's command arose - arose - arose - etc. There was a ballet afterwards, on the same scale, and we came away really quite enchanted with the delicate drollery of the thing."¹

Dickens is not only interested in the acting and actors but also in the type of plays he saw. Dickens' taste evidently ran toward comedy and melodrama which were very popular in his day. In the classics he was never greatly interested; and it seemed to Dickens that the actors trying to portray heavy classical roles likewise had little or no feeling for their parts. Dickens also thought that nothing was quite so ridiculous as the sight of classical drapery on the human form; he says that to him, "it was really so bad as to be almost good." Here again he mentions the pronunciation of English terms by French actors as ludicrous. He mentions particularly a play which he says was a compound of Paradise Lost and Byron's Cain. Some of the controversies between the archangel and the devil, when the celestial power argues with the infernal in conversational French, are most disturbing.² The Medea was performed

1. Ibid., p. 62.

2. Ibid., p. 71.

in Paris in 1855 and Dickens again writes to Forster about it. Here again he mentions the lack of feeling and understanding of the play by audience as well as actor. He says that King Creon was obliged "to keep a wary eye on the proscenium boxes," throughout the performance to dodge the bouquets which were thrown at the most preposterous times in the midst of agonizing scenes when the people should have been so entranced by the theme as to hardly stir in their chairs.¹

Although Charles Dickens realized that the theatre of his day was in a deplorable condition, he never lost hope for it as many of his contemporaries were prone to do. He saw a hopeful future for it with progressing years and very definitely states that in his opinion the theatre could never die because of the vital position it played in peoples' lives. As he stated it: "The Theatre was man's most real escape from reality and therefore would always live."²

1. For further information vide Mr. Dickens' letters, Woollicott, op.cit.
2.

3. Lamb. David, Early Victorian Novelists, p. 21.

Chapter VI

INFLUENCES OF THEATRE UPON DICKENS' LITERARY WORK

Charles Dickens as a writer was influenced by two of the greatest men in the field of drama. He patterned parts of his work very closely on Shakespeare and Richard Brinsley Sheridan. The rise of the novel in Dickens' age was directly due to the decline of the drama, for instead of going to the theatre, the people took to reading plays; yet everybody cannot fully appreciate a play when read. There sprang up a kind of literature which had all the interest of the drama, without over-taxing the reader's imagination. The first novels were actually called "plays with lengthy stage directions". This form was exactly the medium which Dickens wanted for his writings.

Dickens was "not an intellectual at all. He observed life, he had no power to analyse and co-ordinate his observations. Still less did he have a critical ability to discover the laws governing the novel in general and his own talent in particular. He was an average Nineteenth Century Cockney, only he had genius."¹ "Dickens had no special insight into the qualities which are characteristic of man as man; but he had an acute discernment of those qualities which divide him from other men.

... His books are like mobs; huge, seething, chaotic mobs; but mobs in

1. Cecil, David, Early Victorian Novelists, p. 59.

which there is no face like another, no voice but reveals in its lightest accent a unique unmistakable individuality. Mr. Pecksniff is not only Mr. Pecksniff, he is the type of all hypocrites."¹

Dickens is probably the greatest humorist that England has ever produced. His humour is fantastic; he always touches the victim's weak spot and then emphasizes this weak spot as much as possible in order to make him seem more ridiculous. Dickens is a caricaturist; his unique position as a humorist lies in his mastery of "pure" humour; his jokes are amusing just in themselves.

Dickens had a very intense, dramatic feeling for his characters which makes his creations so much more vivid to us than, for example, those of his fellow writer *Thackeray*, who, we can never fail to realize, always stands outside his characters; and who, as he says himself, in his preface to Vanity Fair, considers his personages merely puppets in his hands. To Dickens his characters are as much alive as any other human being of his circle of acquaintance. He wrote to Forster, that he had made himself ill with grief over the last days of "little Nell". "All night I have been pursued by the child and this morning I am unrefreshed and miserable. I do not know what to do with myself," he said to his daughter Mamie. To Forster he wrote: "This part of the story is not to be galloped over, I can tell you. I think it will come famously but I am the wretchedest of the wretched. It casts the most horrible shadow upon me, and it is as much as I can do to keep

1. Ibid., pp. 53-54.

2. The Letters of Charles Dickens, pp. 242-243.

moving at all.... Nobody will miss her like I shall. It is such a painful thing to me that I really cannot express my sorrow." After he had 'killed' her (On the 17th of January, 1841, at 4:00 a.m.) he wrote to his biographer, "It makes me very melancholy to think that all these people are lost to me forever, and I feel as if I never could become attached to any new set of characters. ..."¹

In characterization and plot Dickens tends toward melodrama. His "ideal woman" is no doubt, a long-suffering, sacrificing heroine. Nancy Sikes, when she is asked whether she feels any resentment toward the man who has maltreated her replies, "Resentment! When I am never to see him again! Morning and night my voice will be raised to heaven in anguish for his prosperity." Dickens still firmly held to the principle that "Man was the Lord of Creation. Woman was a more or less negligible quantity." Marriage meant, of course, a step to be seriously considered, but complete happiness does not necessarily require that physical and mental harmony to which all other considerations should be subordinate. Peggotty becomes Barkis' wife, because then she will always have a house and cart to bring her over to David, because she will work in her own house with better heart than she would work in anybody else's and be near her old mistress's grave.¹

Dickens is very prone to have sudden psychologically unaccountable changes of character at the end of his novels. Micawber, the type of "genial impecuniosity," turns out a success in Australia, after helping to unmask the villain Uriah Heep. While this change helped materially

1. Von Amerongen, J. B., The Actor in Charles Dickens, pp. 242-243.

to "end the story happily," it is highly improbable that Micawber ever would have these capacities for service, within himself.

As to plot, we see he was again melodramatic in his eavesdropping scenes. This always makes for good staging. Martha, standing behind the inn-door, hears what David and Mr. Peggotty are discussing;¹ or Noah Craypole spies upon Nancy and Mr. Brownlow.²

In his novels Dickens also represents the professions, usually in a satirical light, as he delineates the characters connected with them. Generally speaking, his merchants (Jonas Chuzzlewit, Scrooge, Pecksniff) are misers and rascals; his clergymen (Chadband, Rev. Melchisedeck Howler) are hypocrites; his lawyers (Dodson and Foggs, Solomen Pell) are unscrupulous rogues; his judges (Mr. Justice Stareleigh) are as a rule ridiculous. He is fond of representing stupid magistrates dependent on their inferiors; his surgeons are ignorant; his military men are boastful and, as a rule, cowardly.

I have given some of the traits that characterize Dickens' work. Now let me more specifically note some of the hints he took from the greatest of all dramatists, Shakespeare. Mr. Von Amerongen, would have us believe that in the following points Dickens' work was typically Shakespearian:

"1. Marley's ghost, like the spirits of Shakespeare, behaves and is dressed as in ordinary life, unlike the conventional stage phantoms, which generally appear in their shrouds.

1. Dickens, Charles, David Copperfield, Chap. XL
2. Dickens, Charles, Oliver Twist, Chap. XLVI

1. *The American*, Vol. 1, pp. 247-248.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

2. Dickens shares the tendency with Shakespeare to idealize what repells in ordinary life. i.e. What Shakespeare did with the cowardly drunkard, Falstaff really is what Dickens did with the infamous hypocrite, Pecksniff, and the vulgar mercenary Mrs. Gamp.

3. Like Shakespeare, the novelist was quite indifferent as to raw material out of which grew the works that came to be universally admired. He was content to take some dry chronicle or worthless forgotten play as the plot for his immortal comedies and tragedies, Dickens in the same way always borrowed his plots.

4. Shakespeare punishes his rogues in light comedy less severely than in tragedy (Think of Falstaff in Merry Wives as compared in Henry IV and V) is not Dickens' treatment of Jingle and Job Trotter in Pickwick similar?

5. Shakespeare's treatment of contrasts was also copied. i.e. in Midsummer Night's Dream we find the fairy-folk Oberon, Titania, Puck. The same interplay of supernatural and realistic elements is found in Dickens' characters that are either super-humanly good or bad; they have excentricities and fantastic abstractions, like Oliver Twist and Rose Maylie, Uriah Heep and Micawber and others."¹

Otto Ludwig goes so far as to call Dickens' work, Shakespeare-drama, but conforming with the interest of modern times and without the impediments of the real state."²

Charles Dickens was also much interested and appreciative of another dramatist of note, Richard Brinsely Sheridan. We find throughout Dickens' work many places in which he used Sheridan as his model. Mr. Von Amerongen suggests that "The relation between Oliver Twist and Monks, between Dr. Strong and Annie, suggests those between the two Surfaces and Sir Peter and Lady Teazle. Again in The Rivals Mrs. Malaprog answers: 'Why, murder's the matter! Slaughter's the matter! Killing's the matter!' Now Micawber, warning his friends of the coming catastrophe replies to

1. Von Amerongen, J.B., op. cit. pp. 242-243.

2. Ibid., p. 222.

a similar question of David Copperfield: 'What's the matter, Gentlemen? What is not the matter? Villainy is the matter! baseness's the matter!' Again Feeder, dancing with Miss Blimber, whispers: 'Had I heart for falsehood framed, it ne'er could injure you;' ... which are the first lines of a song in Sheridan's Duenna Again Mrs. Nickleby's brain is like a 'mere mechanism for setting in motion an irresponsible tongue,' Dickens may have very easily borrowed these traits from Mrs. Malaprop."¹

Every play has five major traits: characterization, plot, stage-direction, action for characters, and a definite setting. Each of these Dickens used in a dramatic way in his novels.

Characterizations

As in melodrama, which undoubtedly greatly influenced his writings, Dickens never leaves us in doubt as to the real nature of his obscure characters; their customs, manners, dress, their whole bearing bespeak their disposition.² Mr. Nadgett, the detective in Chuzzlewit, was "a short dried-up withered old man, who seemed to have secreted his very blood; for nobody would have given him credit for the possession of six ounces of it in his whole body. ... He kept his linen so secret by buttoning up and wrapping over, that he might have had none, perhaps he hadn't. He carried one stained beaver glove, which he dangled before him by the forefinger as he walked."²

1. Ibid., p. 224.

2. Ibid., p. 176.

Otto Ludwig says that every chapter of a Dickens' novel strikes him as the scene of a drama, and Dickens' works generally impress him like plays accompanied by music. His references to the theatre are practically endless. In Little Dorrit he describes Fredrick Dorrit in the Orchestra Pit thus:

"The old man looks as if, the remote high gallery windows, with their little strip of sky, might have been the point of his better fortunes, from which he had descended until he had gradually sunk down there to the bottom. He had been in that place six nights a week for many years, but had never been observed to raise his eyes above his music-book, and was confidently believed to have never seen a play. There were legends in the place that he had not so much as known the popular heroes and heroines by sight, and that the low comedian had "mugged" at him in his richest manner fifty nights for a wager, and he had shown no traces of consciousness. The carpenter had a joke that he was dead without being aware of it, and the frequenters of the pit supposed him to pass his whole life, night and day, and Sunday and all, in the orchestra. They had tried him a few times with pinches of snuff over the rails, and he had always responded to this attention with a momentary waking-up of manner that had the pale phantom of a gentleman in it; beyond this he never, on any occasion, had any other part in what was going on than the part written out for the clarionet; in private life where there was no part for the clarionet, he had no part at all."¹

Again in Nicholas Nickleby when Kate Nickleby is brought before Mrs. Witititterly, her future employer, for the first time, Dickens writes

"That lady was reclining on a sofa in such a very unstudied attitude that she must have been taken for an actress all ready for the first scene in a ballet, and only waiting for the drop-curtain to go up."¹

In Chapter XI of Edwin Drood, the last of Dickens' novels, he describes the waiter in the hotel as "the flying waiter." ...

1. Ibid., p. 171.

"The legs of this young man, in its application to the door, evinced the finest sense of touch; always preceeding himself and the tray (with something of an angling air about it) by some seconds; and always lingering after he and the tray had disappeared, like Macbeth's leg when accompanying him off the stage with reluctance to the assassination of Duncan."¹

Plot

The plots of Dickens' dramas were always bad. The plots of his novels were fair, but always very loosely connected. He was very melodramatic, using sentimental devices and over-elaborate death-bed scenes. Always he included theatrical effects such as thunder and lightening in a crisis to serve as a foreshadowing of the action of the plot, or of the characters themselves. He would become engrossed in his characters and forget all about his plot, rambling on at random; then, suddenly remembering that he was going to have to end his discourse, he would loosely tie the main threads of the plot and leave the minor ones loosely dangling.

At the end of Dickens' stories the heroine is discovered, the hero honoured, and the villain unmasked and punished; Dickens never fails to gather a large company of his characters together almost like a chorus in a Greek play to comment upon the actions. "Sometimes this turns out to be a very incongruous company. When Pecksniff is

1. Ibid., p. 171.

unmasked, he manages to collect upon the scene, John Westlock, old and young Martin, Ruth and Tom Pinch, Mary Graham, Mrs. Terpin, Mark Topley, Bailey, Mrs. Gamp and Sweedlepipes."¹ All are there to view the affair and to see that justice is given. There also is "an equally motley group on the day of reckoning of Uriah Heep, on that of Jonas Chuzzlewit, and when Mrs. Pegler exposes the self-made humbug, Bounderby. At the very end of Chuzzlewit he even makes the poor American emigrants from Eden appear upon the stage to heighten the universal note of happiness. In all these cases we are strongly reminded of the close of his account of Les Me'moires du Diable the play he saw in Paris in 1856: "The wrongdoers are exposed, the missing document is found, they are all on the stage."²

"It is the custom on the stage, in all good murderous melodramas, to present the tragic and the comic scenes, in as regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon. The hero sinks upon his straw-bed, weighted down by fetters and misfortunes; in the next scene, his faithful but unconscious squire regales the audience with a comic song. We behold, the throbbing bosoms, the heroine in the grasp of a proud and ruthless baron, her virtue and her life alike in danger, drawing forth her dagger to preserve the one at the cost of the other; and just as our expectations are wrought up to the highest pitch, a whistle is heard, and we are straightway transported to the great hall

1. Ibid., p. 213

2. Ibid., p. 213

of the castle where a gray-headed seneschal sings a funny chorus with a funnier body of vassals."¹

Such changes appear absurd; but they are not so unnatural as they would seem at first sight. The transitions in real life from well-spread boards, to death-beds; and from mourning weeds to holiday garments, are not a whit less startling; only there we are busy actors, instead of passive lookers-on, which makes a vast difference. The actors in the mimic life of the theatre, are blind to violent transitions and abrupt impulses of passion or feeling, which, presented before the eyes of mere spectators are at once condemned as outrageous.

Stage-Direction, and Dramatic Action of Characters

Dickens very clearly shows his stage-managerial hand in many touches. "The actions of his characters are often accompanied by what is technically called 'by-play'. In her interview with Bradley Headstone, Jenny Wren turns one of her dolls, which she calls Mrs. Truth, with her face to the wall, whenever she feels that her visitor does not say what he really means. Mr. Fips, the lawyer, when having some difficulty in resuming the conversation with John Westlock and Tom Finch, takes up a water stamp with which he imprints 'F's' all over his legs. The talk between John Jasper and Edwin Drood about Rose Bud is accompanied by the two men cracking nuts, the way in which they do this, being accurately described: 'Crack! Crack! Crack!' slowly on Jasper's part, 'Crack!' sharply on the part of Edwin Drood. Chevy Slyme also eats and cracks

1. Dickens, Charles, Oliver Twist, Chap. XVI

nuts in his conversation with old Martin Chuzzlewit. Percy Fritz-Gerald observes that a watering pot is even made to join the action. In the scene between Terpman and the spinster aunt in the Arbours, the lady carries a huge red watering pot with pebbles inside, which make a noise like that of an infant's rattle to divert attention."¹

There are instances in Charles Dickens' novels where he gives minute directions for the pronunciation of certain words, and suggestions for the intonation of exact phrases. In this respect we see in him the ability of a director. "After Captain Cuttle's escape from the dread Mac-Stinger, this formidable female traces him to Solemon Gill's shop, upbraiding him with his ingratitude; 'and he runs awa-a-a-ay!' cried Mrs. Mac-Stinger, with a lengthening out of the last syllable! ... (And keep away a twelve month' ... 'a pretty sort of man is Cap'en Cuttle!' with a sharp stress on the first syllable of the Captain's name!"²

Other tricks that echo of the stage-managerial are the directions given his illustrators. Here are some of the most characteristic. "The child lying dead in the little sleeping room which is behind the open screen. It is winter-time, so there are no flowers; but upon the breast and pillow, and about the bed, there may be strips of holly and berries, and such free grown things. Windows are overgrown with ivy. ... I want it to express the most beautiful repose and tranquillity, and to have something of a happy look, if death can! ... If you can express the women inside without showing them as by a fluttering veil, a delicate arm, or so forth appearing at the half-closed window, so much the better!"³

1. Von Amerongen, The Actor in Charles Dickens, p.210

2. Ibid., p. 211.

3. Ibid., p. 211.

Charles Dickens always grouped his characters as though he was arranging them on a stage in a picturesque way. He consistently used an effective, as well as instructive, background for them. "The evening star twinkles over the love scene of Amy Dorrit and Clennam; the Fountain leaps up high in Temple-Garden during the Idyll between Martin Chuzzlewit and Mary Graham. Very effective is the description of the leavetaking of David Copperfield and Mrs. Steerforth after Littimer has told his disgraceful story, to the two women (Steerforth's mother and Rose Darth) sitting motionless on the terrace in the gathering gloom, some early lamps twinkling in the distance, a lurid sky hovering over head and a mist from the valley below rising toward them like a sea, which mingling with the darkness threatened to draw them! ... When David Copperfield and the Micawbers are enjoying their dinner-party they all at once become aware of a strange presence in the room, and looking up, find Littimer standing hat in hand before them!"¹

Another theatrical device is that of rounding all the characters into a very dramatic, or theatrical scene at the climax of the plot or a sub-plot, as, "When Jonas Chuzzlewit is at Pecksniff's house. Tom Pinch announces the approach of old Martin, Jonas' mortal enemy. The architect wants to propitiate the old man at all costs, so Tom Pinch's simple communication is the signal for general and dreadful confusion. Charity in loud hysterics, Mercy in the utmost disorder, Jonas in the parlour and Martin Chuzzlewit and his young charge upon the very door-

1. Ibid., p. 212.

step."¹ In Oliver Twist, Chapter II, Dickens again uses this device of giving stage-directions. "Do you give the children wine, Mrs. Mann?" inquired Bumble, following with his eyes the interesting process of mixing. "Ah, bless 'em, that I do, dear as it is," replied the nurse. "I couldn't see 'em suffer before me very eyes, you know sir."

"No," said Mr. Bumble approvingly: "No, you could not. You are a human woman, Mrs. Mann." (Here she sets down the glass.) "I shall take an early opportunity of mentioning it to the board, Mrs. Mann." (He drew it toward him.) "You feel as a mother, Mrs. Mann." (He stirred the gin-and-water.) "I drink your health with cheerfulness, Mrs. Mann;" and he swallowed half of it.

Setting

The setting of Dickens' works is most frequently London, the London of the 1820's and 30's, with its squares and shops and offices and murky slums, and prisons and wharves, and crowded rivers and clamorous thoroughfares and its churches with steeples striped with soot, its suburbs with their trim cottages and tidy gentle spaces of open country.

His characters move in an atmosphere of London fog, and smoke and pale dusty London sunshine. We can catch all that from the novels.

In a quotation from Oliver Twist, Dickens gives the reader a setting just as though he were reading from the fly-leaf of a play script.

Dickens says: -

1. Ibid., p. 213.

"Carry your memory back - let me see - twelve years, last winter."

"It's a long time," said Mr. Bumble, "Very well I've done it."

"The scene the Workhouse."

"Good!"

"And the time night!"

"Yes."

"And the place, the crazy hall, wherever it was, in which miserable drabs brought forth the life and health so often denied to themselves - gave birth to pulling children for the parish to rear; and hid their shame, rot 'em, in the grave!"

"The lying-in room, I suppose?" said Bumble, not quite following the stranger's excited descriptions.

"Yes," said the stranger, "A boy was born there."¹

From the setting above you expect to turn the page and start reading the play, having fixed these few facts as a start to the story.

1. Oliver Twist, Chap. XXXV

Chapter VII

CONCLUSION

Although Charles Dickens is known for his abilities as an author, facts concerning his life indicate that his personal wishes and desires lead toward the theatrical world. If his love of the theatre is not an innate characteristic, then it is the result of training and association with it at a very early age. We are told that during his early childhood, due to his father's interest in acting, Charles was trained to entertain people by reciting curious ditties popular in that day. As he grew older he manifested a personal interest in the theatre and constantly was associated with the acting profession. This fact is clearly borne out in the many stories he gives us and the letters he wrote to friends, about his frequenting show houses on every opportunity. On his return home he would endeavor to rehearse what he saw in order to acquire skill at acting. This practice, of devoting much time to attending theatres, never left him, for even with maturity he continued to find his greatest pleasure in this relaxation. His letters from France, Italy, the United States and Canada refer frequently ^{to} his theatrical visits and experiences.

Dickens never became a professional actor, probably because he first attained success in the field of literature. He was not able

through Charles Dickens was thwarted as an actor, stage-manager,

equally well to serve two masters so his life's ambition was never wholly realized. He did not dismiss from mind, however, his deep interest in the art of acting, but attempted to satisfy his inward craving by writing plays. In this effort to achieve his unrealized hope of making a name in the theatre, he again met defeat because he was unable to produce plays which were acceptable in the field of artistic drama. Dickens' difficulty in playwriting probably had its origin in his literary style. This he could not divorce from his plays and the style he used was not suitable to drama, because of his improper technique and his utter disregard for the logical sequence of events. Of course his efforts were not a total loss, for several of his plays were produced; but none ever enjoyed the lasting success that he wished for them.

Although Dickens did not succeed in acting or playwriting he still persisted in his love for the theatre. Toward the later years of his life, he sought an outlet for his desire by organizing and directing theatrical companies and by finally engaging himself as a "reader" of his own works. In this last endeavor, as a "reader," he acquired a success which served him as a good substitute for his unattained theatrical ambitions. His success in this last undertaking can be partially attributed to the fact that he was introducing an innovation in the field of entertainment, namely the personal portrayal of the characters in his novels.

Though Charles Dickens was thwarted as an actor, stage-manager,

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director, producer, and playwright, he finally won his reward as a world renowned platform reader. In this art he was a pathfinder and a great success, both artistic^{ly} and financially, as is told in his letters, and through the comments of friends on his presentations. Thus, although Charles Dickens the actor and playwright, producer and director, is practically forgotten, still Charles Dickens the supreme humorist, novelist, and platform reader will always be remembered.

THE LIFE OF CHARLES DICKENS
BY
ALICE DICKENS
WITH
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
HENRY COLEMAN
LONDON
1899

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