

Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World

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Simon Callow offers a fresh perspective on one of the greatest novelists in the English language, bringing to life Dickens the man. He reveals an original genius, and offers an insight into a life that was driven as much by performance and showmanship as by literary endeavour.

Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World Details


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From Reader Review Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World for online ebook

Craig says

An interesting take on Charles Dickens' life and work. Callow not only agrees with other biographers that theater influenced the style of Dickens' writing, but also that Dickens' entire life was a performance. Still, the most interesting aspect is Callow's descriptions of Dickens working out his characters "in company" through his early informal performances and later public readings. He describes Dickens inhabiting each of his characters, performing their lines of dialogue in front of mirrors, etc. to flesh them out. Callow spends much of the latter part of the book tracing Dickens' tours and public readings, detailing the preparation of the characters and Dickens' evolving characterizations -- his adaptation and modification of the people, passages, and events of his earlier written works. This is a good read for devoted Dickens' fans.

Rikke says

"Literature was his wife, but the theatre was his mistress."

While I do love Dickens, I have never known much about him. For a long time, I have been reluctant to pick up a biography in order to learn more about the much admired author because most of the biographies written on Dickens are long, dense and filled with references and in depth discussions of his literary work. As I haven't read Dickens' entire bibliography I have avoided these very literary biographies.

Callow's biography takes a different approach to the admired author and almost mythical cultural figure that is Dickens. His subject isn't the sublime novels of Dickens, but Charles Dickens himself. Not the collected works, but the man behind them.

Callow's thesis is that Dickens was as much an actor as he was an author. He loved the stage, co-wrote plays with Wilkie Collins, did magic tricks at parties, did dramatic readings of his own stories for an audience, spoke enthusiastically and almost lived his life as a performance. According to Callow, it was only a coincidence which led Dickens to the newspaper world and the written word – otherwise he would have become an actor.

"Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World" explores Dickens' love for theatre and performing and paints a vivid portrait of the beloved novelist. It is both deeply entertaining and highly informative, without ever getting too scholarly or focused on a single novel or a single event.

Shane says

An actor writes a biography about another actor whose role he played. The former is an actor who happened to be writer, the latter a writer whose inspiration came from his passion for acting. The former is Simon Callow, the latter is Charles Dickens.

What we have is a view into the life of Dickens where he is seen as the quintessential actor, able to play many parts, drawing his characters by acting them out, and later dramatizing the characters from his novels

to make a fortune as an itinerant reader, whose reading schedule finally wore him down to the point of death.

Despite his father's incarceration in debtor's prison and Dickens being forced to leave school and work in a boot-blackening factory for two years at the age of 10, for the most part Charles Dickens had a comfortable middle class life. He also enjoyed early success with his work (I did not see any reference to a rejection slip from a publisher) and after that his life was on an upward trajectory. Except for the modest success of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, all his novels were best sellers. But always, even with successful people, there is the tragic flaw, and Dickens' titanic flaw was his manic personality that drove him to extremes in everything he did: fathering 10 children, multi-tasking with amateur theatre, walking miles a day and night to observe life in the nooks and crannies of London from which he extracted his caricature-like characters and larger than life stories, writing, editing, running a magazine, managing a home for homeless young women, and finally undertaking a punishing reading schedule on both sides of the Atlantic. His mania also gave rise to a controlling personality. Wives, mistresses, children, publishers, employees, even friends, all bowed to his will, and when they didn't, he excoriated them, often in public. His public denouncement of his wife Catherine, who bore him all his children and suffered his manic personality through his formative years, earned him the wrath of the literary establishment, although it didn't lose him any fans. Ellen Ternan, his mistress, lived a shadow life in order to keep the company of her lover. Neither wife nor mistress showed up at his funeral.

And yet Dickens championed the law of copyright on both sides of the Atlantic where it did not exist, he pleaded the plight of orphans and the working poor, railed against government, psychoanalysed friends who had ailments that couldn't be cured through existing medicine; on his visits abroad, he made it a point to visit orphanages, morgues, prisons and hospitals to observe and to uplift where possible, he pioneered the concept of "writer as entertainer" in the three-hour readings he gave which were constantly sold-out. He espoused a liberal monarchy and believed that free speech in America was a sham, he supported his derelict father and always earned to pay for his large family, constantly bailing them out of financial minefields. Tragedy was his constant companion: his wife's sister Mary, who had a spiritual connection with him, died young and cast an eternal cloud over the writer, his youngest daughter died suddenly, other children died young, many of his literary and theatre friends passed away during his lifetime.

In his later years he integrated the literary with the theatrical to run the Readings, where he played the roles of the characters he created: Micawber, Sykes, Fagin, Scrooge - he had a great list to pick from. If literature was his wife, then theatre was his mistress. And yet his flaw here was to run on adrenaline, for success in his performances was "mind over matter," while professional actors work on "mind in matter." The Readings ruined his health: his legs gave way, his voice gave way and he aged far ahead of the 58 years he was at the time of his death.

The author tends to glorify Dickens and raise him to mythic status, and that is the flaw in this book for it moves beyond the objective into the subjective and sentimental, much like the novels of the great author. And yet, when we look upon his life, it appears to be one totally consumed by his art at the expense of friends and family

One can't help but wonder whether Charles Dickens would have been successful in the 21st century, where the serialized novel is extinct, magazines struggle to hold their own, the blog tour has replaced author readings, and brevity is favoured over the voluminous. One can but wonder...

Gerry says

Timed for publication to coincide with the 200th anniversary of his birth this superb book is a fascinating study of the great novelist, concentrating more on his life as an entertainer, ie in the theatre and in his public readings.

Fluently told with plenty of anecdotal tales Dickens comes to life and is obviously both a complex and emotional character. His love for the theatre and wish to be in the spotlight began at a young age and, after plenty of readings to his family and amateur dramatic productions (although professionally handled by himself who was the major domo on every production), he brought it to full fruition when he began his series of highly successful public readings.

However, his striving for perfection and his desire to bring something to the public that would both startle them as well as entertain them, ie the Sikes and Nancy scene, eventually proved his downfall. His advisors warned him against continuing the readings but he persisted ... and the result was his early death.

A well written and excellently paced book it proves to be a really enjoyable read and leaves the reader wanting more of Dickens' life and habits.

Bettie? says

listened twice and have it stored in my 're-read treasure chest'

MJ Nicholls says

Michael Slater: encyclopaedic, hardcore. Claire Tomalin: thorough, concisely packed. Simon Callow: lightweight, fluffy. Mr. Callow has played Dickens on the stage and in film, and apparently thinks about Dickens to an unhealthy extent. Rather than writing a book comparing his own Greatness to Dickens, or dwelling entirely on Dickens and the Stage (as hinted the hardback subtitle for this book, stripped in paperback), he wrote a breezy bio, working in all the necessary facts about Chaz in a way that bypasses all the mostly interesting things, like the composition of his works, a close analysis of the works, or loving lingerings on his works. Dickens was a terrible arranger for the stage: his choice of material either unfunny farce, esoteric unfunny farce, or appalling melodrama. He was an excellent helper and thespian, however, and found his calling performing outrageously over the top readings of his own works, sometimes while half-dead from agonising foot pain or other internal ailments. I always find it remarkable quite how quickly Dickens deteriorated in the last few years, how his penchant for relentless toil turned him into a senile, collapsing wreck before his sixtieth birthday. Callow dwells on these facts too, while being fair about the Inimitable's weakness for corny theatricality. This is a serviceable, decent bio, but Michael Slater is the man to read for a proper Dickensian insight.

Barney says

I decided to read this because I recently saw Simon Callow's stage monologue about Dickens and because I want to revisit Dicken's work during 2012.

Biography doesn't normally hold my attention for very long but this is hugely entertaining and eminently readable. I'd recommend it to anyone wanting to know more about this complex individual - not just one for scholars!

Rick Skwiot says

I knew Simon Callow was a fine film actor, having seen him in "A Room with a View," "Four Weddings and a Funeral" and "Shakespeare in Love." Then, when I stumbled upon his recently published (August 2012) "Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World," I found out he is a fine writer as well.

Well-researched and lively with revealing Dickensian anecdotes, the book focuses on Dickens' love of the theatre and performing, and in the process exposes much about what made him tick and succeed as an author.

Like most successful folks, Dickens was a driven man with superhuman energy, according to Callow, and all-too-human failings. Reading this biography gives me new insight into Dickens' fictional world and appreciation for the author, perhaps the first and greatest of literary self-promoters.

Leah says

Exuberant and boisterous...

Callow has written a superbly readable and affectionate account of the great man's life, viewing it from the perspective of how Dickens' love for the world of the theatre influenced his life and work. Interspersed generously with Dickens' own words, taken from his correspondence with friends, we get a real feel for his massive personality, his sense of fun, his unstoppable energy and, yes, his occasional pomposity too.

Callow doesn't shirk from telling us about the less flattering aspects of Dickens' life – his appalling treatment of his wife, for instance, and the occasional bullying of his poor publishers. But he also reminds us of the social campaigning and the generosity to family, friends and colleagues. The account is a linear one, so we find out what Dickens was involved in at the time of writing each of his novels and get a feel for the inspiration for each one.

Callow concentrates in considerable depth on Dickens the showman – the many theatrical performances he wrote for, played in and directed in his early life; and then the tremendous and punishing public readings of his own works which came to dominate so much of his later years. Here was an author who gave generously to his adoring public and who thrived on the adulation he was shown in return.

I've been in love with Dickens the writer for most of my life and now having read this fabulous biography I

have fallen in love with Dickens the man! If I tell you that I cried when Dickens died (not an altogether unexpected plot development) then it will give you some idea of how much of the humanity of the man Callow has managed to reveal. I have been left wanting to re-read so many of the novels and stories, not to mention the letters – thank goodness for my copy of The Complete Works.

An exuberant and boisterous biography – a fitting tribute to this exuberant and remarkable man. Highly, highly recommended.

Lososodiane says

Absolutely excellent! Brings Dickens to life in all his complexity. I read the Tomalin bio first and enjoyed that very much. This one focuses intently on Dickens himself, especially his readings and theatrical performances which seemed to inspire his writing. Dickens immersed himself totally in whatever he was doing--writing, performing, playing with his children, staging his Christmas celebrations, drumming up support for one of his causes. His life WAS a drama and he seemed to see it that way. One can only speculate that his view of women was rooted in his parents' choice to enthusiastically support his musical sister and basically ignore his own intelligence and ambitions. Women seem to be almost cardboard representations of what he thinks a woman should be. While his treatment of his wife after she produced ten children was shameful, he always made sure he supported her. Dickens declined to follow the financially irresponsible example of his father and other family members. He lived BIG--played hard, worked hard, and, incredibly, could walk 10-30 miles at the drop of a hat. Callow left me with a sense of deprivation and irreversible loss because I will never see Dickens doing a reading. What magic it must have been in its time and place. At least there is some hope of seeing Callow portray Dickens, even if I have to take an eleven-hour plane trip to do so.

Dora Wagner says

I have always been a great Dickens fan. I read A Christmas Carol every Christmas and have for about 30 years. It was interesting to learn about his love of the stage and acting, while also re-learning about his life. Simon Callow does a great job relating both his remarkable love of the stage with his genius in his work as an author. While visiting England, I was fortunate enough to watch Mr. Callow perform The Mystery of Charles Dickens. He was truly amazing and brought not only Dickens to life, but also Dickens' characters to life, as Dickens did, while performing his readings.

Emily says

Delightfully Dickensian literary biography of Dickens himself--shorter than the Tomalin, with a different bent than Jane Smiley's Penguin Lives entry. Illuminating and amusing, and the British package is wicked adorable on my cubicle bookshelf.

Charles Matthews says

Dickens biographies, like Dickens novels, tend to run to the high hundreds of pages. (Edgar Johnson's is 1200 pages in two volumes.) Which only adds to my appreciation of Simon Callow's slim and highly readable biography. Callow, who is probably best known in the United States as the actor who played the guy whose funeral is referred to in the title of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, has also written biographies of Charles Laughton and Orson Welles (that one is already in two volumes, so he isn't always as concise as he is in the Dickens bio).

Callow's biography can be concise because he has a thesis: that Dickens was as much actor as novelist: "Literature was his wife, the theatre his mistress, and to the very end he was tempted to leave the one for the other." In fact, Dickens did leave his wife, but he never really acknowledged his mistress, the actress (of course!) Ellen Ternan. Where other Dickens biographers are steeped in literary criticism, Callow sees Dickens as a performer, working out an essentially dramatic approach to life.

This might explain why Dickens's reactions to events in his life -- e.g., the death of his wife's young sister, Mary; his childhood employment in the blacking factory -- seem often to have been so excessive, you might say "melodramatic." Dickens sometimes seems to have viewed his life as happening on a stage, where crucial events demand extraordinary reactions. Certainly, as Callow points out repeatedly, Dickens was never happier than when he was performing -- either as writer or as player.

In the end, Dickens's devotion to the theater culminated in the celebrated readings from his works, which may have -- Callow thinks they certainly did -- precipitated his early death: He was only 58 when he died.

This is an immensely readable book, focused more on the man than on the works. If you haven't read all of Dickens you needn't worry about getting lost in thickets of litcrit and plot parallels. I have only one tiny nit to pick: On Dickens's second visit to America, in 1867, Callow says he met with "President Jackson, who ... weeks after meeting Dickens, ... was impeached." That would have been Andrew Johnson, not Andrew Jackson.

Bionic Jean says

Did you study the works of Charles Dickens at school? Was he pushed down your throat so much that you now yawn when you hear his name? Then please, think again. Don't think of a staid Victorian writer, closeted in his room writing lengthy, boring screeds and rarely venturing out. Dickens was the life and soul of the party; irrepressible and exuberant. He was essentially a showman; an entertainer. He was, complete in himself, **Charles Dickens and the Great Theatre of the World**.

Ironically many of the previous generation (including myself) came to know and love Dickens after formal education. There was a gap between his contemporary popularity when he was clamoured after and mobbed by his fans, and more recent decades. In between he had been profoundly unfashionable and rather looked down on in literary circles. Even in his own lifetime he was never "quite a gentleman", and more often condescended to by the literary intelligentsia, but this did not stop him from being universally loved. Things have now turned full circle, and he is now both read and revered by all, with a plethora of biographies about him from every conceivable point of view.

Simon Callow acknowledges this curious development, and apologises for writing yet another biography of Charles Dickens. For is there really anything more to say? We have John Forster's *Life of Charles Dickens* - a 3 volume chronicle of Dickens by his greatest friend and mentor. We have Peter Ackroyd's masterly *"Dickens"* which was probably the first biography to set an author firmly within the cultural mores of his time. We have books by eminent scholars such as Michael Slater, and we have the bicentennial biography, written in 2012 by Claire Tomalin. Callow is keen to stress that Tomalin's book, *Charles Dickens* is entirely deserving of its enthusiastic literary reception. Yet the viewpoint of the two could hardly be more different. For Tomalin, theatre could only be a negative influence on the novels. She states that,

"Dickens's plots tend to the theatrical and the melodramatic"

as if this is self-evidently bad. But for Callow, Dickens's acting was what made him the writer he was, and what makes him unique. It provided the face-to-face relationship with his public, and in the process of developing his characters on stage, they became real in his mind.

Simon Callow is one of Britain's finest actors, and he has achieved recognition as a skilled essayist, and a biographer of both Charles Laughton and Orson Welles. In addition he is wonderfully talented as a natural raconteur. Combined with his lifetime's enthusiasm for *"The Inimitable"*, Callow has set out to show Charles Dickens, the entertainer, from a unique point of view. Staying closely to the letters and writings of Charles Dickens himself, Callow is keen to obtain his information first-hand, rather than from the secondary sources of previous biographers. He wants to be able to show his readers just how crucially important the theatre was in the life of this, one of our greatest storytellers. And as we read, we realise that for Dickens the theatre was truly an obsession. It is no wonder that his novels all have a theatrical element, or that the reader can "hear" the characters declaiming from the stage, because that is what they were doing - from the stage of Dickens's imagination.

We follow through Dickens's life story, some or all of which may be familiar to the reader. Callow vividly describes Dickens's early years as a child entertainer in Portsmouth, and it gradually becomes clear to the reader that Dickens only really came "alive" at such times, and at the theatre learning his trade as a mimic, memorising long tracts and mannerisms of his heroes in the minutest detail. He was compulsive; a perfectionist, driving himself on to escape from what he saw as degradation and horror. He was not allowed to continue his education as his sister, Fanny, had. He felt this keenly as a betrayal by his parents, especially his mother, and his horror of working in the shoe-blackening factory, and his father's growing insolvency cut him to the quick, remaining as unresolved issues in his persona for the rest of his life, leading to his eventual death by overwork.

Such obsessive behaviour is well-known and repeatedly set down by Dickens biographers. What Simon Callow does however, is to set this firmly within the context and reality of Dickens's perceptions of the theatre. As we read, we become aware that writing was a consequence of having to earn a crust, and - dare I write this - second best. Dickens's true love was the theatre, about which he was fanatical. Here it was that Dickens learned important lessons, picking up his *"streaky bacon"* technique, as he called it, of alternating comic and tragic scenes so familiar in his stories, from the popular performances of his time. And of course he became the original "celebrity" author, with thousands of adoring fans from all walks of life attending his readings in Britain and the USA.

When he wrote, acted in and stage-managed plays, Dickens was in his element, and Simon Callow carefully chronicles each major episode and production, whether in a country house or a failing amateur theatre, interspersing it with snippets of Dickens's writing life and current quarrels (of which there were many and various!) with his publishers. Callow does not mince his words. We know that Dickens was exuberant and

irrepressible. Apparently nobody who ever met him failed to notice his startling eyes. He had enormous energy and drive. But allied with this, he was also supremely confident, single-minded and self-willed. He did not suffer fools gladly - even when they were not really fools at all. There are shameful episodes in his life, such as the letter he wrote to the newspapers denouncing his wife, who had borne him 10 children. Callow describes this as,

"a hateful document, a calm dismissal of Catherine at every level... There is no great man who has ever so completely let himself down as Dickens at this moment... He never again saw Catherine with whom he had shared his life for 20 years... His subsequent relationship with Ellen Ternan was pursued furtively, unacknowledged by all except his very close associates."

No, it was never a good idea to get on the wrong side of Dickens.

It is interesting that these reflections on Charles Dickens, the writer, in the guise of an actor, are enabled by Simon Callow, the actor, in his guise as a writer. Both seem supremely talented in both areas. Simon Callow has made several tours performing the stories of Charles Dickens on stage - but in the persona of Charles Dickens, much as the great man did in his own lifetime. It is abundantly clear that, in common with many actors, Dickens felt the need to be completed by having contact with his audience. There are countless examples in the book, culminating in the rendering of an horrific scene from *"Great Expectations"*, "Sikes and Nancy", which is generally acknowledged to be what killed him, his heart-rate increasing from 72 before the performance to 124 afterwards, as measured by his doctor.

Simon Callow is the natural choice for any casting director wanting someone to play the part of Dickens, whether a full-blown interpretation or merely in a cameo role. In addition to his tours, he has played Dickens in a one-man play by Peter Ackroyd - and even in a minor part in the TV series *"Doctor Who"*. Callow revels in this, and quotes the actor Warren Mitchell when he was accused of changing the line in a play. His response was simply that he hadn't just written about the person, but, insistently, *"I've been 'im"*.

It is on record that while writing a character's speech, Dickens would often leap up to check his own expression in the mirror. Simon Callow himself seems to exhibit multiphrenia, using psychodrama to reveal fascinating insights about Charles Dickens in this book,

"In a sense, Dickens was a greater mystery to his contemporaries than he is to us: they had absolutely no idea as to where it all came from - the darkness, the passionate empathy with the disadvantaged, the massive driving energy, the overwhelming willpower."

What the reader may be left wondering is, is this what Charles Dickens was also doing with his characters? Dickens himself becomes his characters. Is this possibly why his myriad creations seemed to take on a life of their own for him, one more real and precious to him than anything else?

Michael Slater, whom Simon Callow acknowledges in his foreword as, *"the current doyen of Dickens studies"*, pays tribute to this book, with its unique insight and point of view,

"This is the book we have long been waiting for and only Simon Callow could have written it. The theatre was central to Dickens's life, and it needed a skilled biographer to do justice to the subject. Simon Callow rises superbly to the challenge and the result is a marvellous book that really deepens and enriches our understanding and enjoyment of Dickens."

And Simon Callow's final words?

"As long as men and women want to hear stories, Charles Dickens remains and will always be a leading player on the stage of our imagination."

John says

Tough to find a novel approach, that doesn't come off as as contrived/padding/reaching, in a biography of a public figure over a century later, but Callow pulls it off. Yes, there's mention of the novels as points of reference, as they really can't be avoided; however, it turns out Dickens was a real showman in his day - acting in plays co-written with Wilkie Collins, a master of magic tricks at parties, a rousing speaker, and much more. It's obvious Callow's done a great deal of research to bring alive scenes from the great writer's life - true "You Are There" moments, especially with the audio edition, where the author goes full throttle in his admiration and enthusiasm.

Near the end comes a line that particularly struck me: "Literature was his wife, but the theatre was his mistress."

Definitely recommended!
