

DIRECTOR'S NOTES :-

DAVID COPPERFIELD is one of the longest of all Dickens' novels and unique in that it is an entirely personal work rather than a social critique.

Our approach has been to select certain narrative lines that illustrate the main themes. We have set out to explore and confront the subtext through modern eyes.

Dickens himself selected the stories of Steerforth, the Murdstone and Peggotty families as the basis for his own public readings from **DAVID COPPERFIELD**, which were among his most popular performances. In terms of form, we have followed many contemporary critics in defining **DAVID COPPERFIELD** as a "fairy tale", and tried to reflect the dynamic and stylized musical theatre of Victorian London, which was itself a huge influence upon Dickens' work.

DAVID COPPERFIELD was written in 1850 mid-way through Dickens' career, and is probably the most autobiographical of his novels. In his own preface he describes it as "my favorite child". There are many parallels between the life of Charles Dickens and the fictional journey of his title character. Dickens, like David, saw a father figure go to prison, was sent to work in a bottling factory, married in haste and worked as a journalist in the British Parliament. He wrote to his friend, John Foster, that with **DAVID COPPERFIELD** he was "sending some part of myself into the Shadowy World." Just before writing the novel, Dickens had begun work on an autobiography that he later destroyed. Forster states that Dickens drew on that autobiography for the early parts of the novel. Where Dickens' other works were concerned with exposing the reformable social and political evils of Victorian Society, **DAVID COPPERFIELD** largely avoids social satire. Here the focus is on family and romance. The love affair with Dora and even with Emily draws on Dickens' own unhappy affair with Maria Beadnell. He later referred to the experience in a letter to Maria, as the wasted tenderness of those hard years which I have ever since half loved, half dreaded to recall." This ambiguity to emotional experience is a key to the novel.

The emotionally promiscuous David of the novel was not so different from Dickens himself, who lived in parallel relationships with his wife and the actress Ellen Terman. This is not unlike the situation of David, bounced between this affection for Emily, Agnes and Dora.

Dickens, in control of his creations, disgraces and exiles Emily, kills off Dora and resolves the dilemma in a happy ending with Agnes. George Orwell describes Agnes as “the real legless angel of Victorian romance – a character who represses all physical love for David and is rewarded. The emotionally and physically expressive women of the novel are punished with unhappiness, death and exile.

The novel is full of strange “families”, heaving with tensions and desires. These fictional relationships pre-date Freud’s work by two generations, but there is no mistaking the “Oedipal family” here in David’s relationship with his mother, the intensity of feeling between the Murdstones and the bizarre asexual alternative of the extended Peggotty family by the Yarmouth sea.

Equally startling and “modern” in content is the story of physical denial and repression as the child characters grow up. The novel is full of examples of inappropriate affection or infatuation and the failure to acknowledge true feeling. David’s refusal to acknowledge Emily’s love as anything other than “sisterly” plunges her into the equally unsatisfying arms of Steerforth and Ham.

Two levels of emotional repression occur in the novel: first Vampirism of the likes of Steerforth and Murdstone, in which physical love is accompanied by emotional impotence and life draining coldness. Secondly, the apparently harmless promiscuous emotion of David, who hugs almost everyone, but avoids any mature relationship with those who genuinely love him. Dickens exposes and satirises these weaknesses, but he resolves them through coincidence and convenient deaths. Clara and Dora suddenly die from unnamed diseases. Emily is “punished” with exile and prostitution when she seeks passion away from David and outside of her social class. Today, and perhaps even by the end of his own century, Dickens would not have been able to provide such easy resolutions to the contradictions in his narrative. A new readership aware of Freud and the unconscious would demand from a serious novelist a psychological solution to the problems he poses. In this production we have attempted to confront the contradictions in the novel, building from Dickens own characters and situations but rejecting his convenient solutions and coincidental resolutions. We have tried to dramatise the struggle that Dickens himself went through while writing the novel, rather than let the “godlike2 hand of the novelist descend and force a sentimental conclusion.

And we can return to Dickens himself for our authority to do so, as his own dramatic readings from DAVID COPPERFIELD selected six chapters. These chapters combined David's love affair with Dora, the Peggottys, Emily's seduction by Steerforth and climaxed in the storm. Charles Dickens was an enthusiastic theatre goer. He was also a committed amateur actor and became an extraordinary professional reader of his own works. The famous Victorian actor Macready called Dickens "the greatest actor of our age".

DAVID COPPERFIELD is full of demanding and exciting theatricality. In the spirit of that theatricality we are animating the characters in an emotional stage world of compulsive vampirism and human warmth, physical possession and expression. The contradictions and dilemmas of the novels and our production are pressing problems of great drama in which we have all participated: the drama of growing up.