

British Theatre Guide

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David Copperfield

Charles Dickens, adapted by Deborah McAndrew
Octagon Theatre, Bolton
(2010)

For its Christmas production, the Octagon returns to Dickens with *David Copperfield* in a new adaptation, as with last year's [Oliver Twist](#), from former *Coronation Street* actress Deborah McAndrew.

Said to be Dickens's most autobiographical novel, it tells the story of the title character from childhood, when his widowed mother marries the cruel Edward Murdstone who beats him and then, when David bites him, sends him away to boarding school. At the age of ten, Murdstone sends him to London to work in a factory, but when his landlord Mr Micawber is sent to debtors' prison, he walks to Dover to stay with his aunt, Betsey Trotwood.

In his later life, David's schoolfriend James Steerforth seduces and abandons David's childhood friend Emily, David marries the pretty but impractical Dora Spenlow who dies after a miscarriage and he helps his friend Agnes Wickfield when her lawyer father becomes strangely under the power of the sinister Uriah Heap who has designs on Agnes. Of course, being Dickens, those that survive by the end live happily ever after and most of the wrongdoers get their comeuppance.

McAndrew's adaptation of this substantial novel takes a typical literary adaptation route of using lots of short scenes linked by substantial narration from the adult Copperfield with almost all of the cast playing multiple roles. With a novel of this length, even after much of it is cut out, rarely can we really get to know a character or get immersed in a scene before it is over and gone and we're on to the next episode and a different set of characters. This makes it very difficult to care very much for these characters good or bad as they flash before our eyes. It also means that actors, with little chance to establish character in the scenes, often end up creating a series of performances that are either confusingly similar or over-the-top caricatures.

Elizabeth Newman's production begins with a lovely full-stage image that creates the right period setting, designed by Lucy Sierra, with a full chorus lifting the atmosphere with Conrad Nelson's atmospheric music, but the children are running around spraying bubbles from very modern blue plastic bubble blowers. This mixing of ideas that are interesting in themselves but which do not sit comfortably together happens elsewhere in this production. There are puppet birds made from parts of musical instruments and bits of violins incorporated into the set design which look great but have nothing at all to do with David Copperfield.

Geoffrey Breton's adult Copperfield is mostly a narrator character, even when he takes over the scenes from the actor playing his younger self (shared by Jacob Aspinall and Joshua Taylor) and he delivers them in a lively and slightly over-the-top way. Ruth Alexander Rubin stands out; even though her characters of Miss Betsey Trotwood, Peggotty and Mrs Micawber are fairly similar, they are all strongly and naturally played, and her 'twins' as Mrs Micawber, represented by Henson-like puppets with gaping mouths like baby blackbirds, are very funny.

Tobias Beer creates a nice contrast between the thoroughly unpleasant Murdstone and the sympathetic and ultimately heroic Micawber, whereas Jake Norton creates a genuinely believable and almost sympathetic character out of the scoundrel Steerforth but turns Uriah Heap into a totally unbelievable caricature. Clara Darcy creates some nicely distinct characters with a Freudian touch to the casting as she plays David's mother and his first wife. There are also some nicely human characters from Simeon Truby, as well as Lloyd Gorman and Barbara Hockaday, who also acts as musical director. The children are very well-drilled in the chorus scenes and perform well, but some of the more intimate scenes between them are a little rushed.

This is an actor-musician show, but the music is integrated very well and the instruments do not become intrusive as often happens. Conrad Nelson's excellent score is so much a part of the fabric of the show that this is very close to being a full-scale, brand new musical with some good songs, including a great Gilbert and Sullivan parody about making punch.

I'm not sure why Dickens has become so much associated with Christmas in theatres as, outside of *A Christmas Carol*, few of his stories have much to do with the festive season and most are not exactly cheerful. The Octagon's offering has much about it that is entertaining and is visually and musically impressive, but it is a rather brisk whistle-stop tour of major points in the story rather than a human story to get emotionally or narratively involved in.

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)