

press release

THIRTEEN/WNET NEW YORK CONJURES UP THE GHOSTS OF CHARLES DICKENS' PAST IN *DICKENS*, AN AMBITIOUS NEW THREE-PART SERIES PREMIERING DECEMBER 17 ON PBS

Innovative Documentary Uses Dramatic Sequences And Dickens' Own Words To Tell The Story Of The Man, The Writer And The Victorian London He Immortalized

"Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show."

-- *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens

David Copperfield. Oliver Twist. Fagin. Scrooge. Tiny Tim. Pip. Miss Havisham. They will live as long as English literature itself. But what of the man who created them out of his own complex personality and extraordinary life experience? The great literary genius Charles Dickens said of his characters that he could see them, touch them, hear them speak. But how much does the world know about Dickens, himself? He embodied the spirit of his place and time – grim, industrialized, Victorian London in transition – yet history and the popular imagination have tended to romanticize the man and his city.

Now, a new three-part series presented on PBS by Thirteen/WNET New York explores Dickens' life and his psyche through an innovative mix of documentary and dramatic sequences. His world and his stories come alive in stunning computer-enhanced re-creations of Victorian London, replete with authentic characters. *DICKENS* is written and presented by the acclaimed British Dickens expert, Peter Ackroyd, author of *London: A Biography*. Produced by the BBC and Opus Arte, the series premieres Wednesday, December 17, 8-11 p.m. on PBS (check local listings).

Throughout *DICKENS*, prominent British actors portray the entire cast of real-life characters, including Dickens, his family members, his secret lover, his friend and biographer John Forster, and fellow novelist William Makepeace Thackeray. They appear as interview



subjects, commenting on everything from the writer's childhood of hardship and deprivation, which he tried desperately to keep secret, to the scandals and peccadilloes of his adult life. Even London denizens who were the inspiration for some of Dickens' most memorable characters show up to offer their two pence. Much of the commentary is based on the actual words of Dickens and others, as recorded in private letters, biographical interviews and journals. Anton Lesser plays the novelist, Prunella Scales and Timothy West, his parents; Miriam Margolyes is Catherine Dickens, his wife; and Geoffrey Palmer is Thackeray.

Episode one, *Secrets*, introduces three women who made an indelible impact on Dickens: his not-so-doting mother, Elizabeth, his long-suffering wife, Catherine, and his elusive mistress, the young actress Ellen Ternan. The program chronicles the childhood of Dickens, who was born in 1812, and examines the influences on his life, focusing on a crucial, devastating turning point. When the family fell on hard times, debts began to accumulate and they were forced to flee from place to place. After his father was thrown into a debtors prison, 12-year-old Charles was sent to work at a factory. He emerged from that harsh experience determined to achieve wealth and fame, and with the seeds of his most autobiographical novel, *David Copperfield*, already planted in his rich imagination. At age 24, he published his first major work of fiction, *The Pickwick Papers*, as a monthly serial.

By the time he was 25, he was considered by many to be the most famous and best-loved novelist in the world. *Blazing Away*, episode two, looks at the early years of Dickens' fame, the effects of family life on his work and how he used his writing, as well as his growing reputation, to improve social conditions. Dickens' stories – a brilliant melding of fiction and reportage – were imbued with contemporary and topical references, real issues for his avid audience. In *Oliver Twist*, he conjured his own vision of hell – the workhouse. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, he crusaded against another notorious institution, the so-called private academies for unwanted children. At home, the death of his beloved sister-in-law – who became for him the idealized image of the virginal female – struck the first blow to his marriage with Catherine. Later traumas would include the death of his father and his baby daughter, Dora. Dickens found his refuge in the theater, acting and performing dramatic readings. During a visit to America, Dickens was mobbed in the streets and followed everywhere by admirers. Even President John Tyler paid his respects to the young writer. But after speaking out against the bootlegging of his books, he alienated his many fans. He took his revenge in a subplot to *Martin Chuzzlewit*, offering a stinging satire of the American dream.

Dickens had written 11 novels by the time he was in his mid-40s. Episode three, *Terror to the End*, details the author's growing fame, increasing dissatisfaction with family life and deepening affection for Ellen Ternan. Rumors about the relationship were rampant, and after 22 years of marriage, Dickens banished Catherine from their home forever. These were years of

gloom and discontent for Dickens, as evidenced by his novel *Bleak House*. Nevertheless, his love for Ternan intensified, with secret rendezvous and assumed names. In 1865, Dickens, Ternan and her mother were traveling together aboard a train that derailed, killing 10 people and injuring many more. Dickens assisted Ternan and her mother, came to the aid of other injured passengers and – never one to miss a deadline – Dickens even returned to the wreck to recover his manuscript of *Our Mutual Friend*, despite the psychological trauma of the accident. The exact nature of his relationship with Ternan is unknown, but Dickens' later works, such as *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*, were increasingly preoccupied with the theme of unrequited love. One romance he could count on was the love of his adoring public. His readings, which he approached with an almost spiritual fervor, were wildly popular. According to some, the stress of his readings could have been a factor in his death, which occurred in 1870 after a massive stroke.

As the series shows, in his prolific, creative, tumultuous lifetime, Dickens embodied all the restlessness and uncertainty of his era, and captured the character and imagination of his Victorian contemporaries. And for as long as subsequent generations shudder at the cold avarice of Scrooge or applaud the optimistic pluck of Oliver, Charles Dickens will live on.

DICKENS, a BBC/Opus Arte co-production, is presented on PBS by Thirteen/WNET New York. Chris Granlund and Mary Downes are the producers, with Andrea Miller as executive producer for the BBC. For Thirteen/WNET Culture and Arts Programs, Bill O'Donnell is director of program development and Margaret Smilow is executive in charge; Jac Venezais executive producer.

Funding for *DICKENS* is provided by public television viewers and PBS. Special funding for the telecast is provided by Susan R. Malloy – The Sun Hill Foundation.

.....

Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Stage on Screen*, *EGG* the arts show, and *Cyberchase* – as well as the work of Bill Moyers – to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as *The Ethnic Heritage Specials*, *The New York Walking Tours*, *New York Voices*, *Reel New York*, and its *MetroArts/Thirteen* cable arts programming. With educational and community outreach projects that extend the impact of its television productions, Thirteen takes television “out of the box.” And as broadcast and digital media converge, Thirteen is blazing trails in the creation of Web sites, enhanced television, CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, educational

software, and other cutting-edge media products. More information about Thirteen can be found at: www.thirteen.org.

Press Contact:

.....

Caroline Oman

Thirteen

212.560.3057

oman@thirteen.org