

INTRODUCTION

Although Dickens is universally acclaimed as a great novelist and his reputation as a writer mainly rests on his novels, Dickens also wrote a few plays sometimes individually sometimes in collaboration with other writers, and these plays have not received the attention that they deserve. It is interesting to note how Dickens's life-long interest in theatre led him to write these plays and how eventually he switched over to novels mainly to reach a wider range of audience. Even then it is always possible to trace a dramatic strain in his novels and it is in this context that the plays, however insignificant in comparison with the massive body of Dickens's novels, assume enormous significance as a tributary to the novels. It is also possible to discover in these plays some of the essential characteristics of Dickens as an artist - his interest in the riddle of existence, his abiding concern with the social malaise, his sympathy with the downtrodden and, above all, his remarkable sense of humour.

Dickens was associated with the theatre right from his childhood. In this connection Emlin Williams writes :

In an age where there was no button to switch on Radio or Television, amateur theatricals were part of family life and of the Dickens family life as much as only...¹

1. Emlyn Williams, "Dickens and Theatre" in Charles Dickens 1812-1870 : A Centenary Volume. Ed. E.M.F. Tomlin (London : Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1969). Subsequently cited as Williams, p. 178.

And again :

... on the slightest provocation charlie would lift on to a table to sing duets with his sister Fanny, apparently acquiting himself with innate self possession...²

When six years old he was taken to see Richard III, at eight he was taken to see Grimaldi, the great clown could sure have been touched to know that he had enchanted a child so permanently that one day that child would (in the first flush of his own film) edit his memoirs. We also learn from Williams how in 1821 when Dickens was just a nine year old and the family was compelled to move to London under very difficult circumstances, James Lamert comforted the poor Dickens by making him a personal toy theatre. It was this toy theatre that gave the poor homesick child a sense of satisfaction by giving him an opportunity to live in a world of make belief. The Editor of the Vision Edition of Dickens's Plays and Poems also tells us that "Dickens wrote his play, Misnar, The Sultan of India, when he was no more than ten years old ..."³

The play is founded on one of the narratives in Tales of the Genii. We are also told that "a burlesque, O'Thello, (Part of the Great Unpaid), was performed by amateurs, including his father, John Dickens in 1833..."⁴

2. Ibid.

3. Charles Dickens, Complete Plays and Selected Poems. (Vision: Vision Press Limited, 1970).
p. 1.

4. Ibid.

Dickens's interest in theatre was also conspicuous in the school theatricals, where he was a popular figure and a leading light. His performance in Miller and His Men produced at schools was quite satisfactory and enjoyable.

When Dickens left school at fifteen and started working in London as an office boy, he was always haunted by the world of Theatre which beacons him and held out a promise of relief and satisfaction. We have it on record that even during these years Dickens would often run away to theatre to spend a night there in order to forget his immediate surrounding and be transported into the world of imagination away from the world of brute reality. The night theatre provided him an escape from the dull routine existence and "the thorns of life."

It would not be fair to dismiss Dickens's love of theatre as a passing taste of an adolescent who is dazed by the glammers of the illusive world of the stage.

In fact, Dickens had already by the time plunged into acting and we learn that on the nights that he would not go to the theatre he would spend his time in memorizing his dialogue and practising his part for the stage. Sometimes he would practise even seven hours a day with a religious devotion to the art of practice. It is clear that Dickens's frequent visit to the theatre,

to the pantomimes at the Rochster theatre during the formative period of his life cast an abiding influence on his character, shift it in a particular manner and profoundly affected his creative talents. It should also be borne in mind, in this connection, that there were certain personal factors as well that drove Dickens towards the theatre. Dickens was not a happy child. He did not receive adequate love. He famished for love, some kind of emotional bond that would sustain him and give him a meaning of his existence. Theatre, or the world of make belief that the theatre offered, acted both as a safety valve and solace. It made him forget his sorrow as he became engrossed in the theatre. It may not be wrong to say that unhappy childhood, personal problems and domestic misery were largely instrumental in driving Dickens towards the gloriously beautiful, though unreal, world of theatre, and sharpen his theatrical sensibility which was already latent in his character.

But unfortunately the condition of the theatre at Dickens's time was far from satisfactory. The size of the theatre was so large that it was not possible for the actors to display the subtle nuances of gesture or modulations. The dramatis personae of the plays were as stereotyped as those of medieavel mystery plays. The hero pure; the farmer simple, slow and endearing; the law year unscrupulous and so on. The existing condition of the

theatre was no better. From Dickens's novels, articles, letters, etc. we can form a rough idea of the taste and nature of the typical theatre-going audience, and also of the type of actors, professionals and amateur that filled the play houses. Dickens writes :

We were motley assemblage of people ... besides prowlers and idlers, we were mechanics, Clock labourers, coaster mongers, petty tradesmen, small clerks, milliners, stay-makers, shoe-binders, shop-workers, poor-workers in a hundred high ways and by-ways. Many of us - on the whole, the majority - were not all clean and not all choice in our lives or conversations.⁵

And what about the actors ? Dickens writes in Sketches by Boz :

Did any of our readers ever notice the class of people who hang about the stage - doors of our minor theatres in the day time ? You will rarely pass one of these entrances without seeing a group of three or four men conversing on the pavements, with an indescribable public house - parlour, swagger and a

5. Charles Dickens, "A Cheap Theatre" in The Dickens Theatrical Reader Ed. Edgar and Eleanor Johnson, (London : Victor Gollance Ltd., 1964), p. 323.

kind of conscious air, peculiar to people of this description. They always seem to think they are exhibiting; the lamps are ever before them.⁶

The Theatre Act of 1843 legalized the bourgeois demand for entertainment. The rapid industrialization and the growth of the bourgeois class as a strong growing force compelled the theatre to cater to the demands of the audience. What was their demand? This demand chiefly was melodrama or drama enacted on a simplistic level. G.M. Trevelyan, the great social historian, quotes an American auditor who remarked after visiting the London theatre :

Enthusiastic applauses were bestowed by the Galleries this evening on this sentiment, that if a poor man had an honest heart there lived not one in England who had either the presumption or the power to oppress him. In this incident may be seen the active jealousy of liberty which exists even in the lowest orders of England.⁷

6. Charles Dickens, Sketches by Boz in Works of Charles Dickens, Vol. I (London : Gresham Publishing Co. Ltd., n.d.) p. 81.

7. G.T. Trevelyan, English Social History : A Survey of Six Centuries from Chaucer to Queen Victoria (London: Longman Green and Co. Ltd., 1944), p. 468.

This reflects the social situation. An applause in a theatre is an applause by the mass, and the mass demanded exclusive entertainment. It would not possibly be wrong to say that no other era has been so strongly dominated by the demands of the masses. If the plays that Dickens wrote are essentially melodramas or burlesques, it only shows Dickens's sense of zeitgeist, the spirit of the time, and by temperament also Dickens was always in sympathy with the suffering multitudes, the down-trodden and the exploited.

However, Dickens's love of the theatre was not confined to witnessing the performances of simple mimicry as a pasttime. At once stage of life, he took theatre seriously and started acting. His talent particularly in acting comic roles has been referred to by his close acquaintances. George Lear recalls that Dickens's imitations of the speech, ways, and manners of the charwoman at Ellis and Blackmore's were true to life. Dickens had told Lear that he had taken part in amateur theatricals and his father knew many of the wellknown actors. Lear makes a particular mention of Mac Ready and John Pritt Harley. Another source of his acquaintance with the theatre personalities was his sister Fanny who after four years of study at the Royal Academy of Music had begun to hang around the theatres. It is on record

that in 1827 and 1828 she sang for the benefit of the theatrical crowd. In 1833 we find Dickens as the moving spirit behind two evenings of amateur theatricals with his family and a few friends. The first that took place on 27th April consisted of performances of John Howard Payne's opera : Clari, The Maid of Milan, P.P.O. Callaghan's The Married Bachelor and R. Brinsley Peake's Amateur and Actros. We learn from the play-bill that Dickens had not only written prologue for the evening but also worked as a stage manager responsible for directing the plays, getting the actors to rehearsals, pleading with them to complete the scenery that they were assigned to construct, renting costumes, and such matters. He also acted in all the three plays. It was with great passion that Dickens performed the task that he had set upon himself. In the second half of the same year Dickens produced theatrical entertainment, The O'Thello.

In summer holiday also Dickens would generally assist the rehearsal. Dickens's love of the theatre was such a passion that on his honey moon in 1836 he amused his bride and himself by writing a farce The Strange Gentleman. In September 1836 his one act farce, The Strange Gentleman scored a success. In December The Village Coquettes was produced. The third and probably the best of Dickens's plays to be performed at

St. James theatre was Is She His Wife ? or Something Singular. It is comic burletta and happens to be the last publically performed and published dramatic work of which Dickens was the sole author. The Lamplighter, a farce again, was written in 1838. Mr Nightingale's Diary was written by Dickens in collaboration with Mark Lemon for the guild of literature and was first performed at Devonshire house in May 1851. The best and most important of the plays No Thoroughfare written in collaboration with Wil^lkie Collins, the great author of The Women in White, had its maiden show at the Adlephi theatre, London in December 1867.

Dickens's first tour to America occurred in 1842, and at that time he, says Williams, all on a sudden 'burst into dramatic forms'. While at Montreal, Dickens had, Williams further adds, a chance to set in three plays such as A Rose-lind for an Oliver, A Good Night's Rest and Deaf and Past. He would never waste his time in bad companies, says Williams, according to whom, "he turned to acting as another writer might have sought relaxation in fishing or gambling"⁸.

8. Williams, p. 100.

It has already been mentioned that Dickens's passion for the theatre found expression as much in his writing plays as in his acting. It is interesting to note that in 1845 he appeared in The Elder Brother by Beaumont and Fletcher and in Ben Jonson's Every Man in his Humour in which he played the role of Bobadil. In 1848 he appeared as Justice Shallow in The Merry Wives of Windsor. In 1855 he took part in Wilkie Collins's The Lighthouse. And in 1857 in a private production at Tavistock House he played again a most important part in Collins's The Frozen Deep. This is the last recorded appearance of Dickens as play actor.

Dickens's active interest in the theatre may be seen as a manifestation of his natural love for the dramatic. Inga-Stina Ewbank has rightly remarked :

Just as he was both literally and metaphorically a great stage manager in life, so he manipulates the reader's sympathies with theatrical flair in his novels Dickens's ... style draws attention to itself by its blatant theatricality, over statements, chanted repetitions, reiterated, catch phrases

and imagery, a dramatically unexpected metaphors in which people and things merge grotesquely.⁹

And again :

His success stems from an absorbing interest in the problems of the middle and lower classes. Out of an awareness of a man's suffering sprang his vehement attacks on the social evils of his days.¹⁰

Robert Garris also says the something in a different way :

Anyone who opens one of Dickens's novels, then, is prepared to enter a 'theatre' and to co-operate with the 'theatrical mode' ...¹¹

In A Tale of Two Cities a domestic drama is enacted in the backdrop of one of the greatest dramas of human civilization : French Revolution. Apart from the powerful use of different kind of conflict - internal and external - Dickens also uses the dramatic device of the dialogues form. For pages together, for example we have dialogues instead of a narrative by the omniscient narrator. It is highly dramatic novel. Even in a novel like Dombey and Son he draws our attention mainly

9. Inga-stina, Ewbank, Encyclopaedia Americana, International Edition, 1988 p. 80.

10. Inga-stina, Ewbank, Encyclopaedia Americana, International Edition, 1988, p. 82.

11. Robert Garris, The Dickens Theatre : A Reassessment of the Novels (Oxford : Oxford UP, 1965) p. 40.

to the father's suffering and the slow change forced on him by experience. Dickens catches human journey so vividly that the reader accepts at the end of the portrayal of Dombey's pride, not as theatrical manipulation but as the objective revelation of great art. Dickens's natural love for the dramatic is also revealed in his descriptions. Here, for example, is the external view of Lady Deadlock in Bleak House :

Both before and after saying it she remains absorbed, but at length moves, and turns, unshaken in her natural and acquired presence, towards the door. Mr Tulkinghorn opens the doors exactly as he would have done yesterday, Or as he would have done ten years ago, and makes his old - fashioned bow as she passes out. It is not an ordinary look that he receives from the handsome face as it goes into the darkness, and it is not an ordinary movement, though a very slight one, that acknowledges his courtsey. But, as he reflects when he is left above the woman has been putting no common constraint upon herself.

He would know it all the better, if he saw the woman pacing her own room with her hair widely thrown from her flung-back face, her hand clasped behind her head, her figure twisted as if by pain. He would think so

all the more, if he saw the woman thus hurrying up and down for hours, without fatigue, without intermission, followed by the faithful step upon the Ghost's walk.¹²

Here Dickens is doing exactly what Shakespeare had done in the scene between Hamlet and Polonius. He is setting up a tension between behaviour and inner feeling. A close scrutiny of any novel of Dickens in fact would give enough evidence of Dickens's predilection for drama, while it is true that Dickens was in his element when he wrote the novels which gave him enormous scope of moralizing or intruding into the novels as an omniscient narrator. Dickens's plays are also of significance. It is true that Dickens was not a potential Shakespeare. He did not have the 'negative capability' of Shakespeare but the plays that he has produced deserve critical attention. The reason why Dickens wrote mainly melodrama must be sought as much in Dickens's love for the teeming multitude, the common man, as the historically unique character of the Victorian audience composed of people who wanted nothing but entertainment with the establishment of the railways people from the country side began to throng the theatre halls. It is to their demand that Dickens, ever a sympathetic humanist, condescended and wrote plays which are either broad farce, or melodrama or musicals but invariably are of lower order.

12. Charles, Dickens, Bleak House, N.P. : Wordsworth Edition Limited, 1993, p. 479.