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Bleak House, dramatised by Andrew Davies. BBC1 October-December 2005.

There wasn't much fog. But there was so very much more. And amidst the generous Christmastide helpings of Dickens on stage, screen and radio this Christmas, Andrew Davies's version of *Bleak House* on BBC1 towered supreme. It was a triumph. The ratings alone attest its popularity. The early episodes attracted about 6 million viewers – roughly the same as ITV's *Emmerdale* or *The Bill*. Comparisons are interesting. *EastEnders* was currently then at 11.24 million, *Coronation Street* 10.55 million. BBC2's massive UK/US co-production saga, *Rome*, – despite bad language, nakedness, sex and violence – was only pulling in 3 million. But the concluding episodes of *Bleak House* had a loyal following of 6.91 million. And consider this: although the first of the new series of BBC1's much vaunted comedy show *Little Britain* (to which cultural weathercock Lord Bragg devoted a whole *South Bank Show*) began its new run in December with 9 million, this figure dropped to 6.8 million in following weeks – the same number of viewers attracted to this serialised version of Dickens's thousand-page novel. Over twenty countries have shown keen interest in buying the TV series. Amazon's reported sales of the book rose a staggering 290%.

Yet, oddly enough, Andrew Davies doesn't regard himself as a Dickensian. He told me:

I never really thrilled to him in school, and at university in the fifties I was rather under Leavis's spell, and Leavis didn't have much time for Dickens, except *Hard Times*. In my thirties I realised how wrong Leavis was. Read a lot of Dickens – my favourites were *Little Dorrit* and *Our Mutual Friend*. But I always had reservations. I was never quite sure about the manic exuberance of his comic characters; and I was quite sure I didn't like the insipid sentimentality in the characterisation of his heroines.



Bleak House and its principal characters. Courtesy BBC Productions.

Consequently, he hesitated when the BBC gave him the chance to dramatise *Bleak House*. After preliminary discussions with the production people they resolved on an innovative approach to this 1,000-page masterpiece. A generous co-production was agreed with a US company (WGBH Boston) and this £8-million production was the first television drama to be in High Definition Television format.

In an attempt to attract viewers (especially younger viewers) it was proposed to serialise it in 30-minute episodes, instead of treating *Bleak House* in the traditional BBC classic-serial manner. BBC publicity claimed (foolishly in my view) it was being done as a soap opera, and it was scheduled to follow *EastEnders* on BBC1 with Sunday omnibus repeats. Inevitably, these soap-opera claims worked up into a media lather but the Leavisite bile of several commentators was ill deserved. In the event what we got was a very fine dramatisation of a complex novel. Andrew Davies filleted the complex interwoven narratives and concentrated on the bold plot outlines, focusing on Tulkinghorn's quest for Lady Dedlock's secret, the mystery of Esther's origins and the story of the central group of young people caught up in the proceedings of Jarndyce v. Jarndyce. Much had to go, of course, but what remained was absorbing and more or less consistently coherent – although the complete removal of the tedious Bayham Badgers and the vignette grudgingly awarded Chadband would have been greatly beneficial.

This excellent series was produced by Nigel Stafford-Clark and directed by Justin Chadwick and Susanna Chadwick. In the sum of its parts this production had a consistent and coherent sense of style. From the beginning it knew where it was going and it went there. It opened with Esther embarking on a rain-sodden stage-coach journey to London, then cut to the interminable tediousness of the Chancery proceedings, the arrival of the two wards of Jarndyce, then over to the Dedlocks holed up in the damp splendours of Chesney Wold....This was great story telling and set the tone for the whole series.

The art direction (Bill Crutcher) and costumes (Andrea Galer) were excellent. Recalling that BBC2's 1985 version settled for yellowish murk, it was sensible to forego *Bleak House's* celebrated 'Fog Everywhere'. Instead we got general gloominess as far as London was concerned, while it was mostly bright sunshine (with heavy rain as required) in the countryside. The clinging dampness of Chesney Wold was almost palpable. High-definition filming (director of photography Kieran McGuigan) gave us very effective use of close-ups, allowing the actors to make full and subtle use of facial expression. Once you were used to the whiz-bang-clump jump-cutting as we moved locations, the liquidity of the narrative was impressive. Thirty-minute episodes aside, there was little soap opera resemblance.

A splendid cast delivered the goods. With such an array of talent – Pauline Collins, Denis Lawson, Alistair McGowan, Anne Reid, Johnny Vegas, Tony Haygarth, Matthew Kelly, Sheila Hancock – it would be invidious to pick out just a few names. It was too bad the soapy publicity dwelt so much on Gillian Anderson's connection with *X Files*, when anyone who had seen her beautiful performance in *The House of Mirth* might have anticipated her realisation of Lady Dedlock. Timothy West delivered Sir Leicester perfectly, fully bringing home his enduring love for his wife. Charles Dance (Tulkinghorn) reprised his chilling Uncle Ralph (in Alan Bleasdale's dramatisation of *Nickleby* for ITV) with added venom. Nathaniel Parker's Skimpole was a triumph of cherubic nastiness and Lilo Bauer (Hortense) made my flesh creep. Alun Armstrong has long made coppers his speciality. Who will forget his performance as Alan Turing's Nemesis in *Breaking the Code?* Or one of the old dogs in *New Tricks?* Scan the novel again and you'll see how beautifully his performance comes straight off the page. But I'm still puzzled by Anna Maxwell Martin's Esther. This was a tremendously thoughtful achievement, but perhaps sacrificing the powerful, almost divine, qualities of Dickens's beloved heroine in favour of a kind of nurse-like worthiness was a mistake. There was one mystifying character, as new to me as he would doubtless be to Charles Dickens – Clamb, who appeared to be Tulkinghorn's secretary and PA. It is always a pleasure to see Tom Georgeson, but I wondered what he was actually doing here? The novelist goes to so much trouble in stressing

Tulkinghorn's isolation that it was a shame to give him any companionship. Perhaps the name Clamb furthered the tight-shut oyster qualities of the sinister lawyer? There are two Gold Medals to be awarded. Burn Gorman (Guppy) was a wonderful mixture of pathos, cynicism, social ineptitude, comicality, modesty and ambition. Phil Davis (Smallweed) was gloriously hideous and his 'Shake me up, Judy!' (accompanied by alarming spinal creakings) was one of the quotes of the year. I hope he's had his teeth seen to by now.

All in all it has to be said, the combined talents of writer and production team collectively put something truly Dickensian on screen. This *Bleak House* was quirky, melodramatic, grotesque and comic all at once. This was the third time Andrew Davies has collaborated with producer Nigel Stafford-Clark and at last the stifling all-purpose BBC Victorianism was firmly shown the door. Definitely, I hope.

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David Copperfield, BBC Radio 4, December 2005. *Oliver Twist*, BBC Radio 2, December 2005-January 2006.

David Copperfield was broadcast on Radio 4 in twenty fifteen-minute episodes (a division probably suggested by the original twenty monthly parts) from 5 December to 30 December 2005 in a dramatisation by Mike Walker. This was the sixth serialisation of the novel on BBC radio. As an independent play it flowed easily along, despite the short 'part-issues', and held the listener's attention from beginning to end. But it was based only loosely on Dickens's text and had a third-person narrator. The famous first and last sentences were dropped and as with all Dickensian adaptations there were other omissions: the 'friendly waiter' (so memorably depicted by Phiz), Mr Mell, the precise wording of Mr Micawber's formula for happiness, the Strong family crisis and the fate of Uriah Heep. Most startling of all was the disappearance of the great scene of the storm and shipwreck at Yarmouth that led to the deaths of Ham and Steerforth. On the other hand, Walker invented a posthumous appearance of Steerforth in a dream David has while recovering somewhere in Europe. Steerforth, whose company David says he has missed, declares like a role-model that he had always seen 'things as they were'. When David tells Miss Trotwood of this encounter, she briefly tells him that Steerforth was drowned in the shipwreck.

Valerie Grove in a comment in the *Oldie* for January 2006 referred to the 'muted' tone of the production. Other people I spoke to were as surprised as I was at Mr Murdstone's lack of malevolence and his