

SCHOOL RESOURCES

SIMON CALLOW

THE MYSTERY OF CHARLES

DICKENS

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These resources have been created to help you prepare your students for their visit to *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* at the Playhouse Theatre, and make the most of what they have learned when you get back to school. It is aimed at KS3, KS4, AS and A Level students of English Literature and Drama. You can use the suggested activities to build your own lessons and workshops, tailored to your own curriculum requirements.

To book tickets, call ATG Group Sales on 0844 871 7644

BEFORE THE SHOW: What To Expect

It would be a good idea to prepare your students for what to expect from the play.

Synopsis

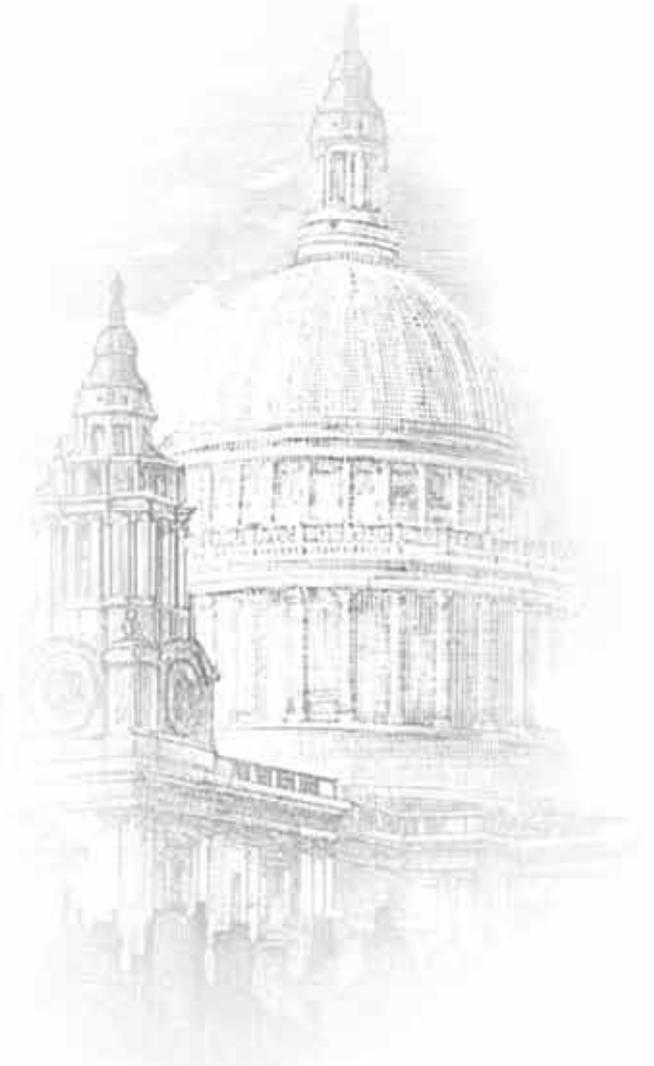
The production tracks the life of Charles Dickens from his childhood experiences to adulthood and his prolific writing career. It provides insight into a fascinating and enigmatic figure and also gives an overview of many of his literary works from *The Pickwick Papers* to *A Christmas Carol*. The narrative re-enacts the story of Dickens' life as well as selected scenes from his novels.

Simon Callow

The play is performed by Simon Callow. Simon is an actor, writer and director, recently renowned for one-man shows including *Being Shakespeare* in the West End and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, and *A Christmas Carol* at the Arts Theatre. Your class may know Simon from his various film roles, particularly Gareth in *Four Weddings and A Funeral*, and Sir Edmund Tilney in *Shakespeare in Love*. He recently played Charles Dickens in an episode of *Doctor Who*.

The One-Man Show

The Mystery of Charles Dickens is a one-man show, in which Simon is the only performer, playing many roles as well as the narrator. Before going to see it, you might discuss with your class what a production might gain or lose from having just one performer. You could reflect on this when you return to school.



Dickens' "Greatest Hits"

Throughout the play, Simon Callow dips into famous extracts from across Dickens' canon of work. Below is a list of some of the characters the play features. Before you see the show you might encourage the class to remember works of Dickens that they have studied previously, or seen on TV or film, and recap the well-known sections of text. They could then listen out for them in the production – and afterwards consider which were used and how, and which were not included.

- **Nicholas Nickleby**
- **David Copperfield**
- **Miss Havisham** (*Great Expectations*)
- **Mr Pickwick** (*The Pickwick Papers*)
- **Oliver Twist**
- **Fagin** (*Oliver Twist*)
- **Scrooge** (*A Christmas Carol*)
- **Bob Cratchit** (*A Christmas Carol*)

Charles Dickens and the Theatre

Throughout his life, Charles Dickens was a man of theatre. He acted regularly in amateur performances and his understanding of theatre is evident through his novels which have often been described as 'theatrical'. He wrote some plays but his genius lay in his literary works rather than his career as a dramatist. Dickens' novels have been consistently dramatised and manipulated to various genres. *Little Dorrit* is the least adapted novel, but *A Christmas Carol* is considered to be the most adapted tale of all time. It regularly appeared as a play, 'fantasy' and operetta throughout the nineteenth century and TV, film, ballet, opera and children's theatre versions are popular mediums today.

In his later life Dickens travelled the country, reading his works aloud. The Reading Tours were sell-outs, and provided him with a unique opportunity to perform his own work. They were never mere readings as he had memorised every word. In total, he gave 433 readings in his lifetime.



SIMON CALLOW ON CHARLES DICKENS

“Most people don’t really know much about Dickens. What our play aims to discover is what made Dickens tick. He was a very strange, extraordinary and contradictory human being. He wrote with great passion and compassion, his sense of suffering and the unjustness of it was very affecting. It’s good news that the human race is capable of producing somebody like Charles Dickens; someone who is not only hugely talented, but also so compassionate and life-celebratory.”

“The Mystery of Charles Dickens contains the three crucial elements which make a play work for an audience: it tells a powerful and fascinating story, it is full of the extraordinary language, and it demonstrates the actor’s power of transformation to an extraordinary degree.”

“I see this play as a ‘living biography’ and ideally the audience would feel absolutely astonished, as if they’re hearing about Dickens in a way they’ve never done before. It’s not the kind of show to wash over people; it will be a real dialogue with the audience, as if I’m talking to them directly.”

AFTER THE SHOW: Classroom Activities

Dickens' Characters

Encourage your class to try devising a character of their own. Charles Dickens spent a great deal of time observing people, and would then pick up on particular characteristics and exaggerate them in his comic characters. Perhaps you could set your students an observation task (for example within school, in the community, or on the bus) and then pool ideas of personality traits and quirks. When they have decided on their character, ask them to write down some physical characteristics.

- What do they look like?
- How old are they?
- How do they move?

Then ask them to think of a sentence their character might say.

- What sort of voice do they have?
- Are they funny, sad, dull, outgoing etc?

You could even set up role-play scenarios of several characters encountering each other in a particular environment.

Callow's Performance

Think back to Simon Callow's performance of the different characters. How did he differentiate between them? What did you notice about his posture, facial expression and speed of delivery? You could ask your students to become theatre critics and write a short review of the play. Alternatively, you could ask them to improvise a radio or television interview between a host and the reviewer.

Storytelling

Simon Callow talks about how important it was to him to tell Dickens' story to his audience. Ask your students to think of an incident in their lives, preferably something that their classmates won't already know. Individually, ask them to consider how they would tell this story to an audience. Have them practice in small groups. They might like to include props, consider movement, or introduce voices and characters.

Next, in pairs, ask your students to swap their story with their partner, and re-tell it. Is it easier to tell someone else's story? Does the story get exaggerated as it gets passed around? What do you think that reveals about the nature of a biography, or of one person telling stories about someone else's life?

Finally, ask your students if there is a famous person whose story they'd like to tell on stage. What appeals about them? How would it be best to tell their story?

USEFUL LINKS

www.dickensmuseum.com/events/night-walks

A chance to explore Dickens' London. The Dickens Museum website has various resources relating to the author and his life.

www.djo.org.uk

Dickens Journals Online, including an introduction from Simon Callow.

www.charlesdickenspage.com

An informational website packed full of resources.

www.dickens2012.org

A website celebrating Dickens' 200th Birthday this year, including a full calendar of Dickens events.

www.online-literature.com/dickens

Dickens' works published online.

www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Jdickens.htm

A comprehensive academic website.



RISK ASSESSMENTS: FAQs

You might find the below Frequently Asked Questions useful when completing your school's risk assessment for the visit to the Playhouse Theatre.

Will the visit to the Playhouse Theatre present low or high risks?

The use of the theatre premises by selected groups (e.g. schools) is LOW risk because all emergency systems are tested regularly; staff are trained to assist those using the theatre to escape in an emergency; the venue is inspected regularly; and the hazards in the theatre are controlled to the lowest levels practicable.

What precautions have been taken against electrical risks?

All circuits are tested on a regular basis and all cables wherever possible are laid in such a way as to be out of the reach of individuals who are not authorised to touch them. All portable appliances have either been tested under the PAT regime or are brand new and have therefore been tested by the supplier and visually inspected by a Competent Person. Access to sockets etc is kept to a minimum and are situated out of reach or in locked areas.

Sound controls in the auditorium are manned at all times when the public are in the auditorium and therefore unauthorised persons are kept away from the controls.

What precautions have been taken against slips, trips and falls?

There are no areas where the floor surface is raised that will cause a tripping hazard, either in the auditorium, bars, toilets, or in escape route staircases. There are also no slippery floors. Surfaces that could cause slips when wet are protected by matting in those areas. In the event of a problem warning signs are displayed. There are no trailing wires in the escape routes or walkways.

What provision is made for First Aid?

There are adequate first aid facilities on site to accommodate any one who may become ill or have an accident. There are also adequate trained personnel and first aid boxes to deal with any illness or injuries.

What if there is a fire?

To comply with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 all ATG venues have a fire risk assessment which is reviewed every four months.

All fire escape routes are clear of obstructions and there are various fire exits throughout the building. Escape routes are adequately signed. In addition, fire drills are completed on a regular basis, fire alarms maintained and tested by manufacturer, and there are adequate numbers of fire fighting appliances for the buildings (all tested and inspected annually).

Designated members of staff are trained to deal with a fire situation either for evacuation or to assist in containing any fire.

School parties are required to have sufficient numbers of competent staff to control the student numbers. Where the Duty Manager identifies that there are not sufficient numbers of staff he/she will require the group to leave the building.

What else should I know?

The building is professionally cleaned on a regular basis. The stairs, exits and entrances are well lit. Any damage to the building or its contents is repaired immediately.

SCHOOL WORKSHOPS

ATG offers bespoke workshops to accompany *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* for students of all levels. We can also arrange tours of the Playhouse Theatre to further enhance your students' experience.

For more information, contact:

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