

OLLI, Fall, 2020, The Victorian Family on Film and TV, Lost and Found

Our Mutual Friend (1998), Script by Sandy Welch; Directed by Julian Farino

The Cast: Paul McGann...Eugene Wrayburn  
Dominic Mafham...Mortimer Lightwood  
David Bradley...Roger "Rogue" Riderhood  
Anna Friel...Bella Wilfer  
Peter Vaughan...Nicodemus "Noddy" Boffin  
Pam Ferris...Mrs. Henrietta Boffin  
Steven Mackintosh...John Harmon/John Rokesmith/Julius Hanford  
Sarah Crowden...First Guest  
Keeley Hawes...Lizzie Hexam  
Michael Culkin...Mr. Veneering  
Anthony Calf...Alfred Lammler  
Doon Mackichan...Sophronia Lammler  
Rose English...Mrs. Veneering  
Margaret Tyzack...Lady Tippins  
Kenneth Cranham...Silas Wegg  
Timothy Spall...Mr. Venus  
Paul Bailey...Charley Hexam  
David Morrissey...Bradley Headstone  
Robert Lang...Mr. Tremlow  
Katy Murphy...Jenny Wren  
Rachel Power...Pleasant Riderhood  
Roger Frost...Police Inspector  
Martin Hancock...Sloppy  
Cyril Shaps...Mr. Riah  
Peter Wight...Mr. Reginald "Rumty" Wilfer  
David Schofield...Jesse "Gaffer" Hexam  
Berty Shelley...Little Johnny  
Heather Tobias...Mrs. Wilfer  
Catriona Yuill...Lavinia Wilfer  
Linda Bassett ... Abby Potterson  
Edna Doré...Betty Higden

"Our Mutual Friend" was the last completed novel of Dickens. It appeared in monthly installments between May, 1864 and Nov., 1865. It was the first major work since his great success with "Great Expectations" in 1860-61. At the time of its composition, Dickens was in a downcast and melancholy mood. He had met the young actress Ellen Ternan, the last and secret love of his life, in 1857, and he separated from his wife in 1858.

In June, 1865, he had been involved in a serious railway accident in Staplehurst, Kent, while returning to London from a trip to Paris with Ellen Ternan and her mother. He was carrying the manuscript of "Our Mutual Friend" with him.

The plot of this novel is very complicated, and Dickens deliberately deceived and played with

the expectations of his first readers, and explained why he did it in an Afterword. The cast of characters is enormous. While there are two major overlapping plots, there are many subplots involving minor characters. The social levels go from low characters on the Thames to the glittering salons of the nouveau riche. The greed for money is followed in various manifestations, and the extreme form seems to be the ownership of mountains of garbage.

So, if you find yourself confused by all this, you have distinguished company. The critics of Dickens' time were negative on this novel, but more recent reaction has been more positive.

Actually, in Dickens's overcrowded plot, there are some subplots missing in this TV version. In the novel, there is a seedy gentleman, "Fascination" Fledgeby, who secretly operates a loan shark business, and one of the characters he is connected with is the arch bourgeois Podsnap.

These characters are missing from the 1998 version. But present in the TV version is the elderly, virtuous Jew Riah, who turns up at the house of Jenny Wren. In the novel, Riah works as front man for the evil Fledgeby, but he eventually revolts and deserts the evil business. The presence of Riah, a "good Jew," in the novel was Dickens' answer to earlier criticism of Fagin in "Oliver Twist" as showing Jews only at their worst. In the novel, Riah helps Lizzie Hexam to escape London and find honest work in the countryside.

The 1998 adaptation won 9 wins and 6 nominations in the awards circuit. Timothy Spall won best actor for his portrayal of the bone merchant Mr. Venus in two competitions.

A major site of shooting was Chatham Historic Dockyard in Kent. The Thames riverbank is now so overbuilt with modern structures that the dockside set had to be built at the waterside of Cardiff in Wales.

A 1978 version in 7 episodes has appeared on DVD. It is not as pictorially sumptuous as the 1998 version, but it has some memorable acting performances. It has Leo McKern ("Rumpole of the Bailey") as Noddy Boffin, Warren Clarke ("Dalziel and Pascoe") as Bradley Headstone, Nicholas Jones ("Silk" and "The Crown") as Eugene Wrayburn, David Troughton ("A Very Peculiar Practice") as Sloppy, and Joan Hixson (Miss Marple) as the operator of the dockside pub, Abbey Potterson.