

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.