COMMENTARY

Dickens in double vision

Adolf Wood

Little Dorrit
Curzon West End

In his famous essay on *Little Dorrit* (1953), Lionel Trilling quietly announced that, together with *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, it constituted Dickens's "great last period". Somewhat sorrowfully, he noted that of the three novels it was perhaps the least established with modern readers: *Bleak House* had come to be the best known, *Our Mutual Friend* was receiving ever-growing admiration, but *Little Dorrit* seemed "to have retired to the background and shadow of our consciousness of Dickens". Trilling's advocacy of the novel about the Marshalsea debtors' prison, "as speaking with a peculiar and passionate intimacy to our own time", and the even more categorical claims made for it by F. R. Leavis in *Dickens: The novelist* (1970: "one of the very greatest of novels . . . its omission from any brief list of the great European novels would be critically indefensible"), may well have helped to secure for it an unassailable position in the Dickens canon, but one suspects that for most people *Little Dorrit* still dwells in the "background and shadow". If that is so, there is unlikely to be a great outcry over any liberties taken with the text in this film version (it seems there has only been one other, a silent film made in Germany in 1933).

Admirers of the novel will come away from the film with strongly ambivalent feelings. First, the good things to be said. There is, at the heart of this meticulous, six-hour-long adaptation – written and directed by Christine Edzard – an impressively poised seriousness, befitting the attempt to re-create what in some respects is Dickens's most profoundly searching examination of Victorian society, and of human nature in general. Many of the scenes are beautiful and moving, and remarkably faithful to both spirit and letter of the text. The worlds (interconnected in reality and symbol) of the Marshalsea prison, the Circumlocution Office, the domestic dungeon of Mrs Clennam, Bleeding Heart Yard, petit-bourgeois Twickenham, Grosvenor Square Society, the Rich Abroad, are brilliantly composed and harmonized: settings and costumes create an unobtrusive authenticity of period, and sound is employed with rare subtlety and depth to convey metaphor (for example, the dull buzzing of the flies trapped in vinegar and sugar in gallipots in the Dorrits' chamber, while the Child of the Marshalsea is being born). And, perhaps the film's most conspicuous success – apart from the astonishingly good performances of Alec Guinness and Cyril Cusack (the brothers Dorrit), Derek Jacobi (Arthur Clennam), the late Joan Greenwood (Mrs Clennam), and just about everybody else in the huge cast – there is the quietly dogged portrayal by the little-known actress Sarah Pickering of Little Dorrit, who emerges as wholly convincing in her goodness and strength of character, as if to confirm Lionel Trilling's view of her: "Her untinctured goodness does not appall us or make us misdoubt her, as we expect it to do."

Little Dorrit, the film, splits the story in two; each part is three hours' viewing. Part One, called "Nobody's Fault" (Dickens's original title for the novel), is told from Arthur Clennam's viewpoint; Part Two, "Little Dorrit's Story", from the heroine's. (The film takes its justification for this division from the novel – at the opening of Book One, Chapter 14, Dickens writes, "This history must sometimes see with Little Dorrit's eyes . . ."). Some scenes are filmed twice from slightly different angles and with different lighting. Arthur's section is drab, dark-toned, in keeping with his gloomy discouragement about life; Little Dorrit's, brighter, warmer-hued, bespeaking humanity and selfless love. The device leads the film into some unprofitable repetition, and the gain in understanding is slight, because subliminal. There are numerous small restructurings: for instance, in the novel the rejected Arthur drops the flowers Minnie Meagles has given him into a country stream; the film substitutes the Thames, helping to effect the transition to his meeting with Little Dorrit on the Iron Bridge in Southwark.

But there are also some alarming misjudgments. A worker in Daniel Doyce's factory is killed in an accident (this is invented, as is Doyce's death later in the film); incredulously, one hears another worker saying, "He could do the police in several voices", not quite straight out of *Our Mutual Friend*. You begin to ask the rather fruitless question, are there no limits to the permissible in transferring classic novels to the screen?

The most serious weakness arises from the wholesale removal of the Blandois-Rigaud element, a dimension of the book which is important for the overall imaginative structure and resonance of the novel as much as for the melodramatic thrills it provides. Out go Tattycoram and Miss Wade; and out goes little John Baptist Cavalletto. An example of a minor but damaging consequence is that Affery's "delusion" that evil things are going on in the Clennam house remains a delusion: so that the knocks and bumpings in the night are merely "atmospheric". Prunes and prisms are out, too, by the way, with Mrs General's demise between page and screen; but then, film-making being what it doubtless has to be, it is perhaps "nobody's fault".

An insistent absence

David Papineau

PETER SPEYER
Old Year's Eve
The Pit, Barbican

Peter Speyer's new one-act play is set on the patio of Blou Blommetjies (Blue Blossoms), a wine farm in the Western Cape. Martin, home from the army for New Year's Eve, banters uneasily with his parents, Sheila and Joe. In true South African style both sides struggle to avoid mention of "the situation". But the pretence of normality cannot be sustained, and it soon turns out that there is a lot more that isn't being mentioned. Martin has deserted the army, and come back to defend his birthright from the "terrorists" at first hand. Unfortunately his parents have decided to "face facts", and are already in the process of selling up the farm.

Various devices underline the danger that surrounds them. Behind the elegant supper table we can see a massive security fence against the night sky. Even more ominously, the servants maintain an insistent absence, despite repeated summonses from Sheila and Joe. This latter device turns out to be something of a red herring, however, since the servants' inconvenient non-appearance is never properly explained, and in the end one has to conclude that it signifies a restriction on the size of the cast, rather than incipient insurrection.

Mr Speyer intends his characters to unfold along with their revelations. He is not always well served by his cast. The South African accents are a stumbling block, and only Reece Dinsdale as Martin seems at all comfortable with his lines. He manages the transformation from goofy youth to gung-ho killer well. When, towards the end of the play, he wantonly slits the throat of an old family servant while on a night prowl for intruders, his unrepentant excitement is horribly believable. Neither Ann Mitchell as Sheila, however, nor Tony Doyle as Joe, has any confidence with the rhythms of South African English, and their performances are hampered by their efforts to stop their voices running off into Home Counties refined (Mitchell) or Bronx brogue (Doyle).

The moral weight of the play rests on Sheila. Despite a petulant façade, she turns out to have more sense and feeling than her weak husband and bloodthirsty son, not that either provides much competition. It is she who wants to leave the farm, and much of the latter part of the play is taken up with her attempts to leave for the railway station. Unfortunately, Ann Mitchell chooses to play Sheila in a grand manner, like some colonial Margaret Dumont, and her series of flouncing exits in the second half rather undermines the sad final speech in which she resigns herself to an ugly future defending the farm.

The *Sunday Times* theatre critic felt that this was "the worst play of the year". It's not that bad. In spite of the deficiencies of this production, Speyer's characters are more than caricatures, and he succeeds in making us see things from their perspective. "Did you ever meet a white South African you liked?" asked a *Spitting Image* ditty of a year or so ago, giving expression to its own version of racial prejudice. Speyer's family, with their limitations of intellect and vision, are not exactly likeable. But we can still manage to identify with their concerns, as they wriggle in the historical trap they have set for themselves. The effort is worth making, for people like these will influence what happens in Southern Africa for many years to come.

Walking-wounded

P. J. Kavanagh

A Month in the Country
Various cinemas

In Pat O'Connor's film of J. L. Carr's novel *A Month in the Country* nothing unexpectedly violent or disgusting takes place. The mood is elegiac, leisurely, even tender, as it is in the book. The horror has happened before the story begins, on the Western Front, represented briefly in a stylized opening sequence of mud, wire and near-drowning.

The two central characters are young survivors of the war, mentally, rather than physically, damaged. One, Birkin (Colin Firth), has come to a quiet northern village to uncover a medieval wall-painting in the church. The other, Moon (Kenneth Branagh), is an archaeologist hired to find the grave of an ancient, disgraced member of the local grand family.

The theme of Simon Gray's screenplay is the contrast between the peace and beauty of the countryside, the gentle, civilized nature of the activities of the two young men, and the turmoil within that each is facing. There is much tossing and turning and crying out in the night (one in his tent amid his excavations, the other dossed-down in the church belfry) and Birkin has developed a twitch and a speech-impediment; in Moon there is a charm, even a chirpiness, which Branagh beautifully suggests is like a memory of these things, which now lies on top of something inside him which is more or less dead.

All this is good. It is good to be reminded of the walking-wounded that unendurable experience leaves behind. It is elsewhere that the film, like the book, begins slowly to fall down. The painting Birkin uncovers is a Last Judgment. Is that significant? We are never quite sure. Nor are we sure, during his long, glowering silences, whether he is going to attack the painting, or his interlocutor, with his palette-knife, destroying them both, or give them one more loving touch. These inarticulate pauses do not "carry", we are not sure what they contain, what he is thinking. Also, the dried-up vicar has a young wife of such virginal bloom (Natasha Richardson) that their marriage is difficult to credit.

But above all it is the beauty of the setting, its contrast to the war that has changed both men, which it is difficult to convey on screen. Too often the image-makers have mocked their own vocabulary. Thus it is now nearly impossible for a camera to shoot through heads of grasses on to a sun-filled picnic scene, without the viewer involuntarily fearing (say) the entry of a dog unrolling lavatory paper.

It is a film anyone would long to recommend; it is serious, careful, and honestly acted. But it is hard not to think it would have been better as an hour on the small screen. (Whereas, oddly, Simon Gray's *After Pilkington*, made for television, cried out for the cinema.) Here Gray has stuck closely to the novel but given it an occasionally bitter edge for which the original did not strive, omitting the gentle, detached humour. The result is confusing, not in narrative, but in tone.

Touching temptation

Alan Jenkins

Manon des sources
Curzon, Mayfair

No one who saw *Jean de Florette*, the first part of Claude Berri's adaptation of Marcel Pagnol's novels, *L'Eau des collines*, will need any encouraging to catch the second part, *Manon des sources*. Manon, daughter of the hunchback Jean, who died in the attempt to defeat nature and the cunning of local farmers (unsuspected by him to the end), is now a beautiful young woman and has taken to the hills with a herd of goats, waiting her time – though too young to understand its workings, she glimpsed enough as a child to convince her that some wrong had been committed. The wily César Soubeyran, Jean's tormentor, still hankers after an heir to the dynastic fortune; his nephew, the simple Ugolin (whose carnations flourish), is the only possible progenitor. Ugolin sees the nymph-like Manon bathing in a pool, and is badly smitten; Manon's attention has in turn been caught by the handsome young schoolmaster, whose geological investigations, rather than venery, take him up into the mountains, where he snares more than a thrush or a hare.

Everything is in place for confrontation and crisis, the emergence of collective and individual guilts, revenge (Manon's, by water, of course) and retribution; in place, too, for the revelation of earlier tragic confusions and coincidences as the history of César's connection with "la jolie" Florette, and thus with Jean and Manon, unravels from the tangle of ancient loves, jealousies and spites. As before, Provençal speech and village life are faultlessly caught; as before, Daniel Auteuil as Ugolin is almost preternaturally convincing. If the first film was Gérard Depardieu's, this one is unquestionably Yves Montand's, whose playing of "le Papet" Soubeyrans moves from the old gruffness and greed to heartbreak and unbearable remorse with complete authority. Transitions between communal farce (the great arrival of the agricultural engineer, the "miracle" of the re-opened source) and private anguish (le Papet's isolation) or a mixture of farce and anguish (Ugolin's lovesickness) are handled smoothly, but the more rapid rhythms of this film, contrasting with the slow build-up to catastrophe of its predecessor, can approach the unintended humour of melodrama as sudden development is piled on development, and fate plays ever more terrible tricks. Emmanuelle Béart as Manon has, naked or clothed with a pleasing disarray, a watchable faun-like grace; but in a unique lapse of touch the director's treatment of her fails always to resist the lure of the Silvikrin commercial.

As a tribute to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose story "A Study in Scarlet" was published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* in 1887, the National Film Theatre is showing five Sherlock Holmes films during December. They include, on December 13: *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1959), with Peter Cushing as Holmes, and *The Final Problem* (1985), with Eric Porter as Moriarty.

Papineau, David. "An insistent absence." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 4419, 11 Dec. 1987, p. 1378. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200453465/TLSH?u=tlsacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH. Accessed 23 Sept. 2023.