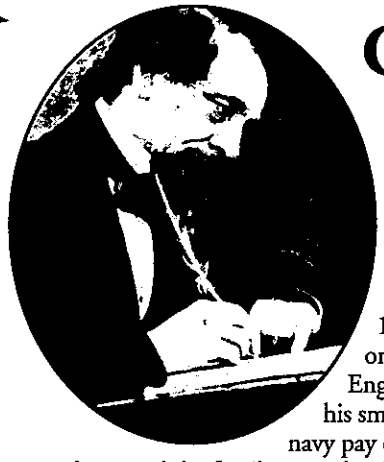
PLAY GUIDE

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

adapted from Charles Dickens
by Barbara Field

Nov. 3 – Dec. 11, 1993

Indiana Repertory Theatre ★ 140 West Washington St. ★ Indianapolis, IN 46204-3465



Charles Dickens:
England's Greatest Writer

Charles Dickens, the great English novelist, was born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, on the southern coast of England. His father lost his small appointment in the navy pay office when Charles was three, and the family moved to London. The Dickens family moved so often during Charles's childhood that he was unable to attend school regularly. This was to prove a great loss to Charles, who valued education above all things.

By 1824 the family's financial situation was so desperate that Charles was sent to work, at the age of twelve, at a blacking warehouse, where he earned six shillings a week. His job there was to paste labels on bottles of shoe polish for 12 to 16 hours a day. That same year, his father, John, was arrested for debt and sent to Marshalsea prison. When Mrs. Dickens and the younger children moved into Marshalsea to be close to John, Charles was left with a friend. He visited his family on Saturdays in the debtors' prison. Out of this experience came the roots of Dickens's strong sympathies for the underprivileged.

In late 1824 John was released from prison after coming into an inheritance which enabled him to pay all his debts. He was also able to send his son to Wellington House Academy. But the family's financial troubles were not over: within three years they were evicted from their apartment, and Charles was once again forced to leave school and find a job.

At age 15, Charles began working as an office boy for two attorneys. He managed to teach himself shorthand, which enabled him to become a freelance shorthand reporter at Doctors' Commons, near St. Paul's Cathedral. In 1832, Charles was employed as a shorthand reporter for the *Mirror of Parliament* and as a reporter for the new evening newspaper, *True Son.* He quickly acquired a reputation as a top-rank reporter and abandoned his desire for a theatrical career.

In 1834 Dickens began to publish short narrative sketches under the pseudonym "Boz" in the *Morning Chronicle.* In 1836, on his 24th birthday, *Sketches of Boz* was published. That same year he received an invitation from a publisher to write the text to accompany a series of prints by artist Robert Seymour; the resulting publication was Dickens's first novel, *The Pickwick Papers.*

In this same year Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, daughter of a newspaper editor. Together they had ten children before they divorced in 1858. Shortly after marrying Catherine, Dickens resigned from the *Morning Chronicle* and became editor of a new monthly magazine, *Bentley's Miscellany.* Becoming an editor allowed Dickens more time to focus on his writing. He explored contemporary conditions for pauper orphans in his second novel, *Oliver Twist,* which was first published in monthly installments in *Bentley's Miscellany* in 1837.

Dickens journeyed to Yorkshire in 1838 to gather material for a novel dealing with the notoriously severe living conditions in lower-class boarding schools. This resulted in the writing of *Nicholas Nickleby,* a novel about a youth who escapes from a tyrant schoolmaster. In 1839, Dickens gave up his job as editor to write fiction full-time. By 1941 he had produced his fourth and fifth novels: first serialized in a weekly periodical, they were later published separately as *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge.*

In 1842, Dickens took the first of what would be four trips to America, where he was met with cheering crowds and much favor. While in America, Dickens wrote journal letters which later resulted in *American Notes.* This book included his impressions of America, which were not altogether positive. First of all, he did not receive money from the sales of his novels in the United States because there were no international copyright laws at this time. He was also disillusioned at experiencing the hypocrisy, malice, and evil that was taking place in a country that claimed freedom and opportunity for all but lived with legalized slavery.

Dickens published the novelette *A Christmas Carol* in 1843, and followed it in later years with several other short Christmas stories written in haste for quick reward. (Recall that in this period Charles and Kate Dickens were producing a large family—their fifth child was born in January, 1844—and Dickens was obsessed with making a sufficient living to support this growing brood. Much of his writing was done for commercial purposes—that is, to feed his family—which is a startling fact to remember for us who consider Dickens a writer of mythic proportions.)

continued on page 4

About the IRT's Production of *Great Expectations*

Playwright Barbara Field, who adapted Dickens's great novel for the stage, wrote: "*Great Expectations* was one of Dickens's later novels, one of his shortest, and one of his best-designed and most unified works. The adaptation employs a simple narrative approach to the story of the novel. In inviting the audience to participate as listeners in the telling of the story, they are allowed to fill in the background behind the narrative thread, becoming collaborators in the theatre event."

What Field is suggesting is a style of theatre called "Chamber Theatre." Chamber Theatre is a method of putting a novel onstage by keeping its narrative line: that is, the descriptive passages are included in the play, not just the dialogue from the novel. A novelist makes meaning in a work of fiction by how he describes the surroundings and the inner workings of a character's mind: a playwright makes meaning only in what a character says.

Chamber Theatre attempts to incorporate the tools of the novelist into the world of the drama by keeping some of narrative language of the original piece of fiction. How this works is that actors deliver descriptive passages directly to the audience, not as characters but as storytellers, thus giving the audience an opportunity to hear the actual language in which the novel is written. This is particularly important with Dickens, who had a keen sensitivity to language, its rhythms, its dialects and its sounds.

To illustrate this technique, take the following narrative passage from Dickens's novel *Great Expectations*:

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried . . . and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all, and beginning to cry, was Pip.

"Hold your noise!" cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. "Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!"

Under normal dramatic circumstances, the marshes, the river, the churchyard—all these atmospheric, environmental details would be conveyed in the scenery and the lighting. Only the dialogue indicated above would actually be spoken:

Magwitch: Hold your noise! Keep still, you little devil or I'll cut your throat!

But in Barbara Field's Chamber Theatre adaptation, she is able to incorporate the descriptive passages as narration:

Narrator: They lived in the marsh country of Kent, where the Thames ran down to the sea. In that dark flat, wilderness was a village churchyard where, one day, Pip found his parents.

(Churchyard: A Few tombstones. Pip kneels in front of one of them, reading haltingly.)

Pip: "Philip Pirrip, Late of This Parish." "Also Georgiana, Wife of the Above. . . ."

Narrator: The boy, a small bundle of shivers, began to cry, when—

(Magwitch pops up from behind a tombstone.)

Magwitch: Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!

Notice in Field's adaptation how she uses a combination of narration, dialogue, and stage directions to retain much of the language of the original work.

IRT's production of *Great Expectations* will employ a narrator character who will be present onstage at all times observing the action and sometimes participating in it. This character is meant to suggest an older Pip, one who watches the action of the younger Pip through the eyes of wisdom, a kind of inner voice guiding the young Pip toward maturity. Director Karen Smith-Hill chose this approach because *Great Expectations* is a first-person narrative story: the novelist uses the voice of Pip throughout the story. As you watch the production, notice how the narrator interacts with Pip: Pip is unaware of the narrator until he comes to maturity, when he begins to acknowledge the presence of this older, wiser part of himself.

Another element of Chamber Theatre is the element of selection: a dramatist using Chamber Theatre techniques must edit a long work of fiction down to a manageable length for the stage. Just think, if you read the entire novel of *Great Expectations* out loud, it would take many, many hours! IRT's production will last less than two. This requires selecting parts of the story to include and parts to eliminate: a difficult task with a novel as sprawling as *Great Expectations*, with its many subplots. You've read an example of selection in the comparative passages above. If you've read the whole novel, try to remember which plot lines and which characters the playwright eliminated after you've seen the play. If we've done a skillful job of enlivening the story, you may not remember what is missing from the novel.

Chamber Theatre frequently features a simplicity in setting. Because *Great Expectations* is an epic novel—that is, it spans many years of Pip's life and many locations—it requires a staging technique that allows the action to flow quickly and simply from one place to another. The setting for *s* is a unit set with many platform levels used to depict various locations called for in the story. But the setting is symbolic rather than literal: for instance, rather than Miss Havisham's house having complete walls and furnishings, a few pieces of furniture will substitute for the whole house. As you watch the play, notice how the set designer has selected significant props and furnishings to suggest the locations needed in the story.

Chamber Theatre features ensemble acting: that is, the ten actors in the production will work closely together as a unit, creating the many facets of the play through their collective imagination. Many of the actors will play multiple roles: that is, the actor playing Mr. Pumblechook will also play Bentley Drummle and Wemmick; the actress playing Mrs. Joe will also play Biddy and Molly. This gives the audience a vivid example of the inner workings of actor transformation. The actors will frequently transform from one character to another in view of the audience through simple costume changes. The actors will also function as the stage crew, creating every aspect of the production in front of the eyes of the audience. In this production style, nothing is hidden from the view of the audience. Rather, the director is asking the audience to thrill in the mechanisms of the theatre as well as taking delight in the characters and story. Just as a single reader gives total dedication to the reading of a novel, an ensemble must give that same dedication in order to make the production complete.

Chamber Theatre allows the audience to feel some of the thrill of being swept away by reading a good book in private, because it allows us to use our imaginations. But Chamber Theatre also capitalizes on all the wonderful elements of theatre by bringing to life the characters and the actions of the novel with movement, sound, costumes, and settings, as if the pictures in our minds were literally springing to life off the pages of a beloved novel. ★

SYNOPSIS: GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The play *Great Expectations*, adapted by Barbara Field from Charles Dickens's epic novel, centers on the character Pip, an orphan being raised by his gruff sister and her kindly husband, Joe Gargery, the village blacksmith. In the opening scene of the play we find Pip in the churchyard, visiting the tombstones of his parents. He meets an escaped convict, Magwitch, who forces Pip to steal food from the Gargerys. Within a few days the convict is recaptured, but instead of involving Pip in the incident, Magwitch confesses to the theft himself.

Estella, Miss Havisham and Pip from the 1946 movie version of Great Expectations.

Pip is soon selected by Miss Havisham, a wealthy, eccentric, elderly lady, as a playmate for her adopted daughter, Estella. Jilted at the alter herself, Miss Havisham is determined to protect Estella from the heartaches of love. Pip instantly falls in love with the beautiful but cold Estella, who regards him as common. In order to win her heart, he seeks to obtain an education and become a gentleman. His good friend Biddy agrees to teach him math, reading, and spelling.

Dismissed by Miss Havisham, Pip begins an apprenticeship with Joe, still yearning to be a gentleman, not a blacksmith. Suddenly a shrewd and powerful lawyer named Jaggers arrives on the scene and informs Pip that he has "*great expectations*": a mysterious benefactor has decided to finance his education and a move to London. The identity of Pip's benefactor is to be kept secret until the benefactor desires to be made known.

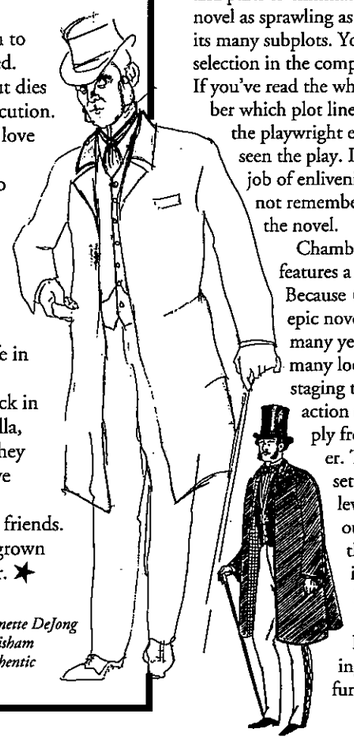
When Pip arrives in London, he becomes friends with Wemmick, Jaggers's assistant. Herbert, with whom Pip lodges, begins to teach him gentlemanly manners. Believing that Miss Havisham is his anonymous benefactor, preparing him to marry Estella, Pip develops snobbery with his newly acquired status; he neglects his sister, who later dies, and is ashamed of his humble friends Joe and Biddy.

One rainy evening, when Pip has reached twenty-three, a scraggly stranger arrives at his apartment. Pip recognizes the stranger as "his convict" and is devastated to learn that this man is his benefactor. Magwitch, who had been exiled to Australia, has returned to England, despite the penalty of death, to see Pip. Pip is taken aback by this sudden surprise visit but feels obligated to help Magwitch. Wemmick advises Pip and Herbert to move Magwitch to a less conspicuous house by the river.

Pip learns that Estella is marrying someone else and goes to visit Miss Havisham. Realizing how she has warped Estella and tortured Pip, Miss Havisham plans to burn her house to the ground, and herself with it. Pip attempts to save her, but is too late.

As Pip and Herbert attempt to get Magwitch to safety, they are discovered. Magwitch is captured but dies of injuries before his execution. Realizing he has learned love and humility from Magwitch, Pip returns to the forge, where he discovers Joe and Biddy are married. Pip gives them his best wishes and, with all his false pride at last gone, joins Herbert and his new wife in business in India.

Several years later, back in England, Pip meets Estella, who is now widowed. They discuss the pain they have both endured and make peace, vowing to remain friends. They part, both having grown older and, perhaps, wiser. ★



These costume renderings by Jeanette DeJong for Jaggers (here) and Miss Havisham (above) are accompanied by authentic fashion designs from the period.

Issues for Discussion

1. Dickens wrote two endings to *Great Expectations.* The most frequently published one ends hopefully: Pip and Estella encounter one another in Miss Havisham's garden, and decide to remain together. The other ending is more in keeping with the sad tone of the novel: Pip, strolling in Piccadilly with Joe's son, encounters Estella, discovers that she is remarried to a doctor, and parts from her forever. Playwright Barbara Field chose to combine these two endings for dramatic effect, and concludes the play on a wistful note. She writes: "Both Pip and Estella have been too victimized during childhood and much too damaged as adults for them to walk out into the sunshine together. Each must heal in his own time and on his own terms." Why do you think that Dickens wrote a happy ending for this sad novel? Do you agree with the playwright's choice to end on the sadder note?

2. Compare and contrast Dickens's own youth and education with Pip's.

3. To the Victorians, the word "expectations" had the specific meaning of a potential inheritance. In that 19th-century British society, one of the only ways in which a person born in the lower or middle class could rise to wealth and status was to inherit money or land. Therefore, one of the major themes of Victorian fiction is the hero's movement through the class structure. Pip's "expectations" hold some cruel ironies. Who else in the play has "expectations" either financial or spiritual? How are those expectations realized?

4. *Great Expectations,* like Dickens's earlier novel, *David Copperfield,* is a "coming of age" novel, in which an honest and likable young man learns important lessons about life through a series of painful experiences. What has Pip learned by the end of the story? How has his values system changed?

5. What makes Pip want to be a gentleman? By the time he has learned proper manners and etiquette, he has lost many of the gentlemanly qualities he possessed before going to London. What does it mean to be a gentleman in this story? What does Dickens suggest real gentlemanly behavior is?

6. Discuss how the theme of parenthood works in *Great Expectations,* not only in reference to those who actually are parents or guardians but also those who assume a parental role in other characters' lives.

7. Pip leaves his country home and goes off to the big city to get an education. This experience causes him develop a snobbish pride and to turn his back on those he loved and left at home. This same set of events happens today to many young people who come to feel ashamed of their past. What does Dickens teach us about the price of this foolish pride?

8. Dickens illustrates in *Great Expectations* the bad consequences of profiting from corrupted wealth. What bad actions does wealth lead people to today? What are some good actions that come of wealth, both in Pip's story and in our lives today? ★

Herbert Discussing Capitol. Illustration by Marcus Stone, Library Edition, 1862. Stone's was the first illustrated edition of Great Expectations.

Dickens *(Continued from page 1)*

Dickens continued to incorporate his own life experiences in his works. A prime example of this literary method occurs in his semi-autobiographical 1849 novel, *David Copperfield,* about a young man who struggles through poverty to achieve respect. This novel was an immediate success. Although Dickens kept his personal life private, readers believed David's experiences were similar to Charles's own life. These assumptions were confirmed after Dickens's death, when secrets of his life were revealed.

Dickens's novels *Bleak House, Hard Times,* and *Little Dorrit* followed in rapid succession, and all took on a similar pattern: he wrote chapters of each book for publication in periodicals and later published them as complete novels. In this manner, Dickens was literally making up the story as he went along. He combined this writing style with extensive travels. In 1853 he began appearing as a public reader of his own works. In this fashion, Dickens was able to combine his literary achievements with his early enthusiasm for the theatre and for acting.

A Tale of Two Cities, written in 1859, captured Dickens's impressions of the French Revolution. This book was not, at first, a best seller, which forced Dickens to write *Great Expectations* (1860), in which he returned to his earlier fascination with a young man's journey from poverty to financial success and accomplishment. It was an immediate success. Written in the first person throughout, the novel's autobiographical narrative allows Pip to comment on the action from the standpoint of a man somewhat older, wiser, and sadder, just as Dickens himself was.

The last ten years of Dickens's life were characterized by extensive travel throughout the world to perform public readings from his novels. He was hailed everywhere as the greatest writer of his age. Through some of these last years, his companion was Ellen Ternan, said to be the real-life model for Estella in *Great Expectations.* Though he enjoyed traveling and the opportunity to exhibit his acting skill in public readings, the combination caused such a strain that in June 1870 he suffered a stroke and died instantly at the age of 58. For three days, thousands of citizens passed by the open grave in Westminster Abbey to pay their respects to the most beloved of English writers. ★