

# Hollywood meets rural Ireland in funny two-hander

**THEATRE REVIEW:**  
Stones in his Pockets  
@ Grand Opera House

MARIE Jones's warmhearted play about a Hollywood blockbuster being filmed in an Irish village, most of the locals roped in as extras required to dig turf and look dispossessed against the windswept, rolling hills and bogland, here stars the excellent Jamie Beamish and Owen McConnell, directed wonderfully by Indhu Rubasingham. The pair play a panoply of characters: the main players, Charlie (Beamish) and Jake (O'Donnell), two young men struggling between ambition and inertia, working as extras, their prospects disastrously limited here in the wilds of rural Co Kerry; the toffy-nosed and highly self-important English and Americans making up the film crew, all clapper-boards and ridiculous demands ('Everyone be here at 5am to look directly at Caroline going past on the horse. Caroline will be represented by my hand'); the starlet Caroline, who knows her Seamus Heaney and

whose beauty and imperiousness cause devastation; an elderly man who is the 'last living extra from The Quiet Man' and finds it hard to be quiet about it.

Though Jones wrote the play over 15 years ago it has lost none of its charm. There is uproarious comedy in the cultural gulf between the villagers and the crew - the glittering world of Hollywood with all its pomp, high-gloss, tight schedules, prima donna demands and pretence colliding with the down-to-earth camaraderie and no-nonsense attitude of the locals. And much laughter is generated by the difference between the Hollywood version of a quaint, rural Ireland, where the land is 40 shades of green and all is whiskey, jigs, Riverdance, leprechauns and poetry, and the reality, which is fed-up cow farmers and teens drinking too much to escape boredom and disenchantment. As ever in Jones's work, darkness is threaded through the humour. A depressed 17-year-old who was rejected from auditions for a part as an extra is spurned by the beautiful film actress in the pub; he commits suicide by walking into the river with stones in his pockets, feeling his

prospects are few and his future too bleak to be borne. Hollywood is quite ruthless in the way it plays with the hopes and emotions of the locals: all that matters to the moviemakers is that the weather holds out and the extras get it right as the ridiculously dramatic music blasts across the fields, befuddling the cows, sheep and passersby.

Beamish and O'Donnell show incredible flexibility in playing so many disparate characters, Beamish in particular drawing much appreciation for his hammed-up interpretation of the seductive Hollywood starlet on the prowl in the village pub. **Stones in his Pockets runs at the Grand Opera House, Belfast tonight and tomorrow (January 28). To book tickets visit [www.goh.co.uk](http://www.goh.co.uk) or call the box office on 02890 241919.**

■ **Stones in his Pockets runs at the Grand Opera House, Belfast tonight and tomorrow (January 28). To book tickets visit [www.goh.co.uk](http://www.goh.co.uk) or call the box office on 02890 241919.**



JOANNE SAVAGE A scene from *Stones In his Pockets*

# Dickens enthusiasts prepare to celebrate author's bicentenary

BY JOANNE SAVAGE

[joanne.savage@jpress.co.uk](mailto:joanne.savage@jpress.co.uk)

THE bicentenary of the greatest English novelist of the Victorian period, Charles Dickens, will be elaborately marked with a year-long line-up of read-a-thons, exhibitions, theatre, musical evenings and film screenings as part of the Dickens 2012 NI Festival.

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) wrote with keen interest about rich and poor and created some of literature's most unique characters - from Miss Havisham, bitter and twisted in her cobwebbed wedding dress, to Oliver Twist poignantly asking for some more gruel. He combined humour, intricate realism and progressive ideas about the importance of social reform in his extensive corpus and, because his novels were often serialised in Victorian periodicals, they were not the preserve of the elite, but were read and enjoyed by all classes of society.

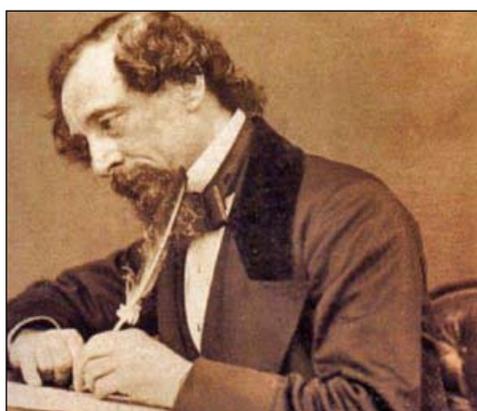
Dickens' popularity remains undimmed, his novels so often adapted for television with their cliffhangers and twists, characters of moral ambiguity and events of tragedy and high joy juxtaposed with a rhythm that seems faithful to life.

Dr Leon Litvack, a Dickensian scholar based at Queen's University Belfast, is director of the festival, and insists that the lineup of events will be 'rich and diverse': "We want you to be entertained and excited by the spirit of fun that was uniquely dear to Dickens' heart."

Leon describes Dickens' greatest achievement as a writer in terms of "the accuracy with which he describes humanity, from the highest to the lowest. He seemed to understand what motivated people in love, what motivated people in their pursuit of money, what motivated people in doing good or ill."

"He was a great observer of humanity and he would walk the streets, watching, drawing inspiration from all he saw before him. He managed to capture the essence of people's characters."

Importantly, the festival hopes to raise funds for the children's charity Barnardo's NI. This is an appropriate partnership. Dickens and charity founder Thomas Barnardo were both 19th century philanthropists. Dickens himself did not have an easy upbringing: when his father was imprisoned because of debts the young Charles was forced to leave school and work ten-hour days at Warren's Blacking Warehouse near



Dickens at his desk in 1858

Charing Cross in order to support his family. He would later write that he wondered how he could have been "so easily cast away at such an age" and the experience gave him a pertinent interest in labour conditions and socio-economic reform. Dr Litvack's favourite Dickens novel is David Copperfield: "because it has such an intimate link to his own biography. It incorporates a line he used in an earlier autobiographical piece of writing where he describes being sent as a teenager to work in Warren's Blacking Warehouse: 'No words can express the deep agony of my soul at being placed in this job.' He repeats these exact words in the novel. Copperfield is also a novelist with a great capacity for memory - he is close to Dickens in many ways."

Leon - a trustee of the Charles Dickens Museum in London - is particularly looking forward to, besides the David Copperfield read-a-thon, an exhibition to be held at the Ulster Museum, commemorating Dickens' visits to Belfast as part of his reading tours.

"On display we'll have some of the actual copies of his books that he held in his hands on his tour, with his notes and thoughts. We also have a note from his doctor indicating the rise in his pulse when he performed the very famous reading of Sikes murdering Nancy in Oliver Twist."

"Then we'll have photographs and other documents describing the Belfast Dickens would have encountered, the conditions of the working poor and so on."



Dr Leon Litvack, festival director, with Mary Theresa Madders, festival volunteer

"Running parallel to this we'll have an exhibition at PRONI featuring some of Dickens' letters."

The author visited the city on three occasions - in 1858, 67 and 69 - to read from his novels and, perhaps aptly, described the city as a "fine place with rough people" ('some rough people' may have been even more apt).

"I think he was maybe talking about the unusual accent or the industrial nature of

the city," Leon surmises. "Perhaps he meant hardworking, people given to hard graft. Dickens drew great strength and enjoyment and inspiration from his reading tours. He loved to see the audience laughing or crying in the aisles. And Belfast audiences would have done much the same."

■ **For a full list of the events taking part during the Dickens 2012 NI Festival visit [www.dickens2012ni.com](http://www.dickens2012ni.com).**