



What the Dickens?

Armando Iannucci's sour, indifferent adaptation of 'David Copperfield'

September 11, 2020 Michael Giltz

Do what you want with Charles Dickens! Or Shakespeare or Jane Austen or Dr. Seuss or any other great artist's work. Modernize their stories. Switch genders. Go non-binary. Cast people of color in roles not written for people of color. Cast Mr. Magoo in roles not written for visually-impaired cartoon characters. Set the story in space. It really doesn't matter. None of this will help you create a good movie, but none of it will stop you from making a good one either.

Director and co-screenwriter Armando Iannucci does quite a bit of this in his new film *The Personal History Of David Copperfield*.

He employs color-blind casting, led by the charming Dev Patel as our titular hero and the even more delightful Rosalind Eleazar as Agnes Wickfield, David's friend and eventual love. She just stands there while intelligence and warmth and heat and light simply burst off the screen. Our appreciation for *Copperfield* immediately falters when he talks to Agnes but doesn't immediately throw himself at her feet in admiration.

After a lifetime of watching art created with color-blind casting, where anyone might be cast in any part; or *intentional* casting, where one considers how diverse actors will bring alive certain roles or aspects of a play/movie/etc.; and movie-star casting, the act of hiring a famous person so you can get the damn thing made in the first place, I simply refer to any and all of this as "casting."

Iannucci also employs a modestly meta device of framing the film as a public reading by Charles Dickens, a famed speaker/performer. Then Iannucci goes nuts. Dickens strolls from the stage into the birth of his autobiographical character David Copperfield and observes the goings-on and then flits to the next scene and you think, oh gosh! Iannucci soon drops such shenanigans except for the occasional touch here and there and it comes to nought.

Sure, the film might have characters relate a story while projecting the image of that very event onto a blanket held up behind them. And they might even brush aside that blanket to proceed to the next scene at an entirely different location. And by god someone might address the audience by breaking the fourth wall. So what? Iannucci makes clear this is not your father's Dickens adaptation, especially if your father is David Lean. Yet unless it serves a purpose, such frippery is neither here nor there.

THE PERSONAL HISTORY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD ★(1/5 stars)
 Directed by: Armando Iannucci
 Written by: Simon Blackwell & Armando Iannucci (based on the novel by Charles Dickens)
 Starring: Dev Patel, Tilda Swinton, Hugh Laurie, Rosalind Eleazar, Ben Whishaw
 Running time: 119 mins

Still, we have a great cast performing the gist of a great novel, indeed a stone cold masterpiece by an author with more than his fair share of them. Why does this version make me so very unhappy? The fault, I fear, is Iannucci. His scabrous heart is a poor, poor fit for the humane universe of Dickens. Iannucci's career is filled with high points: the clueless second-rater Alan Partridge, a precursor to David Brent in *The Office*; the spot-on mockery of government and politicians via *The Thick Of It*, *In The Loop* and, of course, *Veep*. Whatever their merits, you wouldn't say these works are bursting with love and empathy, would you. Hilarious? Yes. Mocking? Absolutely. Kind? Uh, no.

Dickens, however, is kind to everyone, even the bad guys. Villains may be hateful. Hapless characters may be foolish and prattle on or exhibit weird obsessions or be just plain loony. Their names smack of caricature. But they are alive, all of them and Dickens sees them as human whether good or bad or, as in most of us, an ever-changing combination of both.

Read *David Copperfield* and you'll remember Mr. Micawber as the kindest of men. Yes, he's his own worst enemy and rather foolish. Thanks to the cruelties of the law, Micawber and his family are for a time trapped in debtor's prison. But he provides shelter to the young Copperfield and through his essential decency helps foil a villainous plot and ultimately enjoys the success he deserves. Watch this film and Micawber is an absurdity, a fool, a nuisance. Not even Peter Capaldi can rescue the poor man from Iannucci's indifference.

Our hero's great-Aunt Betsey Trotwood is monomaniacally focused on her niece producing a girl, so David's birth is quite a disappointment. The Bene Gesserit have nothing on Betsey Trotwood. Nonetheless, she is generous when needed, with a tragic disappointment in love that deepens her tremendously. In the film, Tilda Swinton's Trotwood is simply bonkers.

Iannucci is better with the villains, naturally. David's step-father Edward Murdstone and step-aunt Jane are suitably hateful. Yet they're so vicious you can't accept his mother would let them in the door, much less *marry* the man. Iannucci even manages to coax out a bad performance from Ben Whishaw, no easy task though a godawful wig helps tremendously.

It's ok not to like the villains, even if they're such cardboard ones you're afraid to hiss too loudly for fear they'll fall down. But you don't even like David's friends, whether it's his mother or his servant Peggotty, here seen as little more than an embarrassment the young David Copperfield will soon outgrow. When David opens his tiny lodgings to the Micawbers and others you don't think, ahh they've made a family. You think, get this rabble away. Even David isn't particularly likable, falling for his obnoxious schoolmate Steerforth, ignoring the delightful Agnes as she waits patiently for him to get a clue and so on. But then, Iannucci doesn't like anyone here either.

Looking back on his work, he seems never to like anyone. Ever. Not liking boorish radio and TV presenters or political hacks is one thing. Not liking any of the characters in a Dickens novel is the same as not liking humanity itself. The humor curdles when it's not softened by understanding. The drama diminishes when you don't give a toss what happens to anyone. And if Iannucci doesn't care, why should we?



Tags: Armando Iannucci, Ben Whishaw, David Copperfield, Dev Patel, Peter Capaldi, Rosalind Eleazar

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 Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, news and more. He has written extensively for the *New York Post*, *New York Daily News*, *New York Magazine*, *The Advocate*, *Out*, *Huffington Post*, *Premiere Magazine*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *BookFilter*, *USA Today* and the *Los Angeles Times*. He co-hosts the long-running podcast *Showbiz Sandbox*.

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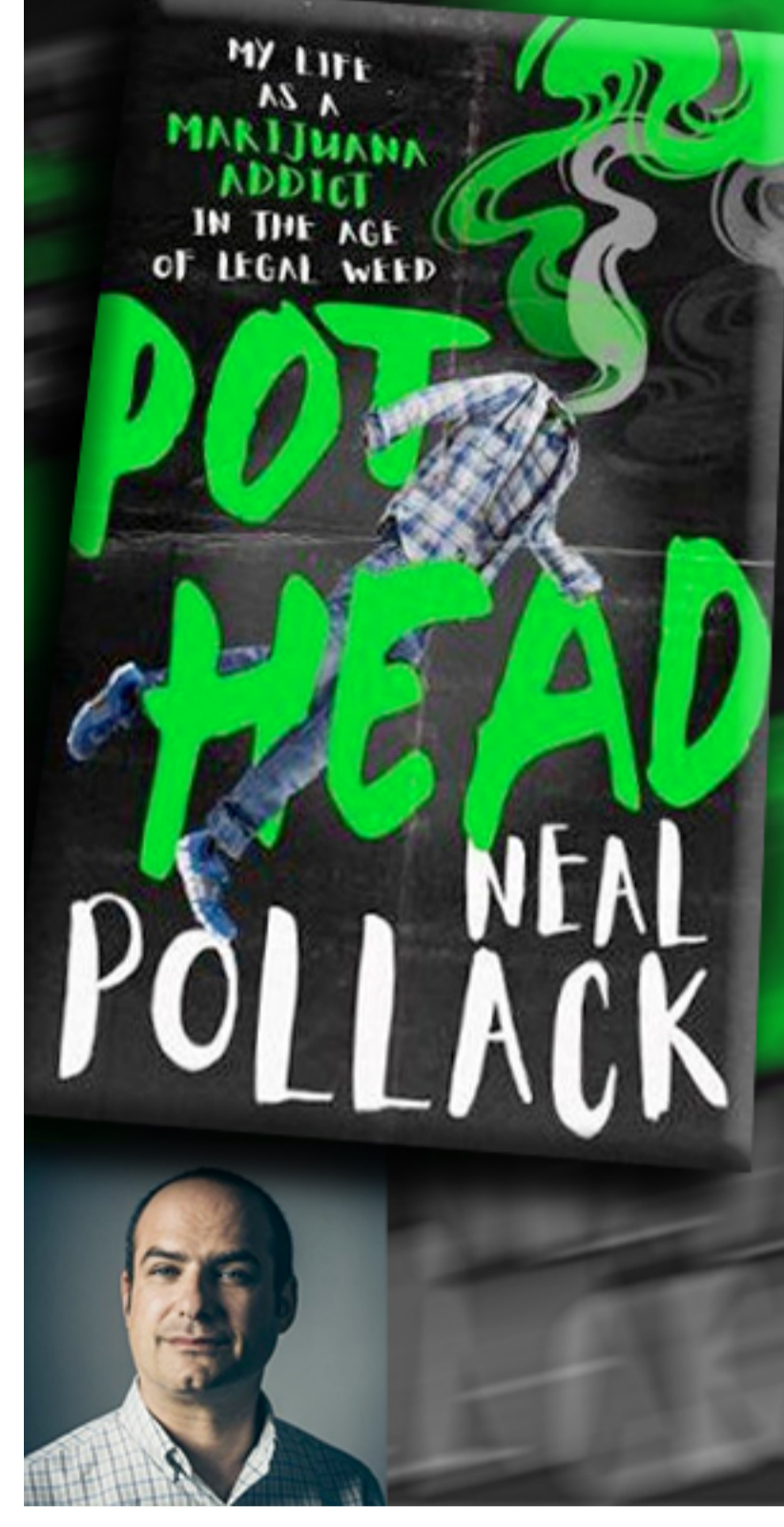
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