

# ENTERTAINMENT

## Pickwick Papers make ponderous play Society struggles with cumbersome Dickens adaptation

BY SEAN MCQUAID

THE U.P.E.I. THEATER SOCIETY'S performance of *Mister Pickwick* left the ambiguous impression one gets on seeing a good performance of a bad play. An adaptation of Dickens' classic *Pickwick Papers*, the play (by Jack Winter and Greg Luscombe) has a lot of funny and touching moments, but that's all they are-- moments. The play as a whole is a disjointed, inconsistent and interminably long affair that alternately entertained and tranquilized the audience.

Little if any of this is the Theatre Society's fault. Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* was an immensely long work published in a serialized format that made him rich and famous with its popularity; for all its wit, though, the collected work is, like most Dickens, a lengthy literary morass to wade through. It's episodic, and might have worked better as several plays-- in fact, the two acts could, with some minor tinkering, easily pass for plays by themselves.

The scenario? A scholarly, eccentric and childishly naive old gentleman named Pickwick (played with admirable charm and animation by Rob Thomson) somehow attracts a following of equally clueless would-be scholars, the Pickwick Club; chief among these disciples are Snodgrass (Jesse Francis), Tupman (Errol MacEachern) and Winkle (Tim Wartman); all three have some beautiful moments over the course of the play, though Tim Wartman is particularly delightful as the inept, scatterbrained and endearingly helpless Winkle.

Pickwick and his three stooges embark on a trip through the English countryside to scientifically observe the world outside their little corner of London. They engage in a series of sometimes hilarious misadventures (the hunting expedition is a particular rib-tickler), meeting Jingle (a near-incomprehensible, fast-talking con artist whose congenial, sentence-fragment style of conversation belies his unscrupulous mercenary tendencies), who is played with nasty flair by Craig Blair (one of the standout performances of the show, like Thomson and Wartman). The experienced, versatile Blair also appears as a lawyer in the second act, in which role he makes an epic-length legal speech which is about as engaging as it can be at that late juncture in the program. Jingle exploits the Pickwickians and their friends, the Wardle family: Mr. Wardle (played with virtually imperishable jollity by Joshua Weale); his

daughters Emily and Isabella (genteel but lovably spunky bookends Lesley Shaw and Aldera Chisholm); his sister, Rachel (a man-hungry spinster played with manic eccentricity by the excellent Lindsay Linkletter); his mother, Mrs. Wardle (the still spirited Jennifer Godfrey, who seems to be making

of the pair to expose and apprehend the faker. This is done with the aid of Sam Weller, an imaginatively wise-cracking servant played by Keir Malone (who has a goldmine of good lines and some of the more impressive moments in the play, especially his satisfyingly amusing courtroom scene, though he

plaintiff (Mrs. Wardle, who claims Pickwick falsely pretended marital intentions to her). After a sobering exposure to the injustices of poverty, the legal system and Victorian prisons, Pickwick is eventually persuaded by his friends to relent and buy himself out of jail, going home a sadder but wiser man for what he has suffered and the sufferings he has witnessed.

The ending, despite being about three hours in coming, still seems to come out of nowhere in rather *deux-ex-machina* fashion, and while Pickwick's evolution and the themes therein are indeed thought-provoking, they too creep up on the audience unexpectedly; farce and social commentary blur, with the grand design, if any, being lost in the shuffle. It's more a collection of stories than a coherent whole, and as such is somewhat unsatisfying as a unified production, particularly given its marathon length--after three hours, you expect more than what you've got by the end of it.

Set design is minimal but effective, costuming is good, and blocking is generally well done (though the many "horse-drawn" entrances and exits met with the occasional snafu). In terms of direction, the play usually moves about as swiftly and effectively as it can, though there are annoying timekilling sequences (like the ballroom dance early on), and there are, inevitably, portions of the audience who find their view limited by obstructions or distance, one of the drawbacks of the innovative theatre-in-the-round presentation. This staging style, incidentally, was set up better than one might have expected in the Barn-- they made ingenious use of the space, but pillars clutter the stage area and the third floor "balcony" is an extremely awkward location for anyone wishing to see the

play in its entirety; some off-centre scenes are simply invisible to the upstairs crowd, particularly those in the rear rows.

*Mister Pickwick* is an ambitious project for the Theatre Society, a cast-o-dozens period piece, and they pull it off pretty well considering what they had to work with in terms of material and staging venue. With some exceptions, the production generally makes the best of less-than-ideal circumstances.



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a career out of playing elderly ladies for comic effect); and the hired boy, Joe, a semi-comatose and mildly creepy little urchin played with inventive aplomb by Shannon Murray (one of the best of the faculty cameos herein). Pickwick's three friends fall for the three younger Wardle ladies like a ton of bricks, but Jingle scuttles the Tupman/Rachel romance by seducing and eloping with Rachel via trickery, with Pickwick and company in hot pursuit

needs to work on the timing and delivery of his signature gag lines to maximize their effect). Thus endeth Act One.

Act Two, which seems to bear little relation whatsoever to Act One, sees a marked shift in tone as Pickwick (back in London), with his new servant Sam in tow, finds himself the subject of a false legal claim and, losing his case, goes to debtor's prison on refusing (out of principle) to pay a red cent to the