

# *David Copperfield*

by Charles Dickens

Produced by the Thanhouser Company (1912)

New Rochelle, New York USA

With original music composed and performed by Phillip Carli

The most ambitious Thanhouser Company effort since its first release in 1910 was manifested in the three-reel version of Charles Dickens' immortal *David Copperfield*, the story of an English lad's tribulation-filled childhood and maturity. Thanhouser's United States distribution channel could not accommodate the release of all three reels on the same day, so Thanhouser gave each reel its own title, endeavored to have each tell a story which would stand alone when shown, and designated them *The Early Life of David Copperfield*, *Little Em'ly and David Copperfield*, and *The Loves of David Copperfield*. Release dates were set for consecutive Tuesdays, beginning on October 17, 1911.

The 817-meter-long, black and white, nitrate positive print complete with Italian intertitles was acquired by the Museo Nazionale del Cinema's Film Library collections in 1955. In 1959, the Museum carried out an initial conservation of the nitrate material on safety film, at the same time making a master dupe negative, from which a 35mm positive and a 16mm positive were later printed. The nitrate print presents characteristics of completeness and accuracy in the editing order of the episodes. With the one exception of the card which says "Fine," all the intertitles are original and bear the production trademark.

In view of the good quality of the nitrate, the decision was made to carry out new preservation effort, which is described in detail in the report prepared by the laboratory L'Immagine Ritrovata of Bologna in February 2012 which may be viewed on the DVD.

This nitrate print was then used to prepare another dupe negative, from which a new projection print (35mm, positive, polyester, 817 meters, b/w, approx. 40 minutes at 18 ft/s, Italian captions) was printed and put at the Museum's disposal for this DVD edition of *David Copperfield* in celebration of Charles Dickens 200th birth.

Directed by George O. Nichols for Edwin Thanhouser, the cast included Flora Foster (young David Copperfield); Ed Genung (David Copperfield as a man), Marie Eline (Little Em'ly as a child), Florence LaBadie (Little Em'ly as an adult), Anna Seer (David's mother), Frank H. Crane, Alphonse Ethier, Maude Fealy, Mignon Anderson (Dora), William Garwood, Harry Benham, Viola Alberti (Aunt Betsey), Justus D. Barnes, William Russell (Ham), and James Cruze (Steerforth).

Flora Foster, who took the title role in *The Early Life of David Copperfield*, at one time was known as "The Biograph Kid." She was an actress for Thanhouser during the 1911-1913 years, although she was rarely mentioned in publicity. Her talents in the motion picture field were never to mature, for in 1914, at the age of 16, she died of heart failure. Maude Fealy, a well-known

stage actress, worked before the Thanhouser camera intermittently. Much more would be heard of her two years later in 1913. Alphonse Ethier, an older man, was a Thanhouser stock player for many years and was seen in numerous minor and supporting roles not credited in publicity.

*David Copperfield* is a novel with a plot too crowded with material to do justice with summarizing, and it took Thanhouser three reels to present it. Even so, the film was simply a series of vignettes or tableaux; to have presented the story with its full original meaning would have taken many hours of screen time. Indeed, the basic work contains enough plots to make up several stories. Basically, it tells of a recalcitrant David, his flight from school, problems of his youth under various harsh circumstances, difficulties in love, and growing up, all while surrounded by numerous highly individualistic and memorable people. In retrospect, even the character names seem descriptive of the people they designate.

In the construction of this novel, much autobiographical material was used. The trials and tribulations of Dickens' own childhood are largely reflected in the story of David. It is no wonder, then, that Dickens said of his own work: "Of all my books I like this one best; like many fond parents I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child, and his name is David Copperfield."

A review published in *The Moving Picture World* covering all three reels was typical, concluding with the following paragraph:

The Thanhouser Company has set a new standard in the filming of Dickens, and I very readily believe their assurance that this was with them but a labor of love and that, imbued with a true Dickens' enthusiasm; they have spent six months in producing these reels. Time is of the essence of success.

While it would undoubtedly have had many advantages to release the three films at once, the film makers had made the best of an otherwise unfortunate situation by skillfully using the autobiographical character as a basis of division - The Childhood, The Boyhood, and The Manhood of David Copperfield. That was a happy idea, although the full effect of this excellent production cannot be secured except by showing the three reels in one night. A lecture would go well with it if it were featured as "An Evening with Dickens."

One of the great Dickens classics, and his third novel, *Nicholas Nickleby* was first published as *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* in monthly installments, beginning on March 31, 1838, then as a complete book in October 1838. Nicholas and his sister Kate - mostly with Nick's efforts - overcome the typical malevolent characters created by Dickens, and in the end, each gets a fitting marriage partner.

This surviving 35mm print is held by the British Film Institute in London, England and is two reels in length with a running time of 31 minutes 18 seconds. With *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *David Copperfield*, both released in 1911, and *Nicholas Nickleby* in 1912, the Thanhouser Company established itself as producer of the best Dickens adaptations in American film.

David Copperfield (1912)

Directed by George O. Nichols, the cast included Harry Benham (Nicholas Nickleby), Mignon Anderson (Madeline Bray), Frances Gibson (Kate Nickleby), Inda Palmer (Nicholas' mother), Justus D. Barnes (Nicholas' Uncle Ralph), N.S. Woods (Smike), David H. Thompson (Squeers), Marie Eline (Wackford), Mrs. Grace Eline (Fannie Squeers), Etienne Girardot (Gryde), Harry A. Marks (Vincent Crummles). Original music is composed and performed by Raymond A. Brubacher.

W. Stephen Bush in a review in the *The Moving Picture World* on March 9, 1912, commented: "I think that within this centennial year we will add a complete cinematographic set of Dickens to the Library of Motion Pictures, and I venture the prediction that the Thanhouser edition will surpass all others in merit and popularity. This is no hasty judgment. The Thanhouser *David Copperfield* created a new standard in the filming of Dickens, and this standard alone can serve as a basis for comparison of *Nicholas Nickleby*. To tell the story of *Nicholas Nickleby* in 2,000 feet of film and tell it entertainingly, with no loss of its humor and pathos, and to give that swiftness of action so necessary to the successful photoplay, seemed plainly and simply impossible."