

## The Adaptation

Alan Bleasdale cherished an ambition to bring a Dickens novel to the screen for 25 years. As a teenager he read Dickens's novels, and loved them all. "When ITV rang and asked if I'd dramatize *Oliver Twist* I said yes immediately," says Alan. "I'd been waiting 25 years for this phone call. When I put the phone down I did cartwheels around the house." But he admits he was daunted by the enormity of the task ahead of him.

"I was scared, because with Dickens you're entering the playground that basically consists of Shakespeare, Dickens and Tolstoy," says Bleasdale. "Suddenly I was playing with the big boys. Dickens is undoubtedly one of the greatest writers who ever lived and facing up to him was hard to do.

"Some people were surprised I wanted to do this, but I have always adored Dickens and couldn't wait to get started. In a way it does sort of make sense because *Oliver Twist* is fundamentally about childhood and that's a subject I've written about before and keep returning to. Even some of my adult characters never seem to grow up."

Bleasdale's admiration for Dickens was unknown even to those quite close to him professionally. Producer Keith Thompson, with whom he runs Diplomat Films, confessed he had no idea about this ambition.

"In all our years working together Alan has never mentioned his interest in Dickens – but once you think about it, it makes complete sense. There are definitely parallels or influences at work. Alan writes about big issues, he deals with issues of social consciousness and he creates extraordinary larger than life characters. These are all descriptions that could equally well be attributed to Dickens's work."

Nick Elliott, controller of ITV Network Drama, says, "Alan was so keen, he knew the book, he loves Dickens, and in some ways his own work has similarities with Dickens – he writes vividly about the ordinary working-class people in everyday life. And, like Dickens, his writing is highly original with memorable characters."

So in the summer of 1997 Bleasdale sat down to re-read *Oliver Twist*, Dickens's most enduringly popular novel. "Oliver Twist was one of the first I ever read, so I must've been only about 13. Reading it nearly 40 years later was a very interesting experience. I'm still stunned by what an incredible piece of work it is and have to keep reminding myself that this was basically Dickens's first major attempt at a novel and that he was only in his mid-20s when he wrote it. It is quite an astounding achievement."

Novel to Film

Turning a novel written in 1837 into a television serial for the '90s presented Alan with major challenges. He explains: "Obviously I read it second time round with a different eye than when I was barely a teenager. There were three things that I was anxious about: firstly, the level of coincidence that exists in the story; then the perhaps accidental anti-Semitism in relation to Fagin, and finally the occasional blasts of sentimentality.

"These are areas that I thought might be problematic for a modern television audience, and it is a testimony to Dickens's brilliance that despite these difficulties the book remains a real page-turner even today.

"What I think he did, because of writing in monthly instalments, was literally make it up as he went along. By the end he'd painted himself into a corner and the only way out was to do this back story - of about four or five pages at the end - where he explains everything at incredible speed. I suddenly realized that this rather problematic part of the novel was actually my solution. By beginning with this material, the audience would understand the motivation of the characters throughout, and whilst writing it, I could be plucking up the courage to get to the point where I enter the same arena as Dickens."

Producer Keith Thompson echoes Bleasdale's words, saying. "In the 53rd chapter of the novel Dickens had so many plot balls in the air, and he suddenly decided to bring them all down to earth in one go, explaining all the relationships and even introducing brand-new characters.

"I always have this picture in my head of Charles Dickens working away and his editor saying, 'Come on, Charlie boy, you've been on that Oliver Twist now for 18 months; it is about time you wrapped it all up,' and Dickens groaning at all the unresolved plot points he had to deal with."

Bleasdale set to work, unravelling the story backwards. The result is two hours of thrilling drama before young Oliver Twist even takes his first breath. The dramatization tells the story of how Oliver is born out of wedlock to Agnes Fleming in a workhouse; the product of her heartfelt but doomed love affair with the hapless Edwin Leeford, a close friend of her father's, and how he becomes an orphan. "The world I've created before Oliver is born is still Dickens's world, but inevitably because it was only a few pages in the original novel and I've turned it into a couple of hours' drama, I've developed it considerably. Some of the book's minor characters, like Oliver's father Edwin Leeford and his wife, Elizabeth, were fascinating people to me, but they were really only mentioned in passing or appeared as walk-ons. Because Dickens was writing at such a furious pace and was making it up as he went along, certain things just get thrown away. Genius that he was, he just kept on writing and threw those pages over his shoulder. So I've followed along behind him, picking them up."

Thompson adds: "Alan has dealt brilliantly with the terrible coincidences in the novel, which in my eyes were a big problem for a modern audience. By taking

the decision to tell the back story in its proper chronological context, it rids it of that curse. Now nothing is down to coincidence, everything is being planned. Not only does it explain how Oliver came to be born, but it also shows us that Fagin, Monks and his mother are all on a mission to get their hands on Oliver's inheritance. They're all basically after the money."

#### Casting and Characterization

Having put the plot line in place, Bleasdale was determined to overthrow many of the clichés often associated with Dickens. One of the areas where this is demonstrated is in the characterization and casting of Oliver.

"Oliver experienced dreadful cruelty, and Dickens was ruthless in showing that to his readers, and I'm really only intent on showing the audience the same thing. But I just don't believe that a boy who had Oliver's upbringing until the age of 10, a boy who'd experienced such hardship, would be quite the boy Dickens describes. It was as if his gentility had never been touched and bruised, but I just don't buy that.

"Our Oliver is sweet, has great decency and strength, but he's been dragged up dreadfully and it's a great compliment to his inner strength that he survives as he does. So I've tried to give the character a toughness, a hardness and a sense of determination."

The search for the perfect boy to play Oliver was not an easy one. Keith Thompson explains their criteria: "Acting ability was essential, but experience not necessary. Oliver must look very appealing and vulnerable. The problem was that most 9 or 10 year old boys are well fed and sporty, and they just radiate health, which was not what we wanted. We were also keen to avoid the Little Lord Fauntleroy look."

Alan Bleasdale concurs: "We wanted someone beautiful as only nine-year-olds can be, someone who the camera would love and someone who could not only act, but who was intelligent. Your heart is touched just looking at Sam Smith."

Casting the other roles reunited a team of actors who are familiar in Bleasdale productions. Bleasdale admits he writes "with particular actors clearly in my mind." And because of his reputation and the strength of his work, many of them sign up for Bleasdale dramas again and again.

For Fagin, he was spurred along by the thought of his long-term collaborator Robert Lindsay.

Bleasdale explains: "Fagin has to be witty and seductive and have the most incredible charm. He's a Pied Piper figure, and in this version I've made him a magician. He does things which we know are morally wrong, but because he does them with real charm, we don't judge him in the same way. I'm always desperately keen to write powerful parts for Robert Lindsay and this part is just perfect for him." Other Bleasdale regulars also appear, including Julie Walters and David Ross as the double act Mrs. Mann and Mr. Bumble. "I put them together before and they work

really well together. They just make me laugh and these two characters are brilliant comic inventions by Dickens. He realized more than anyone that audiences need light relief from all this emotion and I know that Julie and David can pull that off."

Bill Sikes and Nancy are played by two newcomers to the Bleasdale stable – Andy Serkis and Emily Woof. The character of Sikes has to have real presence onscreen, and as Bleasdale says, "Even Fagin should be frightened of this man. He is brutal and brutish, but he's not just an aimless, violent thug – I'm not interested in characters like that. In Dickens's novel he does have some redeeming features, and I wanted to hold onto that. The part of Nancy got a lot of criticism in Dickens's day and she certainly doesn't have a clear line through the novel. I want her to have strength, give her sentiment but not sentimentality. There is never any doubt that she loves Bill wholeheartedly and she is brave enough to stand up to him."

Other leading parts are played by Alun Armstrong, Lindsay Duncan, Michael Kitchen, Tim Dutton and Marc Warren – some of them in roles greatly expanded and enriched by Bleasdale. But, he insists, "Even with those characters who appear only briefly in the original novel, I cannot stress enough that I couldn't have written any of them without having had the scent of them off the page from Dickens."

Adaptations to *Oliver Twist* Bleasdale's Episode One tells the story of Oliver's parents – Agnes Fleming and Edwin Leeford – who in the novel appear almost as an afterthought at the end of his story, where Dickens quickly ties up all the loose ends. Bleasdale puts them up front and tells their story in much greater detail.

As in the novel, the television dramatization opens with the frail Agnes Fleming giving birth to *Oliver Twist* in the workhouse in a small town. Bleasdale's town is by the sea and is called Bruntmarsh. In the novel, Dickens gave the town the fictitious name of Mudfog, but it was most probably based on Chatham in Kent.

After Oliver's birth, Bleasdale then goes back in time to cover Agnes' story. It details her family relationships, her love affair with Edwin Leeford, her resulting pregnancy, her departure from her hometown, her journey to the town of Oliver's birth and her death. In Dickens's novel Agnes is described simply as "a good looking girl... found lying in the street; -- she had walked some distance, for her shoes were worn to pieces; but where she came from, or where she was going to, nobody knows." Bleasdale's Agnes is a fully rounded character.

At the end of Dickens's novel, it is mentioned that when Edwin Leeford meets Agnes, he is already married to, but separated from, an older woman (Elizabeth) and that their marriage was simply an arrangement by their respective families. Dickens hints that Elizabeth is an unappealing woman, but we learn little more about her. Bleasdale has created a whole hideous character for Elizabeth Leeford and also a much more intricate portrait of her disturbed son Edward Leeford, otherwise known as Monks.

Bleasdale's character of Edwin Leeford is fleshed out considerably. In Dickens, he is a shadowy figure, whereas Bleasdale has created a feckless, charming fellow,

who, despite his decent intentions towards Agnes and others, is actually rather weak. In Bleasdale's version we witness how Leeford travels to Rome in order to receive his inheritance from his wealthy Uncle Richard. Elizabeth Leeford is determined to get her hands on this money and she therefore pursues him. In the novel, Dickens simply states that Edwin Leeford dies in Rome the day after Elizabeth Leeford arrives in the city, without any detail of what happened between the two of them. Bleasdale has written in a dramatic encounter between husband and wife.

Once Leeford is dead, Elizabeth and Monks discover that they will only inherit his money if they can get rid of Agnes. Bleasdale has therefore written in their search for Agnes, Monks' failed attempt to murder her and their subsequent mission to seek out Oliver and discredit him in the eyes of Mr. Brownlow, the guardian of Leeford's will.

The character and role of Mr. Brownlow is developed significantly. In Bleasdale's version, he is not only Edwin's closest friend, but also the guardian of his will. It is therefore to him that Mrs. Leeford and Monks have to discredit young Oliver. To do this, they enlist the help of Fagin in this mission, and he decides to send Oliver with Bill Sikes to burgle Brownlow's country house. The encounters between Oliver and Brownlow in the Bleasdale version are therefore planned, rather than being a series of coincidences.

Although the character of Mrs. Mann exists in Dickens's novel, Bleasdale's Mrs. Mann is actually based on another Oliver Twist character, Mrs. Corney. Because she is part of a double act with Mr. Bumble, Bleasdale switched their names around. "I couldn't cope with Bumble and Corney – sounds like a very bad couple of third-rate comedians in the 1940s."