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Tuesday, September 18, 2012

Dickens with a twist at Mechanics Hall

Great-great-grandson set to recreate author's 1868 reading at Mechanics Hall

COVER STORY



Gerald Dickens, the great-great-grandson of Charles Dickens, performs a one-man production of "A Christmas Carol" at Vaillancourt Folk Art in Sutton in 2009. (T&G File Photo/PAUL KAPTEYN)

By Richard Duckett TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

rduckett@telegram.com

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When Charles Dickens came to Worcester in 1842, he was already a literary star, but some of his greatest hits were still to come. "A Christmas Carol," for example, was published a year later.

When Dickens returned to Worcester for a second and final time in 1868, there was much anticipation — great expectations, even — about him giving a reading of "A Christmas Carol" in the 11-year-old Mechanics Hall. Special trains came into the city for the event on Monday, March 23, 1868.

Not everything would go smoothly that evening. Dickens was exhausted before he arrived and exhausted afterward. On stage, however, Dickens (wearing "a profusion of jewelry," according to one report) apparently gave a typically bravura performance. Dickens put everything into his public readings, even at an obvious risk to his health. He would be dead at the age of 58, just over two years later.

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But another Dickens is returning to the scene of that brave triumph. Gerald Dickens, great-great-grandson of Charles Dickens, will perform his one-man show of "A Christmas Carol" at 8 p.m. Sept. 21 in Mechanics Hall.

While Gerald Dickens has been performing Charles Dickens' works since 1993 and is a regular visitor stateside, this will be his first time on the stage at Mechanics Hall, which is one of the few surviving venues from Dickens' 1867-68 American tour.

"It's going to be really, really special," Gerald Dickens, 46, said during a recent telephone interview from his home in Abingdon near Oxford, England, about his pending Mechanics Hall visit.

He was speaking before he was to leave for the United States for several such performances. This has been a busy year for Gerald Dickens, since 2012 marks Charles Dickens' 200th birthday (born Feb. 7, 1812), and the great-great grandson's schedule has included an invitation to Buckingham Palace. "It's been a great year," he said.

Meanwhile, this week will include several other events designed to make for a full Dickens 200th birthday celebration in Worcester.

On Thursday, the Robert Fellman Dickens Collection in the Gordon Library at Worcester Polytechnic Institute will hold a free open house from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. for its exhibit "The Engaging and Enduring Mr. Dickens," along with a talk at 5:30 p.m. by Kristin Boudreau.

On Sept. 22, Gerald Dickens will give two one-man performances at Vaillancourt Folk Art in Sutton, with excerpts from "Oliver Twist" at 2 p.m. and "Nicholas Nickleby" at 7 p.m.

William Wallace, executive director of the Worcester Historical Museum, will lead a bus tour on Sept. 23 of historic buildings that Dickens would have stopped at during his two visits. Also Sept. 23, The People's Kitchen in Worcester will put on a three-course "Dickens-Themed Dinner."

The events are being organized by Vaillancourt Folk Art, which crafts highly detailed, hand-painted figurines, ornaments and other collectibles, often with a Christmas theme. Gary and Judi Vaillancourt's love of Christmas extends to "A Christmas Carol" ("A Christmas Carol is such a part of our tradition," said Gary Vaillancourt, president of Vaillancourt Folk Art), which, in turn, led them to invite Gerald Dickens to perform at Vaillancourt's intimate theater in Sutton for the past three years.

"This gentleman is unbelievable. It's a standing ovation every performance," Gary Vaillancourt said of Gerald Dickens.

Growing up in Tunbridge Wells, Kent, England, Gerald Dickens said he was always aware of his famous forebear "in a way."

"My father was very knowledgeable and gave a lot of speeches and talks about Charles Dickens. It kind of surrounded us, but there was never any expectation or pressure to do anything about Charles Dickens one way or the other."

Gerald Dickens pursued a career in theater. "Theater was where I felt the most comfortable." In 1993, the 150th anniversary of the publication of "A Christmas Carol," he was approached by a local charity about performing the work as a fundraising event. "It wasn't my idea. I wasn't that desperately interested in doing it, but agreed," he said.

Thanks in part to his family connection, he took the script Charles Dickens used for his readings rather than the actual book. "The book would take about three to four hours (to perform). He had edited it to about 90 minutes ...

"But as I started rehearsing, I realized the characters are so great for an actor to do. And the audience was so familiar, it became a real community effort. I got hooked on it."



Charles Dickens gave a reading of "A Christmas Carol" at Mechanics Hall in 1868. (THE ASSOCIATED PRESS)

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Dickens Returns to Worcester — "A Christmas Carol," with Gerald Dickens

When: 8 p.m. Sept. 21 **Where:** Mechanics Hall, 321 Main St., Worcester. **How much:** \$25-\$35; seniors and students, \$20. (508) 752-0888 or www.mechanicshall.org

He gradually expanded his Dickens acting repertoire to include other stories and novels.

Asked if he's ever put pen to paper, Gerald Dickens said, "I wouldn't dare. It's a pretty tough act to follow."

Why are we still reading him 200 years after his birth? "The things he was writing about are unfortunately just as relevant today," Gerald Dickens said. "The poverty gap. From the social criticism point of view, his messages are just as relevant. But that alone does not explain it. They were very good characters and very good stories."

Flush with the success of "Oliver Twist," "Nicholas Nickleby," "The Old Curiosity Shop" and "Barnaby Rudge," Dickens cut a handsome figure when he first came to America in 1842 for a five-month visit. Worcester was an early stop.

" 'A pretty New England town' was how he described it," Gerald Dickens said. "Worcester was a pleasure."

In his "American Notes" published after the 1842 trip, Charles Dickens noted of Worcester, "Every little colony of houses has its church and schoolhouse peeping from among the white roofs and shady trees; every house is the whitest of the white; every Venetian blind the greenest of the green; every fine day's sky the bluest of the blue."

Judi Vaillancourt said that Dickens didn't give any public readings in Worcester in 1842. It was more "a fact finding" visit, she said. He was the guest of Massachusetts Gov. John Davis, who lived on Lincoln Street. In Lowell, Dickens was impressed with the "model" textile mills, which offered a contrast to the harsh conditions of most English factories. But "American Notes" records his increasing disillusionment with America as Dickens headed West and South.

In 1868, as Dickens disembarked from his train at the Worcester depot that then was located between Norwich and Foster streets, some people who remembered him from his 1842 visit were shocked that the young, enthusiastic and clean-shaven writer they had known now looked old before his time, with his face lined, a grizzled beard and "thin wisps of grey hair were prudently gathered over places where there was none." For his part, Dickens was surprised that the pretty New England town now looked like part of the Industrial Revolution.

But at Mechanics Hall on March 23, Dickens discovered that agriculture was still important in these parts.

On the night of his reading, The New England Poultry Club was preparing for its annual three-day exhibition, which was to begin the next morning in Washburn Hall, below the Great Hall. When the gaslights were dramatically turned up before Dickens began to read from "A Christmas Carol," the cocks thought the sun was rising and began crowing.

"The roosters raised hell," Gary Vaillancourt said. Dickens raised the level of his voice. The cacophony lasted through the first hour of the reading

"He was in pretty poor health. He had probably suffered from a series of mini-strokes," Gerald Dickens said. His narrow escape from a catastrophic train crash in 1865 in England is widely regarded as having shattered his nerves permanently. In America, "He had traveled in one of the worst winters the eastern seaboard had ever seen, and he was really suffering.

"But once he got on the stage — bang, adrenaline took over," Gerald Dickens said. "He threw everything into it."

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For more information about this week's events, visit <http://valfa.com/dickens-returns>.

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