

TV Review: PBS Masterpiece Updates Charles Dickens' 'Great Expectations' with Stylish Remake

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 29, 2012 - 12:33pm

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CHICAGO – Very few pieces of fiction have had the proven staying power of Charles Dickens' "Great Expectations," which gets yet another adaptation in a two-week mini-series Masterpiece version, starting this Sunday, April 1st, 2012, on PBS. The mini-series has some flaws (mostly in the performance of its protagonist) but it proves again why this incredible tale has survived so many interpretations and is worth seeing for some striking production design choices, the strength of its incredible source material, and strong supporting performances, including a very memorable turn from Gillian Anderson.



TV Rating: **4.0/5.0**

Do teenagers still read "Great Expectations" in high school? I hope so. It's a fantastic book that has lost none of its thematic power. The story of a young orphan who has his life turned upside down by an encounter with an escaped convict and the interest of a wealthy widow looking for a friend for her lonely daughter has timeless lessons. It's been adapted into dozens of films and TV mini-series since its 1860 release. This version aired in the U.K. on the BBC between Christmas and New Year's over three consecutive nights. It airs on two here in the U.S. and, while it may not be a definitive version of the Dickens tale, it's worth a viewing for fans of the source material, British period drama, or any of the players involved. (I would recommend that you read the book or see David Lean's version before this one, for the record.)



Great Expectations
Photo credit: ABC

"Great Expectations" opens as orphan Pip (played as a young boy by Oscar Kennedy and later by Douglas Booth) encounters the disturbing, dirty, and bloody convict Abel Magwitch (Ray Winstone) in the marshes. Abel orders that Pip steal him a file and the boy brings him the tool to release his shackles along with some food. Instantly, this feels like a darker, more adult take on the story than some interpretations. As played by the visceral Winstone, Magwitch is terrifying and the marshes are cast in green fog that make them look downright supernatural. Director Kirk takes a gritty approach to the material that's refreshing in that it makes the piece feel less stuffy than other versions.



Great Expectations
Photo credit: PBS

After Magwitch is caught, Pip is brought into the life of the truly odd Miss Havisham (Gillian Anderson), a wealthy widow who wants him to be a playmate for her adopted daughter Estella (Izzy Meikle-Small as a child, later played by Vanessa Kirby). Unexpectedly, Miss Havisham does not become Pip's benefactor and instead pays for his apprenticeship with father figure Joe (Shaun Dooley).

Seven years later, a secret benefactor allows Pip the chance to live the high life. He is to move to London and change his social status, arriving with "Great Expectations." Who is his benefactor? Will he find love with Estella? Can a man move from an orphan to a blacksmith's apprentice to a gentleman in London? And how does that change a man to alter his life status so completely? "Great Expectations" is a fantastic piece about social structure, moral value, and how perception doesn't always dictate action.

From the 1917 silent film to this century-later mini-series, people keep remaking "Great Expectations," so how does this version stand out from the crowd? It has the aforementioned dark visual palette and some interesting production design that basically turn the story into something of a Gothic, especially with the loony performance from Anderson, an actress who raised a bit of controversy given that Miss Havisham is typically played by an older woman but who gives a very memorable turn here. She is almost mystical in her oddity, choosing to play Miss Havisham more as a mentally unhinged character than the vengeful spinster we've seen before. The supporting cast is filled with talented actors like Winstone and Mark Addy. It's a strong cast all around the edges.

Sadly, the center of the piece is its biggest flaw — Booth never quite registers as an interesting protagonist. Pip is a tough role given the way the people around him (and fate/destiny, if you will) kind of bat him around but Booth is too dull for the part. Kirby fares slightly better but this is a story that has often been stolen by the women who play Miss Havisham, and 150 years hasn't done a thing to change that fact.

"Great Expectations" stars Douglas Booth, Vanessa Kirby, David Suchet, Ray Winstone, Shaun Dooley, Mark Addy, and Gillian Anderson. It was adapted by Sarah Phelps and directed by Brian Kirk. It premiere on PBS on Sunday, April 1st, 2012.



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