



ANDREW DAVIES INTERVIEW

A star-studded adaptation of a literary classic

BLEAK HOUSE

on MASTERPIECE THEATRE

Sundays, January 22 through February 26, 2006 at 9pm on PBS

LOOK WHO'S TALKING:

GETTING HIS HOUSE IN ORDER - ANDREW DAVIES

by Rob Driscoll

King of the adapters Andrew Davies talks about tackling his biggest project to date – MASTERPIECE THEATRE's epic six-part mini-series of *Bleak House* – and admits Dickens' labyrinthian plotting has almost got the better of him.

He has been dubbed the prince of period adaptations, thanks to ratings grabbing successes like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wives and Daughters*, *Daniel Deronda* and *Doctor Zhivago*. But screenwriter Andrew Davies insists he is just as happy transferring more contemporary fiction to the small screen – and often has done, notably with the Kingsley Amis novel *Take a Girl Like You*, plus the masterful political black comedy *House of Cards* and its two sequels. He also contributed to the two *Bridget Jones* movies.

Bleak House is the latest of Davies' conveyer belt workload, which never seems to diminish, even for a man in his late sixties. Surprisingly, this is his first-ever Dickens adaptation. His next jobs will be adapting Alan Hollinghurst's 2004 Booker Prize-winning novel *The Line of Beauty*, set in the eighties, and Jane Austen's *Sense & Sensibility*, published in 1811.

When it comes to period dramas, Davies is generally regarded as the master. His 1994 adaptation of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* seemed to bring literary costume romps back into favor and paved the way for his takes on *Moll Flanders* (1996), *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, *Vanity Fair* and *Wives and Daughters*, plus two lesser-known Anthony Trollope novels, *The Way We Live Now* and *He Knew He was Right*. Then of course there was his controversial adaptation of bodice-ripper *Moll Flanders*.

But adapting *Bleak House* has been a very different kettle of fish for Davies. The sprawling cast includes former *X-Files* star Gillian Anderson, Alun Armstrong, Charlie Brooks, Warren Clarke, Pauline Collins, Philip Davis, Charles Dance, Matthew Kelly, Alistair McGowan, Nathaniel Parker, Hugo Speer, Liza Tarbuck, Johnny Vegas and Timothy West.

This is the first adaptation of *Bleak House* since the much-praised 1985 MASTERPIECE THEATRE version, which starred Diana Rigg. For Davies, adapting the novel about

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injustices of the 19th century English legal system has been a mixed blessing.

“On the plus side, Dickens gives you such strong lines of dialogue and there are all these wonderful, grotesque characters you can really run with,” says Cardiff-born Davies.

“But plot-wise it’s a nightmare, because it is so convoluted and keeps spinning off into sub-plots. Your main concern is to keep focused on the central plot, that the whole audience can follow. In truth, when you get down to the finest detail, quite a bit of the plot doesn’t work, so you have to straighten things out. But every problem is an opportunity in disguise and I think we’ve cracked it.”

Davies’ next task is adapting of Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* for a three-part BBC serial. “Alan doesn’t like me saying this but it’s a little bit like *Brideshead Revisited*,” says Davies. It is about a young gay man who in 1983 moves in with this glamorous family, the father of which is an up-and-coming Tory MP in Thatcher’s government.

“He goes through the whole thing of great hopes, money-making, drugs, parties, and in the end gets blamed for everything that goes wrong,” he says. “The other thing is, it’s also a picture of the eighties from the point of view of a young gay man coming out, the euphoria of falling in love, and also the tragedy of AIDS.”

Davies might even have to write scenes featuring Margaret Thatcher. “I’ve not yet decided how we’re going to do that,” he muses. “In the novel, Thatcher comes to a party at the house, which is a big triumph, and our hero dances with her. But that might just be a bit overwhelming for viewers.”

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