

PRESS RELEASE

Judi Dench in

RETURN TO CRANFORD

on MASTERPIECE Classic

Hosted by Laura Linney

Sundays, January 10 and 17, 2010 at 9pm ET on PBS

The sleepy English village that captured the hearts of MASTERPIECE viewers in 2008 reawakens with two enchanting new episodes, based on the stories of Victorian-era writer Elizabeth Gaskell, on *Return to Cranford*. The MASTERPIECE Classic season premiere airs Sundays, January 10 and 17, 2010, 9 to 10:30pm ET on PBS (check local listings).

Dame Judi Dench (*Quantum of Solace*, *Mrs. Brown*) heads a distinguished cast in this sequel to the Emmy- and BAFTA-nominated miniseries, *Cranford*, acclaimed as “moving and wonderful” (*Daily Variety*), “extraordinary” (*The Boston Globe*), and “a glorious feather in the bonnet of British drama” (*LA Weekly*). [MASTERPIECE Classic will repeat the original six-hour miniseries starting Sunday, December 20 on PBS.]

In *Return to Cranford* Dench reprises her role as the kindhearted Matty Jenkyns, bringing viewers up to date—at least as far as 1844—on the surprisingly engaging doings around Cranford, which is reluctantly coming to terms with the wrenching social change brought by the industrial revolution.

Also returning are Matty’s closest friends, including manic town gossip Octavia Pole (Imelda Staunton, *Harry Potter*, *Vera Drake*), cow fancier Mrs. Forrester (Julia McKenzie, who plays the title role in *Miss Marple*), self-styled aristocrat Mrs. Jamieson (Barbara Flynn, *Poirot*), and endearing eccentric Augusta Tomkinson (Deborah Findlay, *Vanity Fair*).

More of Britain’s top actors play newcomers to Cranford, including Jonathan Pryce (*Pirates of the Caribbean*), Celia Imrie (*Bridget Jones’s Diary*), Lesley Sharp (*Poirot*), and Tom Hiddleston (*Wallander*).

Based on the village where Elizabeth Gaskell spent much of her childhood in the early 19th century, the *Cranford* stories recount the merriment, romances, absurdities, and tragedies that affect all classes in an insular Cheshire community, proud of its traditions, although no one knows quite how they came to be.

Gaskell's nostalgic ode to small-town life combines the love interests of Jane Austen with the social consciousness of Charles Dickens, who was Gaskell's close friend and mentor as a writer.

The original *Cranford* miniseries closed with the railway from Manchester stopped just short of town, due to the refusal of local land baron Lady Ludlow (Francesca Annis, *Wives and Daughters*) to sell part of her estate for the right-of-way. With the villagers rescued from the encroaching iron horse, the series sewed up other subplots with a mixture of happy and bittersweet endings—some of which begin to fray alarmingly in *Return to Cranford*.

For one, the impoverished lad who was made rich by a bequest from Lady Ludlow's steward is in danger of being swindled out of his fortune. Harry Gregson (Alex Etel), fresh home from a grueling experience at boarding school, is a tempting mark for Lady Ludlow's dissipated son, Septimus (Rory Kinnear, *Mansfield Park*), newly arrived from Italy, who has an odious plan to pay off his considerable debts.

Not to mention, the railroad is a force that apparently can't be stopped. When a new plan to lay track into Cranford rears its head, Mattie consults her conscience and decides, in the words of her sister Deborah's guiding biblical passage, "Examine all things. Hold fast to what is good." Before long, Matty has roused the community for a most surprising excursion.

Then there is Mrs. Forrester's cow, who has a starring role in wrapping up the gloriously proliferating plots of *Return to Cranford*—among them that there are new couples to be married off and tradition-bound adults to try to stop them.

Some things never change.

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Return to Cranford is a BBC/WGBH coproduction in association with Chestermead Ltd.. It was created by Sue Birtwistle and Susie Conklin, written by Heidi Thomas and directed by Simon Curtis. The executive producers are Kate Harwood for the BBC and Rebecca Eaton for WGBH. *Return to Cranford* is based on Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Cranford*, woven together with other of her works. BBC releases the DVD set of *Return to Cranford* on January 19, 2010.

MASTERPIECE is presented on PBS by WGBH. Rebecca Eaton is executive producer of the series. Public television viewers provide funding for MASTERPIECE. Laura Linney is the host of MASTERPIECE Classic.

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