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THE VERY DICKENS!

One-Man Charles Dickens Show Goes on the Road in 2011-12

Created by Gaen Murphree and Neil Flint Worden, *The Very Dickens!* premiered in a workshop production at the Town Hall Theater in Middlebury, June 2010. Murphree adapted and directed the one-man show, which features Worden as Charles Dickens performing selections from *David Copperfield* and *Nicholas Nickleby* and embodying an entire cast of characters.

The piece received a huge boost in August 2010 when it was awarded a grant from the Vermont Arts Endowment Fund of the Vermont Community Foundation.

Based on Charles Dickens' 1868 tour of America, where he performed his work to rave reviews and ecstatic audiences, *The Very Dickens!* began a number of years ago when Murphree worked on *A Christmas Carol* at San Francisco's award-winning American Conservatory Theatre. "That's when I learned about Dickens's lucrative side career as a performer of his own stories," says Murphree. "The 19th century had lots of professional elocutionists, and many novelists read their work to genteel audiences, but Dickens ended up creating a whole new genre. He didn't just *read* the words, he *became the characters*, he made the stories live and breathe on stage. Audiences went bananas. Dickens was hailed as 'the greatest reader of the greatest writer of the age.' We have Mick Jagger and Lady Gaga, they had Charles Dickens."

Dickens began reading tours in earnest in April of 1858. At about the same time he left his wife, Catherine, by whom he'd had ten children, causing a huge public scandal. For the next 12 years, until his early death at 58, Dickens fought publicly with his estranged wife and alienated many of his former friends and supporters. He lived a secret double life as the mystery lover of a young actress half his age. The more he toured and performed, the more the audience's adulation and adoration became like a drug to him. His health started failing but he couldn't get enough. Many believe the exhausting demands of touring drove him to an early grave.

Murphree's fascination with this often lurid tale inspired her to begin reading and re-reading her way through the Dickens oeuvre and the mountains of Dickens research. When Worden came on board, the two started by reading Dickens' own performance versions around the kitchen table. Things started to click.

"Dickens is like the 19th-century Shakespeare, his language and characters are so rich," says Worden, "and

getting to portray both Dickens and this array of characters is an amazing challenge for an actor. In fact, as a 'mature' actor, this was exactly what I needed to inspire the sense of wonder about character that all actors share and Dickens had in spades throughout his life."

"We learned a lot from our June workshop at Town Hall Theatre," adds playwright/adaptor Murphree, "and I've been revising ever since. It's still very much a work in progress. We are thrilled to be a part of Winterfest at Lost Nation Theater and honored to be alongside the other wonderful performers. It's a great opportunity to get back in front of a live audience and see what we've got. We're especially pleased that Jeff Salzburg has agreed to do our lighting design."

Over the long run, the duo envisions *The Very Dickens!* as having a variable bill like Hal Holbrook's famous *Mark Twain Tonight*. They plan to focus initially on touring New England and then build an audience nationally.

"Right now, we're still at the beginning of the process," says Worden. "We're using these next three Vermont venues to learn from our astute audiences up here about the piece's strengths and weaknesses. We won't have a complete script until this tour's feedback shapes it live onstage."

Worden and Murphree are longtime colleagues from the prestigious University of Washington School of Drama. A veteran of over 200 performances, Worden recently appeared with Olympia Dukakis in *Another Side of the Island*. Other favorite roles include Claudius and Henry IV at the Utah and Wyoming Shakespeare Festivals, respectively, Louis XIV in *Las Meninas* at the San Jose Repertory, and El Tigre in *Spain* at Half Moon Theatre, of which he is a cofounder. Before coming to Vermont, Worden ran the acting program at Vassar College. Murphree has worked in such diverse theatres as the American Conservatory Theatre, the Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Seattle Repertory Theatre, the Intiman Theatre, the Tacoma Opera, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Directing credits include Kevin Kling's raccoon-boy fable, *Lloyd's Prayer*, and an all-women *Hamlet* at Marlboro College. Her first play was produced at the Actors Theatre of Louisville.

The Very Dickens! is available for booking at colleges and community and arts venues throughout New England and the United States. This highly adaptable one-man show can be performed almost anywhere -- from the largest, most well-equipped theatre to your living room.