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### The 2015 Dickens Universe

Climate change was on the minds of many of the attendees at the 2015 Dickens Universe, held August 2-8 at College Eight at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Rather than the cool mornings and warm days Santa Cruz usually provides, there were cloudy afternoons and even a late-week rainstorm.

With 250 people in attendance, registration has remained steady over the past few years, thanks in part to the 2011 *New Yorker* article about the event by this year's keynote speaker Jill Lepore of Harvard University. This year, there were more faculty and graduate students, with 130 participants from the general public. The number of universities affiliated with UCSC's Dickens Project continues to grow, with 45 universities in the consortium from across the U.S. and overseas, and others expressing interest.

This is the Dickens Universe's 35th year, and it's been more than 30 years since the Universe treated *Martin Chuzzlewit*; *American Notes* has never been discussed at this forum. This year, an adjunct conference titled "The Long, Wide 19th Century" preceded the week-long Universe, running from July 31 to August 2. On Sunday evening, Dickens Project Director John Jordan segued from one conference to the next by quoting Project co-founder Murray Baumgarten, saying, "Dickens is the railroad station through which everything in the 19th century passes." He amended that statement by saying that Dickens is also the "port"

through which everything passes. The Universe, he said, is a scholarly conference, but “It’s also a place where we come to have fun.” Most conferences, he said, last just two to three days, but this can be thought of as a “residential” conference—and as a summer camp.

Jordan introduced John Bowen of the University of York and Jim Adams of Columbia, who worked together to organize this year’s Universe. He also acknowledged Ed Eigner and Murray Baumgarten, the Project’s co-founders, and the Friends of the Dickens Project, led by President Dan Atwell. He then introduced the Sunday evening speaker, Jill Lepore, who is the David Woods ’41 Professor of American History at Harvard University and a *New Yorker* staffer whose 2011 visit and subsequent writeup of the event, Jordan said, “has done more to publicize the Universe than anything we could do.”

### **An Escape to America**

Lepore’s talk, “Pickwick in America (The Burden Whereof is, ‘Hail Columbia’)” included the results of her meticulous research into letters and other documents from, to, and about Dickens related to his first American visit. Dickens, she said, was in a sense “escaping” to America on this first trip; he was being “pursued by his publishers” and was beloved in America, so he thought he would find something very different there than he did.

There was, Lepore said, a new opposition to abolition in America at the time of Dickens’s visit. The two people he came to know best in America, Charles Sumner and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, were both ardent abolitionists. Longfellow, in fact, visited Dickens in England in September 1842 and brought *American Notes*

back with him to be published, saying in a letter to Sumner, "He has a grand chapter on slavery." Yet Dickens's reaction to America in general and slavery in particular was that, as he wrote to Macready, "This is not the republic I came to see."

Lepore followed Dickens's trip down the Eastern Seaboard, listing the people he met, their reactions to him, and his impressions of them in letters to friends. She also covered the reactions to *American Notes* in U.S. papers and magazines, of which, she said, he was "painfully aware." In fact, she said, it was surprising that he would set his next novel in the United States. But *American Notes* and the resulting American chapters in *Martin Chuzzlewit* turned out to be, Lepore suggested, a turning point in Dickens's writing, ushering in his more serious novels.

After each evening lecture, attendees were invited to attend a film screening of the BBC's 1995 version of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, shown in parts. Some, however, chose to retire to catch up with friends or to sleep, in preparation for the 8:30 morning sessions that started Monday morning.

To start the day, attendees from the general public are always assigned to faculty-led contextual discussion groups; we attended the one led by Margaret Loose of UC San Diego and Rochelle Almeida of NYU. These two leaders traded off throughout the week talking about a quantity of topics that interested the Victorians and that gave context to both *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *American Notes*: travel writing and travel art that attempted to bring travel to people, politics, the class system in England vs. slavery in America, women's legal status, and so on. And, of course, there is also the rich input from the group members themselves, some of whom were extraordinarily well-read in Victorian history and culture.

### **Graduate Student Activity**

Last year, the Universe moved from its packet full of loose handouts to a sophisticated glossy brochure that is distributed to all registrants, and for members of the general public, this full schedule affords a glimpse into the rigorous instruction involved in being a graduate student at this conference. Smiling servers of libations at the nightly post-prandial potations and the eager question-askers after each lecture, the graduate students are housed in other quarters and attend a different set of activities from the general public, including afternoon faculty-led seminars, and professionalization seminars, all taught by faculty members. A peek at some of the seminar titles in the brochure shows us that these students were treated to afternoon seminars called “Shapes of Dissertations,” led by Catherine Robson of New York University and Teresa Magnum of the University of Iowa; “Publication,” led by Jonathan Grossman of UCLA and Peter Capuano of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln; and “Reviewing and Reporting,” led by Jim Adams of Columbia University and John Bowen of the University of York.

Carolyn Williams of Rutgers also led a “Publication” workshop in the late afternoon; Daniel Pollack-Pelzner of Linfield College in Oregon led a “Presentation” workshop in the mornings; Priti Joshi of the University of Puget Sound and Susan Zieger of UC Riverside worked with students on “Pedagogy”; and Renee Fox of UCSC and Jill Galvan of Ohio State led a “Writing” workshop. It’s little wonder that the graduate student attendance at the Universe is growing. The list of faculty members here gives a snapshot of the variety and prominence of the universities involved in

the conference, and of the diversity of training offered to graduate students during this one-of-a-kind experience.

### **Questioning the Beginning**

The 9:45 Monday morning lecture was given by Alex Woloch of Stanford, and was titled “Middle Dickens,” in which Woloch asked, “What *is* the middle of the novel?” What, in fact, is the beginning? The first chapter, with its discussion of the Chuzzlewit “pedigree,” is, he said, a “corruption in protocols of narrative beginnings,” and the delay in starting the story extends even into chapter 2. Woloch offered Todgers’s as the “inductive middle of the book,” saying that it might allow the reader a point of orientation. But there is still, he argued, a “delay” of information throughout the novel, as with the enigmatic Mary Graham.

Woloch’s talk cataloged peculiarities in the narrative and argued that there is a “middle state” throughout the book where things haven’t come together. And besides the “shifts and disjunctions” in the narrative, there is also a disconnection between the novel’s discourse and the novel’s form, Woloch said; in other words, between what actually happens and how the novel enables—or disables—us from discovering what happened. Is the end of the story, he posited, actually in the middle, in Martin and Mark’s return from America? For that matter, who is the “Martin Chuzzlewit” of the title, and whose story then is the novel? The elder Chuzzlewit is peculiarly passive throughout, yet, Woloch said, his actions are firmly connected to the narrative.

## **Onward and Upward with the NAI**

This year marks the second year that the Dickens Project has given its high school essay contest awards solely to students in USC's Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) program. Because general interest in the high school essay contest remained low, and the recipients of the award tended to be from elite schools, the Project decided to partner with the NAI to award scholarships in the form of registration and housing at the Dickens Universe to four NAI high school students and their teachers, this year Kate McFadden and Jacqueline Barrios. Barrios, who was instrumental in first submitting her students' essays to the high school contest and then in working with the Project's Jon Varese to set up the partnership, has been at the Dickens Universe before as a high school teacher and returned this year in two roles—a teacher and a graduate student, having started work on her own graduate degree in English at UCLA. On Monday afternoon, in lieu of the regular high school teachers' workshop, Barrios presented the story of the NAI to interested Universe attendees.

A tiny Latina in jeggings, a gray T-shirt, leather boots, and no makeup who kept pushing a stray lock of hair away from her eyes throughout her talk, Barrios might be taken for a high school student herself. But this dynamo has, as she says, blackmailed, bribed, and used her own personal partnerships to get the NAI program to work at USC, and to get her traditionally underprepared, underserved student population successfully into a university and beyond.

NAI has been in existence for 25 years and has an astounding 80% success rate. Its goal, unlike many "bridge" programs between high school and college, is not

only to get students into college, but to make sure they graduate. Students and their families from inner-city high schools in Los Angeles enter the NAI program after the sixth grade, and they commit to a heavy schedule of additional enhanced classes at USC, a four-hour Saturday academy, tutoring, and other workshops in addition to their high school classes. Meanwhile, the students' parents or guardians must commit to attend seminars that emphasize a positive learning environment in the home. At the seventh and eighth grade level, some students are channeled into another college prep program, and the high school group Barrios and McFadden work with becomes a smaller group. "You are able to create the students you want," Barrios said of the rigorous curriculum. Barrios and McFadden teach at South L.A.'s Foshay Learning Center, which was among the top high schools sending students to USC in fall 2014 (the other top schools were Loyola High, Palos Verdes High, and Harvard-Westlake High).

Barrios had never taught Dickens before someone told her about the Universe, but she took on Dickens the way she takes on everything else. The first year, she treated the high school essay contest merely as an exercise in writing essays about what the students were reading. The essays didn't win. But the essay readers in Santa Cruz saw something there, and they encouraged her. She decided to go for her own MA in English, and the second year, the essays were winning ones, thanks to her dedication. Says Barrios of the program, "You can throw as much money at it as you want, but if you don't have people on the ground, it won't work."

So how did she get a classroom full of largely nontraditional college aspirants to not only read, but write intelligently about, Dickens? For one thing, Barrios' group

is an AP English Literature class, different, Barrios said, from an AP English Language class, which focuses on argumentation and which is becoming the most popular AP test. “This might be the last time some of these people will read a novel,” she said, but the experience gives the students a “compendium of information that they need to navigate; it’s material that doesn’t necessarily hang together.” It gives them skills to interpret life, she said. But a Dickens novel? Barrios starts with passages and sometimes even single sentences, asking students to draw a picture of what they are reading. “It’s OK to jump around,” she said. She encourages journals, recommends videos, and even embraces *Cliff’s Notes*, guiding the students as they use them. But they do end up reading the novel, the purchase of which the Dickens Project funds so that all students in the class are reading the same edition. “Their struggle is your job,” Barrios said of the students’ introduction to Victorian literature.

In the end, some of the NAI students aren’t accepted at USC and end up going to a community college. But many of them are successful. “What’s relevant to them is their families,” Barrios said, so there are few who choose careers in the humanities. “Lots,” she said, “choose health careers,” and they intend to return to the neighborhoods they came from to improve lives. Essay contest winner MaryAnn Cabrales told us in that she plans to major in global health and eventually either attend med school or earn a PhD. Belen Espinoza plans to earn her BA and then her MA, and work for a nonprofit health organization.



**Yet More To Do**

In addition to the high school teachers' workshop, which continued throughout the week, three undergraduate and summer school student seminars were held, led by John Jordan of UCSC and Susan Lurie of Rice University; Murray Baumgarten of UCSC and Emily Finer of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland; and Monique Morgan of Indiana University and Summer Star of San Francisco State. Students who participated in these seminars included MaryAnn Cabrales and Belen Espinoza, the two NAI essay-contest winners who were able to attend this year; two community college essay contest winners (sponsored by the Thomas Savignano Scholarship), Corrin McCauley of Folsom Lake College and Chris Pitts of College of the Redwoods; returning community college essay contest winner Beth Hightower; and returning high school essay contest winner Natalie Kopp. The first community college essay contest winner, Joshua Commander, has returned to the Universe each subsequent year with his wife Krystl. There was also a "Dickensian Seminar" offered in the afternoons to anyone who wished to attend, led by Rob Polhemus of Stanford.

Each afternoon at 3:00, the lawn between the residence halls at the top of College Eight blooms with a Victorian tea party. The Friends of the Dickens Project braved alternating sunny, cloudy, and even windy afternoons this year to give the teas, served by honorary servers from the Universe faculty. Attendees can choose from iced tea punch served from crystal punch bowls and accompanied by fresh strawberries, or hot Earl Grey tea served from silver pots into china cups and accompanied by homemade tea cookies. At the same time, the Friends membership committee sets up a table with scrapbooks from previous years maintained by

photographer and historian Elizabeth Walker. The teas are a favorite event during the week, and a chance to sip and chat in a lovely setting.

After the teas, afternoon talks were held each day. Monday's was "I mean to make my mark with her': Mr. Dickens and Mrs. Gamp," by Taryn Hakala of UC Merced. On Tuesday, Wayne Batten, a high school teacher at Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville, read "The Art of Absence and Return in *Martin Chuzzlewit*"; Wednesday's talk was given by Nathalie Vanfasse of Aix-Marseilles University and titled "Neo-Victorian Cities and the Ramifications of Global Capitalism in Ayesha Menon's *Mumbai Chuzzlewits*," and on Thursday afternoon, Iain Crawford of the University of Delaware presented " 'Yield to the mighty mind of the Popular Instructor': Dickens, America, and the Press." On Friday afternoon, a panel titled "Performance Spaces" was moderated by Sharon Weltman of Louisiana State University and included papers by Becky Richardson of Stanford; Rob Jacklosky of the College of Mt. St. Vincent in Riverdale, NY; Taryn Hakala of UC Merced; and Patrick C. Fleming of Rollins College in Winter Park, FL (now at Fisk College).

On Monday evening, John Jordan officially announced the essay contest award winners for the year. The Savignano California Community College scholarship usually goes to just one student, but this year the judges could not choose between two of the essays and thus brought two community college students to Santa Cruz: Corrin McCauley of Folsom Lake College and Chris Pitts of College of the Redwoods. The high school essay contest winners, students of Jacqueline Barrios and Kate McFadden, were Belen Espinoza and MaryAnn Cabrales.

Four NAI essays were deemed as winners, but only Belen and MaryAnn could make the trip this year and thus received the student scholarships.

### **Through American Eyes**

Monday evening also saw the presentation of the yearly Herbert Furse Memorial Lecture, given by Elsie Michie of Louisiana State University. Elsie started with a quote from *Middlemarch*, saying that the Dickens Universe has an “incalculably diffusive effect” on everyone who comes here; it is, she said, “an experience that changes the lives” of those who attend. In her talk, titled “The Pleasure of Hating,” Michie drew heavily on Frances Trollope, and her title comes from critic William Hazlitt’s “On the Pleasure of Hating.” Hazlitt argued that if we had nothing to hate, we would never do anything, never produce anything, never move forward. In Dickens’s time, Michie said, it was no longer possible to write novels with the animosities and hatred Sir Walter Scott observed because legislation in England had changed and removed many of the problems Scott wrote about. “But you could,” she said, “displace antipathies across the Atlantic,” which is what she argued Dickens did. Going to America, with its slavery, helps Mark and Martin understand the relationship of master and servant in their own country. And how, in fact, did England balance its hatred of slavery and indentured servitude with its own class system? “Americans condemn the British social hierarchy,” Michie said, and in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Dickens “confronts his nation’s self-image.” Dickens’s American work often parallels Trollope, with much of *Martin Chuzzlewit* drawing its inspiration from her *Domestic Manners* satire.

## Welcome Endowment News

On Tuesday morning, John Jordan made an important announcement when he said that the Friends of the Dickens Project has reached the \$200,000 mark in its goal to create a \$1 million endowment for the Project. Such an endowment, Jordan said, would make the Project self-supporting in perpetuity. The University of California provides space and some administrative support, but it cut its academic funding several years ago.

Jordan then introduced Robert Douglas-Fairhurst of Oxford, and his talk, “The Comedian as the Letter C—Wit in *Martin Chuzzlewit*.” Douglas-Fairhurst opened with a Gary Larsen cartoon of a little dog hurtling toward a boarded-up doggie door while its mistress encourages it. This type of humor, Douglas-Fairhurst said, is socially acceptable, a sort of “stylized aggression” that expresses a level of overall discontent with civilization. And this idea of something being “funny because it is awful” intrigued Dickens, Douglas-Fairhurst said. Dickens wrote to Forster once saying that Americans were “destitute of humor,” and it may have been Dickens’s disappointment in the Americans that generated his comedy. “He tackles his anxiety with the comic underside,” Douglas-Fairhurst said, meaning that his comic response to America should have come as no surprise.

The choice of the name “Chuzzlewit,” Douglas-Fairhurst said, also comes as no surprise. “Wit” has a different meaning from “humor” (“mental sharpness and inventiveness” as opposed to “the quality of being amusing or comic,” according to the OED), but “wit” is what many of Dickens’s reviewers found notable in his work, and Douglas-Fairhurst offers that Dickens actually moves from wit to humor;

“Nothing can prevent humor in the end,” he said. Thus “Chuzzlewit” (Chuzzle being a slang term for cheating or defrauding someone). Within the novel, though, the potential for comedy is often “quickly squashed,” Douglas Fairhurst said, with Pecksniff being the clearest example of “comedy gone wrong. He takes himself so seriously he fails to see the joke.”

### **American Newspapers**

On Tuesday evening, Meredith McGill of Rutgers presented her paper, “Dickens and the Press of Philadelphia, or, What Mrs. Hominy Said.” She started with a brief history of the American publishing industry, saying that what Dickens saw in 1842 was very different from the America of his second visit, when he delivered his apology for *American Notes* and stated his renewed regard for the American press. In 1868, American newspapers existed in a new era of gentility, McGill said. But in 1842, when Philadelphia, not New York, was the center of American publishing, newspapers dissented against political power, society, international copyright, the banks, the elite, and so on. American newspapers also blithely reprinted British publications on crowded pages, some of which McGill provided as visuals for her talk.

Dickens traced his 1842 exposure to this radical American democracy through *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which he portrayed a “flattened social world,” where everyone is of high rank; there seems to be no serving class, as there was in England, because everyone was important. Although clearly English, Mark Tapley, she continued, is thus recognizable as an “American.” McGill did a close analysis of the scene in which Martin returns to find Mark ironically whistling “Rule Britannia” to a

former slave named Cicero outside the *Rowdy Journal* office. Her discussion of Mark Tapley led nicely to the next section of her talk, in which she posed the problem of “delivering moral condemnation in a novel that sets out to satirize moral condemnation.” Within his complex narratives in the novel, McGill, said, Dickens succeeds in hiding his own voice; Mrs. Hominy (possibly modeled on Frances Trollope) is a double both for Martin and for Dickens himself.

### **The Jordan-Stern Chair**

Before the Wednesday morning lecture, John Jordan made another well-received financial announcement. Thanks to two generous donations of \$250,000 each from John himself and participant Michael Stern, the University has made good on a promise to match the \$500,000 donation, creating a \$1 million fund to endow the Presidential Chair in Dickens and 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Studies at UC Santa Cruz. The person who is the director of the Dickens Project will also hold the Jordan-Stern Chair. John Jordan will hold the position until Assistant Professor Renee Fox, a former Universe graduate student and faculty member who was hired for Jordan’s faculty position last year, succeeds him as Project Director.

Ruth Livesey of Royal Holloway, University of London, then spoke on “Ruins Without History—Dickens and the Writing of Place from *Martin Chuzzlewit* to *Dombey and Son*.” Dickens, Livesey said, had the experience of being “out of place” on his first lengthy trip abroad. It moved him into a global arena unexperienced by Britishers traveling to India, in which case those travelers merely brought England with them. But there is a different sense of “place” in *American Notes* and in the American section of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, largely due, Livesey said, to a dichotomy

concerning the railroad. *Martin Chuzzlewit* is set, as many of Dickens's novels are, just before the railway—the monster that replaced the sedate, beloved stagecoach in Dickens's mind—took over England. Yet in America, the railroad is established. And while it has the power to “unmake settled places” in England in the Dickens novels in which it does appear, it is no help in making cities successful in America. Livesey outlined the history of Cairo, Illinois, the “real” Eden, with a number of visual accompaniments. Both it and Todgers's, she argued, are “highly localized labyrinths.” Yet Todgers's is an “intensely inhabited place” that echoes its generations past, unlike Cairo/Eden, which has no past and, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, no future. Ironically, she said, it was British bankruptcies that affected investments in Illinois and led to recession in America, a lesson in “what it takes to make place.” She likened the abandoned settlements on the Mississippi to ruins in Europe, presaging the future (she referenced the website [abandonedonline.net](http://abandonedonline.net), a compendium of once-bustling America now laid waste) and said, “The present is wide awake in America” in Dickens's works. The world in America is moving forward without hesitation; the scenes upon the return to in England in the novel are “a brake pushed down on the accelerating world.”

### **Banquo Was a Blonde**

Wednesday evening was a free evening, and many Universe attendees walked through the trees to see *Macbeth* at Santa Cruz Shakespeare. This production was well received even by traditionalists, although several roles, including the key role of Banquo, were cast as women. Banquo sported long blonde hair and form-fitting leather warrior gear, giving a memorable performance that was one of the

last in the wooded outdoor theater. Santa Cruz Shakespeare, no longer supported by the university, will move next year to a new location, possibly Delaveaga Park south of the campus. Those who did not attend the Shakespeare play either went downtown to sample Santa Cruz's boardwalk and restaurants or viewed the films offered at the Universe: two parts of Miriam Margolyes' "Dickens in America," a 10-episode documentary following Dickens's footsteps on his first trip. Also, a one-hour episode of the old *Bonanza* television show called "A Passion for Justice" was presented that explored the copyright issue rather evenly, once one got past the choice of Jonathan Harris (the iconic *Lost in Space's* perpetually nervous Dr. Smith) as Dickens, and his fictional visit to Nevada's equally fictional Ponderosa Ranch.

### **"Leaning In"**

The Thursday morning lecture, "Gathering and Scattering," was given by Jim Buzard of MIT and discussed various characters' ways of interacting with the novel and with the world it represents by "leaning in," as he termed it, or not. He started with the "sketchy gentleman," the Chuzzlewit relative who appears in the first family meeting and at Charity's wedding and is a sort of "outline man," Buzard says, representing a "truly disinterested posture." He takes no sides, advances no interest. Spottletoe, on the other hand, "leans in" to get what he wants, unlike the sketchy gentleman and Tom Pinch, who appear in illustrations as submissive. Tom, in fact, is "dwelling in an enchanted world," Buzard said, where he can fulfill his world himself, needing no one else. The only interest he expresses throughout the novel is in Mary, and his attack on Jonas (his only "leaning in") surprises even Tom.



Buzard also treated nature as an interactive force in the novel, and the force that scatters and gathers. At the start of chapter 2, the forceful late-summer sun gives way to a wintry night, and men in the forge “lean in” to fight back the night and the wind. The wind also sees the travelers off to America at the start of chapter 15, fighting the ship on which they sail. Is this illustrative, Buzard asked, of the “essential antagonism of civilization to nature”? And then there is the character and scenery of Todgers’s, and of London, both key forces in the novel, and here Buzard returned again to Tom Pinch, and his desire to ask directions of the “man in the monument.” Tom’s understanding of the city is, at least initially, that a ticket-taker at the bottom of a monument would know what the overall view was from the top, similar to that of the earlier visitor to Todgers’s roof—a detached overview.

### **Farewell to JoAnna**

In recent years, Thursday evening has been devoted to the year’s “farce,” a tradition begun by John Glavin of Georgetown University and now directed by Adam Abraham of Oxford. This year, an added bit of pageantry went on Thursday evening, as retiring Assistant Director JoAnna Rottke was celebrated. JoAnna, who had been rushed to a local hospital with a kidney stone earlier Thursday morning, was on hand, albeit a little woozy from painkillers, in party dress and sparklers. Acclaim and admiration for JoAnna’s twenty years of work with the Dickens Project came from Teresa Magnum, representing the faculty, who said that JoAnna is “inextricably entwined with the plots and characters of Dickens” and the one who holds the “key to the Universe”; from Dan Atwell, representing the Friends of the Dickens Project, who claimed that JoAnna had a “heart of gold”; from Antje Andersen, representing

the staff, who noted that we should treat JoAnna with the “reverence of a dowager monarch” as she retires to her dream of running a chihuahua ranch; and by the University itself, represented by Marissa Fullum-Campbell, a former Project staffer who said that JoAnna originally hired her as a “sherpa.” John Jordan, taking the microphone to give the final tribute, parried with his experience of working with JoAnna, saying, “Who’s the boss, and who’s the sherpa?” Jordan drew on one of his favorite Dickens’s quotes, saying, “Life is made of ever so many partings welded together,” at which point the unexpected and unbelievable happened—thunder and lightning crashed outside the Porter Dining Hall and the skies opened up to drench Santa Cruz with the rain California has been missing for years. Said JoAnna calmly, “I ordered that.”

JoAnna was presented with a “Georgina Hogarth Lifetime Award for Distinguished Service to Dickens,” a gift check that will assist in her retirement travels, and two standing ovations. Although this will be her last year at the Universe, she will not retire until the spring, and a search for her replacement will begin in October. On that thought, JoAnna thanked her admirers and concluded, “This is the best job on campus.”

The farce this year was titled “Chuzzlewit’s End—An American Tragedy,” and it opened in “Hollywood—the present,” with “I Feel Pretty,” from *West Side Story* being played on a piano on the stage. Hopefuls were pitching a film version of *Martin Chuzzlewit* to a Hollywood producer, with the help of live visuals—the Misses Pecksniff in white petticoats, a pink-haired Mrs. Todgers, and so on. This ensemble contracted and expanded to include Mrs. Gamp, who gave a speech that wandered

from Mrs. 'Arris to Mrs. Dalloway to Mrs. Robinson and then broke into a rendition of "A Spoonful of Sugar," while Mrs. Gamp decked the "real" Mary Poppins, who lay on the stage next to Jim Buzard's Anthony Chuzzlewit, who had played a death scene a little earlier. The producer immediately called for "The World According to Gamp," Mrs. Hominy swept onto the stage in a glittering sequined peacock gown, and "Martin Puzzlewit" and his sidekick Jorge Luis Borges entered to pirate the entire film. The cast commenced shouting, "Who you gonna call?" and were answered by the audience, "Lit critics!" The finale was an ensemble version of a Taylor Swift song to immense applause. One of the amazing features of the yearly farce is that it is built purely from scratch—Abraham collects volunteer actors at the start of the week, rehearsals are impossibly held while everything else is going on, and props and costumes appear from nowhere to create a credible stage presentation.

The evening's festivities were not yet over, for people made their way from the Porter Dining Hall to the annual Grand Party, sponsored by the Friends of the Dickens Project, where a grand time was had by all despite the surprising weather resulting in the loss of the lights, and attendees enjoyed cakes, savories, drink, and other delicacies.

### **Dickens as Prophet**

On Friday morning, the final lecture of the week was given by Rob Polhemus of Stanford: "Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit*, American Exceptionalism, and the Heritage of New Eden." Polhemus's fascinating research took the audience on a visual tour (thanks, he said, to Porter's tech whiz Rafferty, who also provided your reporter with her much-needed hearing-assisted devices each night AND served as

house manager for *MacBeth*) of what Polhemus called a “much deeper, blacker view of America than 20<sup>th</sup>-century readers saw.” In his research, Polhemus happened on a musician, Stace England, who had himself happened on the history of Cairo, Illinois, Dickens’s “Eden,” and had written a number of incisive songs covering Cairo’s infamous history—“Equal Opportunity Lynch Mob” was one of the songs Polhemus played for the audience. This view of Cairo, Polhemus said, is symbolic of the U.S. and of our “national fascination with tools of violence.” He feels that Dickens’s decision to send Martin and Mark to America was not to boost lagging sales of the novel, but to explode American hubris. We think of the post-WWII era and the Cold War as the time of American exceptionalism and pride, Polhemus said, but Dickens was way ahead of us, giving America a “defining prophetic view” of itself that is “deeply disturbing.” The history of slavery, he said, “did and does define America.”

As it has for a number of years, the Universe closed Friday evening with a Victorian dance featuring the Brassworks Band and dance instructor Angela Elsey. The dance was preceded by the final auction of the week (The Friends of the Dickens Project held silent auctions throughout the week during teas and post-prandial potations, but the final auction is always the big money raiser) and by the announcement of the book for next year, *Dombey and Son*. Next year’s conference is scheduled for July 31-August 6.