

The new David Copperfield movie is both more and less than Charles Dickens' original story : Director Armando Iannucci talks us through the big changes in his "contemporary" version of the classic novel - though you might be surprised how much just came from the text

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By [Huw Fullerton](#) in [Radio Times](#)
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10 In any adaptation from page to screen, changes must be made - and when (The Thick of It and Death of Stalin) director Armando Iannucci came to making [his movie version of David Copperfield](#) (starring Dev Patel, Hugh Laurie and Tilda Swinton among others), it was no exception (*Ausnahme*).

15 "We had to make narrative changes, because it's a very episodic and long book - and that's not a movie," Iannucci, who also co-wrote the film with Simon Blackwell, told [RadioTimes.com](#).

20 "The film had to have a life of its own in terms of a beginning a middle and an end."

25 But in the end, Iannucci's The Personal History of David Copperfield - the full title of Charles Dickens' novel - is actually a remarkably faithful (*treu*) adaptation. While some parts of the book are changed, truncated (*gekürzt*) or cut entirely, the film's great achievement is how well it nails (*festmacht*) the tone and humour of the original text, which Iannucci says was a key part of bringing the story to life.

30 "I wanted to preserve the spirit of the book," Iannucci said, "and also the freshness I felt of Dickens' humour, and the extraordinary relevance still (*noch*) of the issues.

35 "Not just homelessness and riches and poverty sitting side by side, and the burden of debt (*Schulden*), but those very modern issues of identity, imposter syndrome* and status anxiety. 'Am I alright? Will I be found out? Do I fit in? Who am I, really?'" (*Imposter Syndrome = *dass Leute sich wie Hochstapler vorkommen*)

40 In the finished film, viewers might struggle (*sich bemühen*) to separate Iannucci and Blackwell's changes from Dickens' original words, with the pair consciously (*absichtlich*) trying to ape the author's style. (*Wörtlich: nachäffen*)

45 "There are lots of new lines, and Simon Blackwell who worked on it is another huge Dickens fan," Iannucci told us. "And hopefully our dialogue doesn't jump out as being different from Dickens' dialogue, because we tried to stay faithful to his kind of style."

50 So far, they seem to have managed it (*geschafft*) - and in fact, some audiences have assumed (*angenommen*) some favourite lines are new inventions, when they were actually (*tatsächlich*) taken from the text itself.

“The lines that people quote, I keep going ‘Yeah, it’s in the book! We lifted (*klauten*) that from the book.’” Iannucci said.

55 “Dora does say ‘May I hold your pens? Pause... let me know when you need a new pen.’ You know, it’s all there! David really does become so besotted (*vernarrt*) with her that he just sees her face and curls everywhere he looks around him.”

60 Perhaps, though, these old lines land as new partially thanks to the directorial choices of Iannucci himself, who was keen to make the drama feel fresh and contemporary and unlike any period drama (historical drama) he’d seen before.

65 “I said to the crew, let’s shoot this like no-one’s ever done a costume drama before, and therefore there are no conventions as to how you go about it,” he said.

“And I said to the cast, don’t speak like you’re thinking you’re a Victorian - as in ‘Hello Sir, Doing All This With Your Voice.’ Just speak, just be yourselves.

70 “I wanted to kind of blow away any sense of there being cobwebs and dust. It’s set in 1840, but these people in it are in their present day. We should feel like people are living their lives now, rather than historically.

75 “There’s that terrible thing of when you see a period drama and someone picks up a book and it’s all covered in cobwebs (*Spinnengewebe*) and it’s yellowing,” he added.

80 “And you think - ‘But that book would just have been bought two months ago! That book hasn’t lain there for 160 years.’ And London at the time, it should feel like Manhattan! It’s at the height of the industrial revolution, it’s a big trading city, it’s an international city. So it should feel really bustling (*wuselig*).

85 “It should feel contemporary - but what I didn’t want to do was do a kind of artificially gimmicky (*effekthascherisch*) contemporaneity, like putting modern music in or setting it somewhere different. I wanted to be faithful to what the story was, but push these scenes, I think.”

90 The big idea, then, was to make changes primarily to how we see David Copperfield and period literary adaptations in general, rather than to the events of the book themselves - and overall it’s remarkable just how much Iannucci and Blackwell managed to fit in the finished film. (*Wieviel sie reinkriegten!*)

95 Sadly, though, not *everything* could conceivably be included, meaning some changes were inevitable (*unvermeidbar*). And while Iannucci says he tried to preserve as much of the world as he could, a few secondary characters ended up on the cutting room floor.

“I suppose the biggest one was Barkis, which everyone who are Dickens or David Copperfield fans would mention,” Iannucci said, referring to the stagecoach

100 driver best known for his catchphrase “Barkis is willin’”. (*Er sagt immer und immer von selbst selbst, dass er sie heiraten würde.*)

“But I sort of felt the story isn’t much other than that Barkis says he’s willing, and then he marries Peggotty. And then he kind of dies soon after. I mean he was in
105 some of the early drafts for quite a while, and then just having to pare (*schälen*) it down and make sure we weren’t shooting too long a film, I had to make some decisions.

“So Barkis went. But we tried to embody elements of his character in Dan Peggotty, Peggotty’s brother, played by Paul Whitehouse. So we put a little bit of
110 Barkis’ spirit there as well.”

David’s schoolfriend Traddles is also cut from the story - “Mr Dick mentions him in the film, but he had to go,” Iannucci says - though other figures, like David’s
115 eventual wife Agnes Whigfield (Rosalind Eleazar) actually end up with a slightly meatier role in this retelling.

“We were looking at some of the characters who maybe in the book felt slightly slight (*unbedeutend*), like Agnes in particular,” he said.

120 “I wanted Agnes to be more than a match (*Gegenstück*) for David, and be able to kind of match (*passen*) him line for line in terms of wit and ability. So you could see how they are actually (*in der Tat, tatsächlich*) made for each other.”

In the end, Iannucci says that making this film was a tightrope walk of paying
125 tribute to, tweaking (*kleine Veränderungen machen, justieren*) and adding a new perspective to what had always been a part of Dickens’ original David Copperfield. Of course, it’s not the book - a film never could be - but if he’s at least done it some justice (*dem Buch etwas gerecht gewesen*), he’ll be happy.
130 “I suppose there’s things you have to do to make it be a film that exists on its own merits (*hat eine Qualität für sich selbst*), and tells its own story I think,” he said.

“And I’m not expecting people to know anything about the book or the story, but
135 if at the end of the film it makes them go out and want to take a look at it, take out (*sich ausleihen*) some Dickens, then fantastic.”

The Personal History of David Copperfield is in UK cinemas now

<https://www.radiotimes.com/news/film/2020-01-27/david-copperfield-book-comparisons/>

140 *Das stand so, aber in Deutschland werden wir den Film im Herbst - wegen corona - sehen können.*

