

What the Dickens

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Format Description: A one-hour crime/adventure drama following different stories per episode.

Logline: Pilot; A criminal gang are stealing children off the street. A good living can be made selling children into servitude and indentured trades in the New Worlds. One young policeman, John Dickens, aware of the gang, stumbles into their glare by rescuing a kidnapped boy and with the help of his fearless and resourceful landlady alongside her savant daughter, must fight the gang to stop their trade... before they stop him.

Setting: Liverpool, circa 1860. Charles Dickens was a frequent visitor to the city of Liverpool, a place he called his 'second home'. He even spent a day as a special constable walking the beat of the toughest areas. This was the inspiration for this story.

Tone: Victorian in a contemporary style, atmospheric, humorous, character driven (in the vein of Miss Scarlet, Murdoch Mysteries, Ripper Street).

Main Characters:

John Dickens (20ish)

Tall, skinny, boyish, impulsive with a hero complex. Expelled from a private school for fighting and breaking his opponent's nose. He was defending another pupil from being beaten up by several others for being gay. Illegal to be so at the time, John never gave the school a reason for fighting – allowing the bullied boy to avoid prosecution. In doing so, John lost his place at Oxford University, which he was to take up that autumn. His father, incensed and ashamed of his son's behaviour, sent John away to "sort himself out". After some minor adventures, John ended up in Liverpool as a beat copper. John is a man of deep principle, a fighter against social injustice and is not afraid to stand by his beliefs.

Mary Shelley (late teens)

Daughter of, Martha, the Irish immigrant owner of the lodging house Dickens resides in, Mary has an allergy (real or imagined?) to the daylight, so lives her life at the other end of the day, giving her a different perspective of all that surrounds her. Very pale in complexion with a mop of ginger/red curls inherited from her mother, Mary is a scientific savant, with social skills which are poorly developed, having learnt them from the men who have occupied the rooms her mother has rented out for the past 10 years.

Mary inhabits the basement of the lodging house which she has turned into a lab with a corner given over to a cubby bed. Here, with a lack of daylight being the norm, she has invented various steampunk devices which will help her, and Dickens detect the undetectable as the series progresses.

Mary speaks Spanish, French and Italian fluently, is earnest, willing and fascinated by gore and is not the slightest bit squeamish.

Felipe (Pip Old Chap, a term which Dickens uses constantly annoying Felipe intensely)

A French/Moroccan boy of approximately 10 years of age. At the beginning of the series, Pip speaks no English. Pip is fast, agile, smart and street savvy but is unable to stop himself from getting into trouble. Kidnapped at the docks from his ship - where he is a cabin boy - by a gang selling children as slaves, Pip escapes and is rescued by Dickens. Mischievous but well meaning, Pip is fiercely loyal and honest. Martha takes him in and has him help her out around the house.

Martha Shelley (40's)

Mary's mother and landlady of the house. A big-hearted Irish woman. Her mop of ginger hair would seem to be the only thing she passed on to her daughter. However, Martha has been around the block more than once. Several husbands later and with many suitors, she owns her lodging house outright. Martha has aspirations of being a great in the theatre and still dreams of being famous in the West End and Broadway. She has 'The Gift' and reads Tarot Cards. You mess with this woman at your peril.

Synopsis

Episodes: 6 (season one)

Episode: 1 (Pilot)

Title 'Run for Your Life'

Liverpool, circa 1860. The Victorian's 'Gateway to the World'. From here all conceivable items that can be bought and sold are collected, packaged and shipped to every harbour in the known civilised world. The New Worlds of Australasia and the Americas are growing fast. Hungry and greedy these areas need workers and quickly and don't care how young they are or how they are acquired.

The docks are dark and dangerous places with all sorts of unimaginable crimes taking place meted out by the mighty, looked on by the weak and afraid. A handshake here... A purse of gold coins there... A known phrase spoken in winks and whispers... In one of those dark corners a disreputable trade is in full swing. Children as young as 5 or 6 are brazenly kidnapped, sent to the New Worlds and sold to the highest bidder upon arrival. No child is safe in the docks of Liverpool.

Into this realm steps Felipe (Pip). A 10-year-old French/Moroccan boy. A cabin boy to be precise, on his first voyage and berthed at his first port. The world-famous Port of Liverpool. It is big, bustling, noisy and full of life from all walks. Cautioned by his Captain to stay aboard, the mischief that resides in Felipe (Pip) persuades him that once around the docks will be fine. What could possibly happen??? He is from Morocco, a place not too dissimilar to Liverpool in terms of skulduggery. He knows the streets. Felipe (Pip) is unafraid.

How wrong could he be! A rough, dirty and calloused hand lands on Felipe's shoulder. Man handled by the very Devils his Captain forewarned him of, Felipe (Pip) struggles out of his jacket to his shirtsleeves and out of the clutches of the Devil and runs!

Hiding behind barrels and bales, Felipe (Pip) is found by Constable John Dickens. Taking Felipe (Pip) through the docks, they are confronted by three burly men who are intent on recovering their 'salvaged cargo'. With murder and profit in their hearts, they are not fazed by the gentlemanly stature and fearless nature of the man in the blue uniform.

But they should be.

To survive the brutalities of a private boarding education, John Dickens had schooled himself in martial arts and other forms of protection. Fighting older boys on a regular basis, living a life of cruelty had hardened John. He was afraid of nothing, and these three thugs will not best him, tossing the thugs one at a time into the cold, cold waters of the dock. A battle won, John and Felipe (Pip) head for safer territory until John can come up with a plan. They head to where John is lodging.

That night, in Martha's kitchen, in front of a roaring fire, full with the food Martha cooked for them, attention and discussion turns to what to do with Felipe (Pip). Martha tells John he is now a marked man. His colleagues will nothing to help him or help Felipe (Pip). John has stumbled into something so big and brutal; he is unlikely to be here by Christmas time.

Thinking he has brought trouble to Martha's door, John offers to leave and take Felipe (Pip) with him. Martha will hear nothing of it. She thinks of John as the son she never had. She also has eyes on him to marry her daughter Mary, but more about that later! Two quirky women of high intelligence and moral fortitude. These misfits recognised a kindred misfit in Dickens, when he appeared looking for lodgings. John is now family and by default so too is Felipe (Pip).

This crew of outsiders, heavily armed with street knowledge, bravery and brains adventure together in their fight for fairness and justice. Fighting to smash the child kidnap ring takes them from the dockside to the parlours of the monied as they search for the head of the snake.