

ARTS

TELEVISION EUNY HONG KORAL

Parade of passing stars brings this Dickens to life

can be annoying when programmes boast about big-name actors strutting their stuff; commentarily, in cameo parts; several NBC mini-series come to mind. But, in a BBC adaptation of *David Copperfield*, first released in Britain last Christmas, the parade of passing stars works.

That's how Charles Dickens handled his own characters, after all: they barge in, get in everyone's face, and shuttle out, leaving joy, misery, or confusion in their wake. (PBS. Airing in two parts on Sunday April 16 and Monday April 17, at 9pm. Check local listings.)

Imelda Staunton, best known in the US as Nurse in *Shakespeare in Love*, brings frenetic bounce to the role of Mrs Micawber, devoted wife of an eternal debtor. Maggie Smith is David's widowed aunt Betsy Trotwood.

When David is born, she reveals a lifetime of man-hating in the way that she utters: "How

is she?" To all who hear, she is determined to have a niece rather than a nephew.

David is played by the fresh-faced Ciarán McMenamin. His performance is flat, which seems oddly appropriate in this context — David is so busy building his character that he has neglected to find a personality.

A master-stroke in this adaptation is its depiction of the marriage between David and Dora, the fluff-headed daughter of his employer. The union is laden with disappointment, that least serious yet most numbing of marital afflictions. It is the sort of marriage that is quietly bad, rather than overtly tempestuous, and is difficult to describe in words or on film. Yet here it is

portrayed with subtle pathos, such that one is not sure whether to be sad for David when Dora dies.

Although this production was made for television, it was filmed using the letterbox format generally reserved only for wide-screen films. This has the charming effect of allowing more characters to appear in the same shot without the camera panning all over the room as if it were following a bouncing tennis ball.

It is a well-conceived touch, because the characters in *David Copperfield* exist relationally, not as lonesome Bergmanesque individuals. They do not have much of an interior life. Why should they? This is Dickens; what's more, it's television.

CNBC. Last year's episodes explored the business aspect to the hilt, and to detail them much further would be about as interesting as itemising deductions for one's income taxes.

This year's stories are bleak and profound Aesop-like fables, focusing on the characters' inability to change their natures. In one episode, Tony's lawyer advises him to take a desk job in one of his semi-legitimate businesses, which literally gives Tony hives. Getting back on the whacking rampage is the only thing that restores his serenity and complexion.

Additional complaints fall along the following lines, which appeared in a prominent online magazine: "It's evident from the

first episodes of the new season that the writers have lost interest in [Tony's wife] Carmela, which is a tragedy, because Tony's sister is an epic drag."

Nothing could be further from the truth. *The Sopranos* is the only mob story in recent memory that takes a serious interest in female character development. Diane Keaton's blanched-faced horror in *The Godfather* is a thing of the past. Instead, we learn from *The Sopranos* that some mob princesses are born, some are made, and some have it thrust upon them — but escape is not an option. Last year, Carmela tried to remove her family from mob life; this year, she threatened a Georgetown trustee into writing a college recommenda-