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DON MORRISON'S 2 Cents' Worth



So, OK, department stores get gussied up for Christmas—and the lucrative Christmas trade. So, OK, Dayton's long has led the local merchantile pack in the lavishness and imagination of its Yuletide displays—especially the elaborate block-long display of window scenes.

Dickens Village at Dayton's Is Enchanting

But this year Dayton's has quite outdone itself—and outdone any seasonal display I have seen elsewhere.

In a manner of speaking, the 1966 Christmas blast was forced upon the store. With the addition of kooky new "Mod" shops along Nicollet Av., the store had to eliminate the whole middle section of its show windows—and thus the possibility for its usual format. The alternative was to move the Christmas layout to the eighth floor auditorium. And, in doing so, the store obviously decided to go for broke.

The result is the "Charles Dickens Christmas Village." It is no less than enchanting, a product of two years' work and a quarter-million dollars—plus a caliber of craftsmanship, meticulous detail, imagination and taste without which the money expended would be visible only as gaudiness.

Packaged somehow into the auditorium space without seeming cramped are several blocks of old London town—about 20 buildings and store fronts with associated alleys and streets and squares, in each of which is a scene from Dickens' writings.

The buildings, the rooms, the furnishings and, of course, the characters all are drawn directly from the novelist's own artfully precise descriptions.

Leonard Shimota designed the exteriors of the wonderful old buildings, after reading through most of Dickens' works and making heavy use of research works that describe and picture actual structures the Master used as models. Shimota spent six months at the drawing board and, along with a crew of about 60, has been engaged in "hard production work" since last January.

While this was going on, Mrs. Gayle Blake—artist daughter of the late, noted U of M bacteriologist, Jerome T. Syverton, and wife of Robert Blake of the Guthrie Theatre publicity staff—spent a good part of the year "antiquing." In a capacious station wagon, she combed the entire region, searching out authentic furniture, utensils, even doors and mantelpieces, of the design and period appropriate to Dickens' time.

This collection of loot is fascinating—some of it beautiful, some of it suitably battered and meant for Dickens' slum people. A wonderful example is the toy shop of Caleb Plummer and his blind daughter, Bertha ("Cricket on the Hearth"), in which are antique toys and a tool chest full of real, use-worn implements at least 100 years old. Peg-gotty's cottage, made from a derelict boat hull ("David Copperfield"), has a kitchen hearth hung with similarly old cookware that shows its long service. All of the scenes are equally rich with authentica.

The life-sized figures were created by Tommy (she's a she) Rowland, a New York designer, and were animated by John Grice, who is here supervising their installation.

Tuesday night was busy-busy as final touches were put on the village for Wednesday's preview. One young woman was clipping the eyelashes of a character-figure; two others were trimming a beautiful Christmas tree outside the Micawbers' house; electricians were tinkering with the hidden mechanism that makes Caddy Jellyby do an out-of-step pavane at the Turveytop Academy of the Dance; carpenters still were hammering on Marshalsea Prison, and Mrs. Blake was still arranging antique settles and firkins and alepipes and gout-stools.

Dayton's traditional Christmas sidewalk show (except for two windows) is no more, but the new one amply rewards a trip upstairs by young or old. If it also rewards Dayton's, as it doubtless will, I shall not say the establishment does not deserve it this year.

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