

The Invisible Woman (2013)

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 51 min.

Our content advisories (1-10): Violence 3; Language 4;
Sex/Nudity 4.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'

Matthew 5:27

*Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

Isaiah 58:6-7

The Charles Dickens in director Ralph Fiennes' new film is not the Great Author that we were taught about in high school, but instead a man with human foibles balanced by noble impulses. The script by Abi Morgan, based on the novel *The Invisible Woman* by Claire Tomalin, goes into the details of society's "whisperings" about the affair that Dickens (Fiennes) carried on with Ellen "Nelly" Ternan (Felicity Jones) during the last 13 years of his life. From recent reading on Dickens' life, the film seems fairly factual to me, and in Ralph Fiennes' capable hands it certainly is restrained, unlike the lurid bodice ripper that Hollywood might have turned out.

Beginning years after the author's death in mid 1870, the film moves back and forth in time, beginning in 1857 with the arrival in Manchester of Frances (Kristin Scott Thomas), an actress with three grown daughters to participate in a play that Dickens is starring in and co-producing with his faithful friend and collaborator Wilkie Collins (Tom Hollander). The youngest daughter Nelly has also been engaged to be in the play, based on Dickens own tragedy *The Frozen Deep*.

From the very start Dickens is impressed by Nelly's poise and intellect. He is emotionally distant from his wife Catherine (Joanna Scanlan), who has little left to offer him after the exhausting years of giving birth to their ten children. Thus as he interacts with the Ternans in their dramatic ventures and mingles socially with them, he finds himself drawn closer and closer to Nelly, even though he is 25 years her senior. Frances becomes aware of this mutual attraction.

Dickens eventually separates from his wife, but he can never openly marry Nelly—nor even be seen alone with her in public. One's reputation in those strict days was paramount to maintaining a place in society. In a harrowing scene toward the end of the film, the couple is returning from a trip to Paris when their London-bound train goes off the rails at a bridge, except for their carriage which still is badly damaged and its occupants ejected onto the ground. A rescuer asks the battered Dickens if he is traveling alone, and after the bruised Nelly signals him, he says that he is alone. She is shaken but relatively in good shape, so he moves on to help rescue the really injured victims.

Six years after her lover's death, Nelly marries a younger man George Wharton Robinson (Tom Burke), but as we see, her feelings of loss mixed with guilt prevent her from being close to her husband. Fortunately into her life comes the Rev. William Benham (John Kavanagh), who is a keen and wise observer. She finally gives in to his gentle invitations to open up her heart. He proves true to his word, that he will

not judge her.

Nor does the film judge Charles Dickens, despite his violation of the strict Victorian code. It would be easy to do so: He certainly does not do well by his wife Catherine (though in his will he did provide for her). She discovers his affair when an expensive bracelet bought for Nelly is sent to her by mistake, along with a note that he wrote. In a sad scene she calls on Nelly to give the bracelet over to her rival, telling her that she has come because her husband ordered her to do so.

And yet the other side of Dickens is also shown: He was a great advocate for the poor and downtrodden. Not only did he reveal their plight to the public in many of his novels, but he also donated his time and money to raising funds for hospitals and other charities. I suspect that the Lord who refused to condemn tax collectors and fallen women has embraced this generous man who also looked upon the multitudes who "were like sheep without a shepherd."