

House Proud

Dickensian London comes to life in all its authentically grimy glory in the BBC's *Little Dorrit* – thanks to production designer **James Merifield** and his team

It's not easy being a set designer. Gone are the days of flimsy cardboard sets held together with gaffer tape – with high-definition TV you just can't get away with it today. This autumn's lavish Dickens dramatisation, *Little Dorrit*, has to look picture perfect, from costumes' distressed velvet to the authentic-looking oak beams. And production designer James Merifield (pictured right) is expert at delivering just that. Originally trained as a theatre designer, he impressed director Ken Russell so much with his first set, designed for the National Youth Theatre, that he was headhunted at the age of 26 to work on Russell's operas for the stage and film. Merifield has since worked on high-profile TV dramas,

including *Sense and Sensibility* (2008) and *Dracula* (2006), as well as feature film *The Walker* starring Lauren Bacall (2007) – which, though set in Washington DC, was mostly filmed in a cowshed on the Isle of Man.

So how do you go about creating a "look" for a costume drama? "I like to start from paintings," says Merifield. "I go to the National Gallery to see the paintings of the period, then use their influence to help colour the design."

Once the general ideas are in place, Merifield and his team – mainly art director Paul Ghirardani and buyer Debbie Wilson – start sourcing props. They had a props budget for *Little Dorrit* of £60,000. "We spent six

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS
Bolts of material (below) for Mrs Clennam's fabric shop are covered in dust by mixing button polish with water, which reacts to create a thick patina



The Entrance

The pair of stone lions flanking Mrs Clennam's front door (above, right) have seen better days – one has a mangled leg with a rusted iron framework showing through. Far from being disappointed that the pair weren't perfect when he found the lions at a market, production designer James Merifield leapt on them. "I had the front built around them," he says. "They tell the story of old majesty!"

weeks visiting antiques fairs up and down the country," he says. "Then I built the set around what we found. It's an approach that works for me – finding things first-hand leads me in directions I would never have thought of. And the bonus is, these props have never been seen on TV before."

Using scale models, Merifield creates sets for construction expert Kevin Harris to build at Pinewood Studios. So which was the most challenging? "No question about it – the Clennam house [main picture]," says Merifield. "Nothing's straight, doors don't fit and there's water coming through the ceiling." The rickety old house lists to the side, with uneven floorboards and a leaning staircase (see overleaf). Towards the end of the series, the script demands that the building collapses completely. To achieve this, it was built

with a split down the middle, which was rigged with explosives. The prospect of seeing all his hard work blown up doesn't bother Merifield. "It's exciting," he says. "I'm really looking forward to it. We're going to have champagne on the day it all comes down." **Laura Dixon**

LINKS

For cast photos and our RT blog, see www.radiotimes.com/little-dorrit
Also: www.bbc.co.uk/drama

"I built the set around props we found at antiques fairs"

BARGAIN CORNER

The faded green and gold tester, or canopy, was found leaning against an old transit van at a market by the props team

FACT FILE

WHAT IS IT?

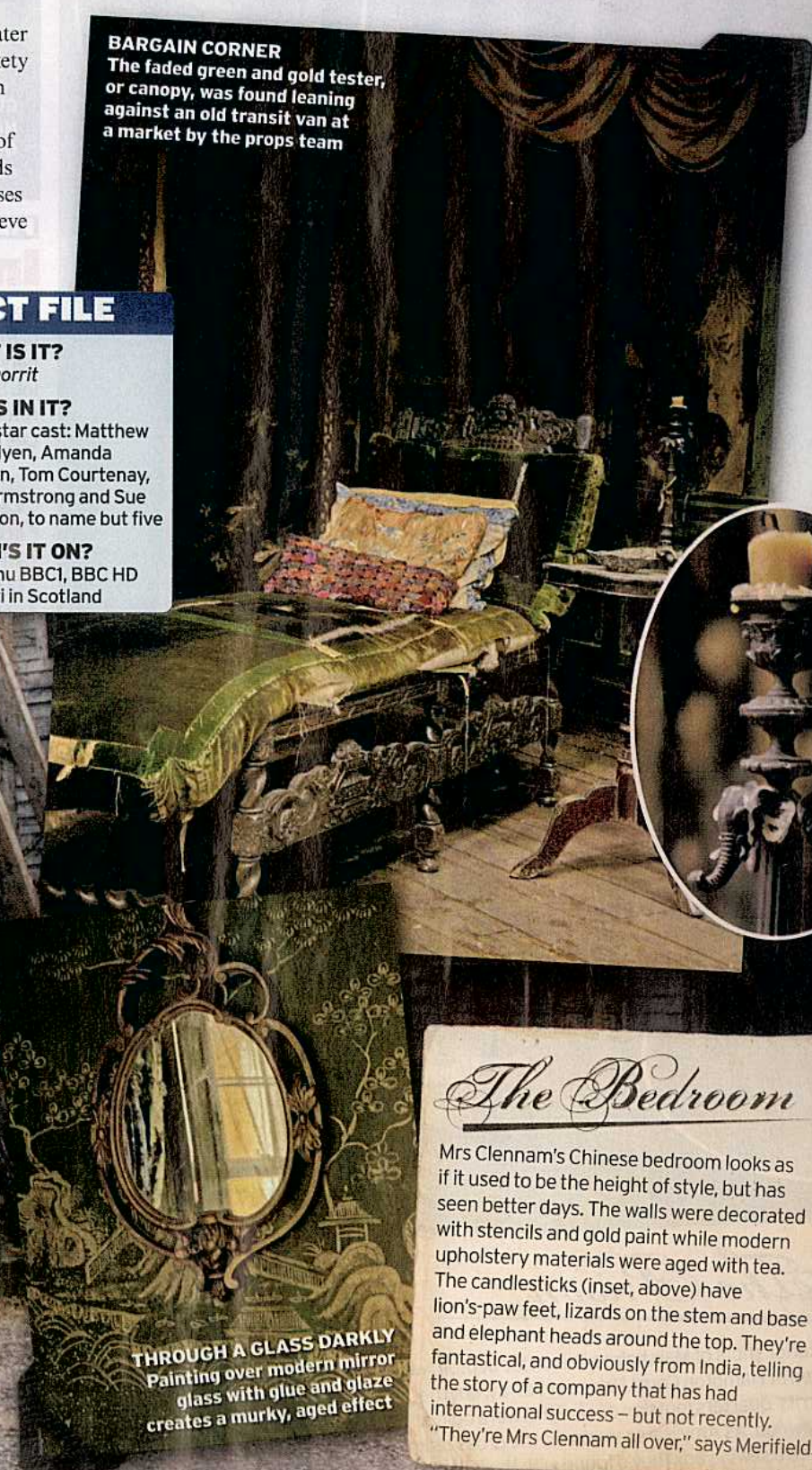
Little Dorrit

WHO'S IN IT?

An all-star cast: Matthew Macfadyen, Amanda Redman, Tom Courtenay, Alun Armstrong and Sue Johnston, to name but five

WHEN'S IT ON?

Wed, Thu BBC1, BBC HD
Wed, Fri in Scotland



VICTORIA BROOKS

The Bedroom

Mrs Clennam's Chinese bedroom looks as if it used to be the height of style, but has seen better days. The walls were decorated with stencils and gold paint while modern upholstery materials were aged with tea. The candlesticks (inset, above) have lion's-paw feet, lizards on the stem and base and elephant heads around the top. They're fantastical, and obviously from India, telling the story of a company that has had international success – but not recently. "They're Mrs Clennam all over," says Merifield.

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY
Painting over modern mirror glass with glue and glaze creates a murky, aged effect