



TCM BREAKFAST CLUB SCREENING

Oliver Twist | 1948

Directed by David Lean

Newly-restored for this year's London Film Festival at the NFT, Oliver Twist was a landmark British movie of the immediate post-war period. It is TCM's first sponsored Breakfast Club screening at Cornerhouse. TCM writer David Humphrey gives his viewpoint.

Oliver Twist, David Lean's 1948 version of the Dickens classic, mirrored the brooding solemnity of a nation exhausted and near-bankrupted by six years of war; away from the picture palaces, austerity endured, with unrelenting rationing and, in a cruel twist, the aftermath of one of the worst winters on record. The movie opened as it intended to go on, with the eponymous hero's pregnant mother struggling through a storm in a pathetic bid to reach shelter in order to give birth to him. Thus this masterpiece of British noir and nuance, which would have chimed with many people whom a Victorian childhood was a painful memory, announced its arrival.

Nearly six decades after it was made, Oliver Twist, newly-restored by the BFI National Archive and Granada International, remains as powerful as ever and a magnificent testament to the genius of Lean, just 40 when he made it. He had acquired a

workmanlike reputation with both the public and his peers in the film industry after a succession of stirring war movies, notably in *In Which We Serve* (1942). Now he turned his attention to the squalor of mid-19th century London, the seedy setting for Dickens' painfully-observed tale of Oliver's progression from workhouse to the mean streets of the capital and its ravenous, thieving underclass.

Lean had already established his credentials for cinematic adaptations of Dickens with *Great Expectations* two years earlier, in 1946, and *Oliver Twist* shared many of its qualities: both were filmed in black and white, reinforcing the harshness and cheapness of life in Victorian England; each stripped away the sentimentality only those of more privileged rank could attach to this era when the vast majority lived lives of unremitting despair and deprivation.

Quirkily of its time, Dickens' evocative prose conveyed the grim reality of day-to-day existence in London 150 years ago, and the collaborative screenplay by Lean and Stanley Haynes fairly crackles with threat, menace and danger.

The cast are a fine tribute to Dickens' graceful penmanship, and chief among these must be Alec Guinness, just setting out on his long and distinguished partnership with David Lean - one which would later see them working together on such epics as *The Bridge On the River Kwai* (1957), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Doctor Zhivago* (1965).

It fell to Guinness to portray Fagin, the criminal mastermind who controls the young pickpockets into whose company the founding, played with a cherubic innocence by eight-year-old John Howard Davies, finds himself an involuntary member. And Guinness duly delivers a performance that ranks as one of the most memorable in British cinema, his Fagin coming across as a mixture of evil, creepiness and ruthlessness, yet with the hint of endearing qualities too. Guinness's portrayal and make-up, which included a long, hooked nose, caused offence to some who saw it as an anti-Semitic stereotype, coming as it did just three years after the Holocaust. Riots broke out in Berlin and 12 minutes were cut from the film before the American authorities gave the go-ahead to a US screening. The film also achieved the unlikely feat of being banned in both Israel (as being anti-Semitic) and in Egypt, which saw Guinness's interpretation as too sympathetic. Lean argued he had done nothing to foster anti-Semitism, while the book itself refers to Fagin as "The Jew" and

makes reference to a "shady Jewish peddling network". Moreover, Guinness's make-up for the part was based on Cruikshank's illustration that accompanied the novel.

Robert Newton, eyes rolling, makes an impressive Bill Sikes, while Kay Walsh is sweet innocence personified as Nancy. Elsewhere, look out for the teenage Anthony Newley playing the Artful Dodger, a very young Diana Dors as Charlotte and Hattie Jacques as a singer at the "Three Cripples". But what of Oliver himself, John Howard Davies? He stayed in the entertainment business and 20 years on, as a TV producer, was instrumental in bringing Monty Python's *Flying Circus* to the small screen.

The triumph of Lean's *Oliver Twist* owes much to Guy Green's shadowy cinematography that gives an appropriately unsettling feel to the whole experience. Dickens gives us a happy ending and Oliver is eventually plucked from his hellhole by a benevolent old gentleman, but the images that remain are of the fate he so narrowly avoided. As searing as these are, at the end of it all one almost wishes one could say to the late Sir David: "Please sir, I would like some more".

References: <http://lean.bfi.org.uk/>

Alec Guinness: *The Authorised Biography*, by Piers Paul Read (Simon and Schuster).

Further reading: *Beyond the Epic: The Life and Films of David Lean* by Gene D. Phillips (University Press of Kentucky).

ESCAPE TO A WORLD OF FILM THIS DECEMBER WITH TCM.

For the festive fortnight from 23rd December – 5th January TCM reserves the 3pm slot every day for **Christmas Crooners**, musical favourites including **High Society** on 30th December and **Singin' in the Rain** on New Year's Day. At 9pm TCM has set aside a slot for those less festive, in **Criminal Christmas** with the first three films from the **Lethal Weapon** series back to back on New Year's Eve and Harrison Ford on the run in **The Fugitive** on Christmas Day.

On **TCM 2** there's a **Classical Christmas** fortnight featuring epic **Gone With The Wind** at 7pm on Boxing Day, **The Wonderful World of The Brothers Grimm** at 7pm on 31st December and **Mogambo** at 7pm on 2nd January. Also on TCM 2 catch a night of silent films with **Silent Night** on 28th December including Erich von Stroheim's **Greed** at 7pm followed by Greta Garbo in **Flesh and The Devil** at 10pm.