

## Oliver Twist

Euro-director Roman Polanski's last effort, *The Pianist* (2003), was a critical and commercial hit. His latest, a new version of the Dickens novel *Oliver Twist*, is a forthright, well-rounded narrative of the poor orphan in early 19th century London. Polanski has tried such an adaptation of a major English literary work before, in his 1980 film *Tess*, based on a Thomas Hardy novel. That film was a solid and sober, if not brilliant, re-creation; the same thing could be said for his *Oliver Twist*.

Polanski and his screenwriter, Englishman Ronald Harwood, have hewed quite closely to the novel's trajectory, closer than either David Lean's memorable 1948 version or the musical version mounted on film by Carol Reed in 1968. Inevitably, of course, whole chunks of the novel have been jettisoned to concentrate more specifically on the travails of young Oliver, which--when spun out over about two hours--can seem quite grim and relentless.

(The almost unrelieved trials of Oliver could make this a tough film for children; there are no jolly songs of relief, like "Who Will Buy?" or "Consider Yourself," which peppered the "Oliver" musical).

The cast is mainly a fine parade of English pros ripely playing Dickensian grotesques, the star being Sir Ben Kingsley as the famous fence Fagin. He is a cackling and fawning scarecrow behind heavy makeup, but Fagin was never supposed to be a subtle character. He does, however, show real poignance during his jail cell goodbye to Oliver. As for Oliver himself, 11-year old Barney Clark, a doe-eyed beauty of a child, he displays an almost uniformly awed or pained expression, and it is hard to find anything in that sweet countenance to show that his bleak world is having any effect on him. But wait a minute...he's just a kid, right? Give'em a break!

*(This "Oliver Twist" is rated PG—some scenes could be too intense for kids.)*

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