

## Nicholas Nickleby

*Nicholas Nickleby*, was one of the young Charles Dicken's ripest and most sprawling novels, replete with characters and incident (a powerful theatrical version of the book in the 1980's took over nine hours to perform!). It could be seen as fit for a "Masterpiece Theatre" mini-series perhaps, but not necessarily as a straightforward feature film. For those who need their Dickens full-bodied, they probably should avoid this truncated version, but director Douglas McGrath's new adaptation takes on the task and does a creditable job, worth a visit to those who don't know the novel but might be drawn to reading it after this cinematic tasting.

A full plot summary can be found elsewhere than this brief review, but it can be noted that the adventures begin with Nicholas (Charlie Hunnam) and his family penniless in London, in thrall to his cruel uncle Ralph Nickleby (Christopher Plummer), then confined by the squalid Mr. and Mrs. Squeers (Jim Broadbent and Juliet Stevenson) within the grim Dotheboys orphanage (from which Nicholas escapes with newfound friend Smike), into an interlude with a bumptious theater troupe run by the Crummles (Nathan Lane and Dame Edna Everage), only to be taken in as an assistant to the kind-hearted Cheeryble brothers (Timothy Spall and Gerard Horan), and finally to confront the vindictive Ralph and to find his true love in Madeline Bray (Anne Hathaway). The episodes come thick and fast, betraying its original source as a novel written in installments.

Douglas McGrath, an American who earlier adapted and directed a decent version of Jane Austen's *Emma*, has written thoughtfully about the drastic cuts he had to make in this adaptation. His careful re-reading of the classic lead him to jettison the many digressions and subsidiary storylines to find the core of the book in the conflict between Nicholas and Ralph: "They were the heart of the story, their struggle, their contrasting philosophies, the starkly different choices they made." He changed the timing of the story, too, moving it from the 1830's when it was written to a more industrial age 1850's to heighten the contrast between country and city. His aim was, he admits, to create a "walking, talking supplement" which might lead people to Dickens himself.

So what's the verdict on this kind of Cliff Notes cinema? Creditable, as I said above, and most watchable both because of the richness and variety of the story itself and because of the pleasure of watching a passel of great British actors strut their stuff--in material that allows a bit of preening and overacting. The Squeers, for example, are over-the-top vile creatures but still fun to watch. Poor, cowed Smike, played by young Jamie Bell (a hit in the title role of *Billy Elliott*) is just the kind of pathetic figure that provides the right contrast for the virtuous Nicholas. Nathan Lane--lone of two Yanks in the crowd along with Anne Hathaway--emotes nicely as the coarse thespian Vincent Crummles, the veteran Tom Courtenay stands out as crusty Noggs, the manservant to Uncle Ralph, who openly despises his master, and Edward Fox is juicily slimy (and appropriately named) as Sir Mulberry Fox.

Which brings us to the leads. Here, I feel, the competition is uneven. Christopher Plummer's Ralph Nickleby is a striking villain, the more depraved because of his sleek surface and mellifluous delivery. The most apt animal metaphors would place him somewhere on the scale between an eel or a snake. Whatever the beast, Plummer plays him with snarling relish, the more to contrast him with the character of Nicholas, possessor of probably the purest heart in Dickensian fiction.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the young Charlie Hunnam as Nicholas cannot match the older actor's force. Hunnam, an actor since his teen years and recently seen in the film *Abandon*, is the right age for the character and he gives an earnest performance, but his slushy voice and very contemporary looks undercut both the valor and pathos one expects from a convincing Nicholas Nickleby. This almost "surfer-dude" is no match for the reptilian Plummer. (*The film is rated "PG," having nothing objectionable.*)

(January 2003)