

Oliver Twist

Dir. Frank Lloyd | US | 1922 | N/C PG | 1h 16m

Performing live: Neil Brand (piano)

2pm on Saturday 23 March 2024

Screening material courtesy of Film Preservation Associates

Born in Glasgow in 1886, director Frank Lloyd's first showbiz experience was as a Harry Lauder impersonator on the vaudeville stage in London. In 1910 he emigrated to Canada and soon found himself acting in silent pictures in Hollywood. From 1913-1916 he appeared in over sixty films, then switched to directing and never acted again.

He's known as a skilled studio craftsman, never showing off, reserving his flourishes for where they'll help the story. He made every kind of film – 135 of them! – but showed a particular skill with period drama. At the time of his *Oliver Twist* in 1922 he'd already made one Dickens adaptation, *A Tale of Two Cities*, but also *Les Miserables* and *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

The call for another *Oliver Twist* – the book had been filmed at least four times already – was surely provoked by the sudden stardom of Jackie Coogan, a genuine child prodigy propelled to fame by Chaplin's *The Kid*. Legendary producer Sol Lesser joined forces with Coogan Sr., who managed his son's career, to not only make this version, but to buy up and destroy all copies of the 1916 version to prevent competition.

Joining Coogan is another legendary performer, Lon Chaney, previously featured at Hippfest in *The Unknown* and *The Penalty*. The "man of a thousand faces" was already celebrated for his powers of transformation, and must have seemed a natural for the role of Fagin, a character who seems to invite exaggeration and, unfortunately, an element of racial caricature.

Throughout Lloyd's movie his casting emphasises this cartoonish element found in Dickens' gallery of grotesques, and in the original illustrations of Phiz, so Mr. Bumble is bulbous and Noah Claypoole is a gangling gargoyle, which all seems fine. Fagin is more complicated: Dickens himself recognized that he'd been guilty of antisemitic tropes and tried to soften the

HIPPODROME silent film festival

A world class festival for silent film, cultivating an international community with an adventurous appetite for extraordinary cinema.

MARCH 20 - 24 2024



novel when it was reprinted. Chaney's false nose isn't as egregiously huge as Alec Guinness' in the impressive but notoriously insensitive David Lean version, but the adaptation leaves out the real affection between Fagin and his boys and so Chaney's performance sadly focusses on the thief's most negative qualities. Given his skill, it's a shame he wasn't supplied with a more nuanced character, though his pantomime villainy is certainly entertaining.

At times, Chaney threatens to turn this into a horror movie, so monstrous and inhuman is his characterisation, but this isn't entirely misguided: like *Treasure Island* (in which Chaney also acted, as), *Oliver Twist* is a children's adventure in which terror is a keynote. Rather than making his kid protagonist superhumanly resourceful as in much modern children's literature, Dickens respects his vulnerability.



Coogan is a joy. For Chaplin, he'd proved an adept mimic, able to copy his director gesture for gesture, without losing anything in emotional truth. It must surely have helped that Frank Lloyd had been a performer too, able to *show* his young star what he wanted. The director frames his Oliver beautifully, peering out of a heap of oakum or through windows, and devises opportunities for him to display his pantomimic skill, as when he impersonates his benefactor Mr. Brownlow to demonstrate the art of pickpocketry.

Preserving most of the novel's picaresque and convoluted plot, the movie has to dash through its scenes, but pauses long enough for frequent and striking effects, from Bill Sykes' menacing

★ HIPPODROME CINEMA 10 HOPE STREET BO'NESS EH51 0AA ★

HIPPODROME silent film festival

A world class festival for silent film, cultivating an international community with an adventurous appetite for extraordinary cinema.

MARCH 20 - 24 2024



entrance, preceded by his giant shadow (a moment echoed in Carol Reed's musical version, *Oliver!*) to faithful duplications of the original cartoons, as when Fagin huddled in his cell (his one moment approximating pathos).

Film history tells us that this movie was unavailable for decades: the fact that Reed used the giant shadow and David Lean borrowed Bill Sykes' dog's furious scrabbling at a door lintel during a scene of violence, suggests that (a) prints circulated secretly, or (b) both filmmakers had seen Lloyd's film when it came out, and never forgot it. That seems quite possible.

Different adaptations prioritise different aspects of the story: Roman Polanski's 2005 version jettisons all the stuff about Oliver's respectable parentage, whereas in the Lean and Reed films he speaks with a posh voice, as if his accent were genetic. A silent film doesn't have to worry about that, so Coogan being American isn't an issue. Ultimately, the film turns out to be about Oliver's quest for his identity, something he barely knows he's lost: it makes the film's ending unexpectedly moving.

Frank Lloyd's movie career lasted until 1955, winning Oscars for *Mutiny on the Bounty* in 1936 and for his wartime documentary *The Last Bomb* in 1945.

When Jackie Coogan came of age, he discovered that all his silent movie earnings had been spent by his parents. Continuing his acting career through juvenile roles and into old age, he helped pass a new law that protected child actors from exploitation and saw that their money would be stored for them in trust: more than any of his amazing performances, this was the accomplishment of which Jackie Coogan remained proudest.

DAVID CAIRNS

David Cairns is a filmmaker and critic based in Edinburgh, where he teaches at the Film Department in the College of Art. He runs the film blog [Shadowplay](#).

★ HIPPODROME CINEMA 10 HOPE STREET BO'NESS EH51 0AA ★