Oliver Twist

Talent: Barney Clark, Ben Kingsley, Jamie Foreman, Edward Hardwicke, Leanne Rowe.

Writer/director/editor: Roman Polanski
Classification: PG
Duration: 130 minutes
We rate it: Two stars.

Date of review: 22nd June, 2006.

Roman Polanski is, in this reviewer’s humble opinion, one of the cinema’s greatest directors. As legendary for his eventful personal life as he is for his extraordinary body of film work, Polanski, who is now in his early seventies, has throughout his long career managed to make films that are at once deeply personal and widely accessible to audiences around the world. From his fascinating beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s with films like Knife in the Water, Repulsion and Cul-De-Sac, through blockbusters like Rosemary’s Baby and Chinatown, to the recent award-winning masterpiece The Pianist, Polanski has proven himself an unique force in the filmic world. Respected by other directors as a master of the form, Polanski is a filmmaker whose each successive work is eagerly awaited by a devoted audience.

With Oliver Twist, Polanski has made a film that represents if not a change of pace at least a distinct change of tone. The Pianist, Polanski’s previous film, was a work that many critics, myself included, regarded as a truly perfect piece of cinema. Stunningly powerful from beginning to end, the film depicted the momentous wartime experiences of Wladislaw Szpilman, a Jewish musician who survived against all expectation inside the Warsaw ghetto in the 1940s. The film was an immensely personal document for Polanski, whose own experiences as a child in Warsaw during World War II were fraught with tragedy and helped shape him as an extraordinarily resourceful and capable person. Given that the director clearly had such a profound emotional investment in The Pianist, it was easy to read the film as an especially personal and significant document.

Oliver Twist, then, finds itself with a pretty tough act to follow. Given the themes of Dickens’ beloved novel (themes including the resourcefulness of children), and the narrative premise (in which an orphan’s need to survive and endure despite immensely difficult circumstances is put to the test) one could see a line linking this film with the rest of Polanski’s work. What seems to be missing from Oliver Twist though is the razor-sharp edge of menace that has made so many of Polanski’s
previous films so unforgettable for audiences. Polanski is possessed of an uncanny understanding of the ways in which the devices of the cinema (camera placement, editing, casting and the use of music) can affect audiences; the director has often used this awareness to create a palpable sense of unease and dread for his viewers. This is an element that is missing from Oliver Twist, despite the fact that the raw material invites just such a tone of foreboding.

Young actor Barney Clark, who plays Oliver, is effective enough as the mistreated orphan (and his resemblance to the young Polanski is indeed uncanny) but he too shies away from conveying a sense of true horror at his predicament. Furthermore, Clark’s Oliver is quite overshadowed, performance-wise, by an unrecognisable Ben Kingsley as Fagin, and a suitably forbidding Jamie Forman, who plays the brutal Sykes. (Note should also go to the admirable supporting performance by Edward Hardwicke, who plays the kindly scholar who eventually takes Oliver under his wing.) Clark certainly gives a charismatic performance, but again there is a softness about the way in which his predicament is presented to us that takes the edge off what should have been a dark and troubling story.

It’s a mighty uncomfortable thing for me to give a lukewarm review of a Roman Polanski film. Beautifully made by anyone’s standards, Oliver Twist comes off as strangely unaffected, largely because Polanski has toned down the aforementioned atmosphere of menace with which he usually endows his films. The explanation for this may lie in the director’s apparent desire to make a film for his own children (both of whom appear in Oliver Twist as extras) and who are still too young to watch much of their father’s earlier work. Touching as this is, it does render the resultant film less memorable than it should have been. Coming from such an important and supernaturally gifted director, Oliver Twist is ultimately disappointing, despite the beauty of its construction.

Nick Prescott