

Oliver! (1968)



Theatrical release poster by [Howard Terpning](#) (Wikipedia)

TOMATOMETER

All Critics

85

Average Rating: 7.7/10 Reviews
Counted: 26 Fresh: 22 | Rotten: 4

Top Critics

60

Average Rating: 6/10 Critic Reviews:
5 Fresh: 3 | Rotten: 2

It has aged somewhat awkwardly, but the performances are inspired, the songs are memorable, and the film is undeniably influential.

AUDIENCE

82

liked it Average Rating: 3.4/5 User
Ratings: 55,441

Movie Info

Inspired by Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*, Lionel Bart's 1961 London and Broadway musical hit glossed over some of Dickens' more graphic passages but managed to retain a strong subtext to what was essentially light entertainment. For its first half-hour or so, Carol Reed's Oscar-winning 1968 film version does a masterful job of telling its story almost exclusively through song and dance. Once nine-year-old orphan Oliver Twist (Mark Lester) falls in with such underworld types as pickpocket Fagin (Ron Moody) and murderous thief Bill Sykes (Oliver Reed), it becomes necessary to inject more and more dialogue, and the film loses some of its momentum. But not to worry; despite such brutal moments as Sykes' murder of Nancy (Shani Wallis), the film gets back on the right musical track, thanks in great part to Onna White's exuberant choreography and the faultless performances by Moody and by Jack Wild as the Artful Dodger. The supporting cast includes Harry Secombe as the self-righteous Mr. Bumble and Joseph O'Connor as Mr. Brownlow, the man who (through a series of typically Dickensian coincidences) rescues Oliver from the streets. *Oliver!* won six Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Director, and a special award to choreographer Onna White. ~ Hal Erickson, Rovi

G, 2 hr. 33 min.

[Drama](#), [Kids & Family](#), [Musical & Performing Arts](#), [Classics](#), [Comedy](#)

Directed By: [Carol Reed](#)

Written By: [Vernon Harris](#)

In Theaters: Dec 11, 1968 Wide

On DVD: Aug 11, 1998

Sony Pictures Home Entertainment

[\[www.rottentomatoes.com\]](http://www.rottentomatoes.com)

Oliver! (film)

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Oliver! is a 1968 British musical drama film directed by Carol Reed and based on the stage musical of the same name, with book, music and lyrics written by Lionel Bart. The screenplay was written by Vernon Harris.

Both the film and play are based on Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*. The film includes several musical numbers, including "Food, Glorious Food", "Consider Yourself", "As Long as He Needs Me", "You've Got to Pick a Pocket or Two" and "Where Is Love?".

Filmed in Shepperton Film Studio in Surrey, the film was a Romulus Films production and was distributed internationally by Columbia Pictures.

At the 41st Academy Awards in 1969, *Oliver!*, which had earlier been nominated for eleven Academy Awards, won six, including Awards for Best Picture, and Best Director for Carol Reed. At the 26th Golden Globe Awards the film won two Golden Globes for Best Film - Musical or Comedy, and Best Actor - Musical or Comedy for Ron Moody.

Synopsis

Act 1

A workhouse in Dunstable, England is visited by the wealthy governors who fund it. At the same time a sumptuous banquet is held for them, the orphan boys who work there are being served their daily gruel. They dream of enjoying the same "*Food, Glorious Food*" as their masters. While eating, some boys draw straws to see who will ask for more to eat, and the job falls to a boy named Oliver Twist. He goes up to Bumble and Widow Corney, who run the workhouse and serve the gruel, and asks for more. Enraged, Bumble takes Oliver to the governors to see what to do with him ("*Oliver!*"). A decision is made to have Oliver sold into service. Bumble parades Oliver through the snow, trying to sell him to the highest bidder ("*Boy for Sale*"). Oliver is sold to an undertaker named Mr. Sowerberry, who intends to use him as a mourner for children's funerals. After his first funeral, Noah Claypole, Sowerberry's apprentice, insults Oliver's mother. Oliver attacks Noah and Sowerberry forces him into a coffin while Noah fetches Bumble. Oliver is too angry to be intimidated by Bumble, who places the blame on not keeping Oliver on a diet of gruel. Oliver is thrown into the cellar as further punishment. Alone in the dark with a

roomful of empty coffins, Oliver wonders "*Where is Love?*". While clutching the window grate, Oliver pushes it open and escapes.

After a week on the road, Oliver reaches London. Shortly after arriving, he crosses paths with the Artful Dodger, a young thief who decides to take Oliver under his wing ("*Consider Yourself!*"). Dodger leads Oliver to his home, a hideout for a group of young pickpockets run by the older criminal Fagin. Oliver naively believes the items they have stolen are "made" by them and Fagin and the boys play along for their amusement. He then helps the boys practice their stealing while proclaiming his belief that "*You've Got to Pick a Pocket or Two*" to get by. Once the boys go to sleep, Fagin sneaks off to meet Bill Sikes, a dangerous thief with whom he does business. Sikes' girlfriend, Nancy, waits for him at the pub and sings of her contentment with the life she shares with the reprobates of London while covering up her own broken dreams of the life she wishes she had with Sikes ("*It's a Fine Life*").

Back at the hideout, Oliver witnesses Fagin counting his hidden treasures and taking a little more than his fair share from Sikes' loot. While initially furious that he has been discovered, Fagin calms down and has Oliver go to sleep. Nancy and her best friend Bet arrive in the morning to collect some money from Fagin on behalf of Sikes, and meet Oliver. The boys mock Oliver for his politeness towards Nancy, which she finds charming. Dodger attempts to be just as gentlemanly towards Nancy and the boys and Fagin join in the fun ("*I'd Do Anything*"). Fagin sends the boys out for the day and Oliver asks to go with Dodger, which he agrees to ("*Be Back Soon*"). While on the job, Oliver witnesses what Dodger really does and is apprehended for Dodger's theft of a wallet belonging to a gentleman named Mr. Brownlow. Afraid that Oliver will tell the police all about them, Fagin and Sikes send Nancy to court to observe him. Oliver is too terrified to say anything, but before the magistrate can finalize the verdict, a bookseller who witnessed the act arrives and proclaim Oliver's innocence. As Brownlow takes in Oliver, Sikes and Fagin send Dodger to follow them.

Act 2

Oliver has been living in the residence of wealthy Mr. Brownlow for several weeks now. From the balcony, he watches the merchants and other folk of London sell their wares. ("*Who Will Buy?*") Sikes has been keeping an eye on Oliver, firmly believing he may tell on them. He and Fagin are determined to get him back and employ Nancy to help them as Oliver trusts her more than he does the others. Nancy refuses as she wants Oliver to have a life free of thievery, but Sikes hits her. As Nancy reluctantly follows Sikes, she sings of her unwavering love for him despite his

ways ("As Long As He Needs Me"). The next day, Brownlow entrusts Oliver with some books and money to be delivered to the bookshop. As he leaves, Brownlow notices a striking resemblance between Oliver and a portrait of his long-lost niece Emily. While walking through the streets of London, Oliver is sidetracked by Nancy and is kidnapped by Sikes and taken back to the hideout. Following a brief confrontation with Fagin over Oliver's five pound note, Sikes is defied by Oliver, who in turn is protected by Nancy. Sikes becomes increasingly violent, leading Nancy to leave. When Fagin warns him to calm down, Sikes threatens him with his life, should their operation be compromised. Realizing Sikes' violent nature, Fagin begins reconsidering his life as a thief and weighs all his options, but decides to keep to his old ways after "*Reviewing the Situation*".

Bumble and Corney pay a visit to Brownlow after he begins searching for Oliver's origin. They present a locket belonging to Oliver's mother, who arrived at the workhouse penniless and died during childbirth. Brownlow recognizes the locket as his niece's and throws the two out, enraged that they selfishly chose to keep the trinket and information to themselves until they could collect a reward for it. Meanwhile, in an attempt to introduce Oliver to a life of crime, Sikes forces Oliver to take part in a house robbery. The robbery fails when Oliver accidentally awakens the occupants, but he and Sikes get away. While Sikes and Oliver are gone, Nancy, fearful for Oliver's life, goes to Brownlow, confessing her part in Oliver's kidnapping and promising to return him to Brownlow at midnight at London Bridge. She then goes to the tavern. When Sikes and Oliver appear, Sikes orders his dog Bullseye to guard the boy. Nancy starts up a lively drinking song, hoping that the noise will distract Sikes ("*Oom-Pah-Pah*"). Bullseye, however, alerts Sikes, who gives chase.

As Oliver and Nancy share a farewell embrace at London Bridge, Sikes catches up and assaults them, bludgeoning Nancy to death. He then takes off with Oliver, but Bullseye returns to the scene of the crime and alerts the police. The dog leads Brownlow and an angry mob to the thieves' hideout. Sikes arrives at Fagin's den and demands money, revealing that he killed Nancy, as well. Upon seeing the approaching mob, the thieves disband and flee. Sikes runs off with Oliver, using him as a hostage. During the evacuation, Fagin loses his prized possessions, which sink into mud. Sikes attempts to flee to an adjacent roof, but is shot dead in the process by the police. Fagin makes up his mind to change his ways for good. Just as he is about to walk away a reformed character, Dodger appears from nowhere with a wallet he stole earlier. They dance off into the sunrise together, happily determined to live out the rest of their days as thieves ("*Reviewing the Situation*

(reprise)") while Oliver returns to Brownlow's home for good ("*Finale: Where is Love?/Consider Yourself*").

Cast

- Ron Moody as Fagin
- Mark Lester as Oliver
- Shani Wallis as Nancy
- Oliver Reed as Bill Sikes
- Jack Wild as the Artful Dodger
- Harry Secombe as Mr. Bumble
- Peggy Mount Mrs. Bumble
- Leonard Rossiter as Mr. Sowerberry
- Hilda Baker as Mrs. Sowerberry
- Joseph O'Connor as Mr. Brownlow
- Sheila White as Bet
- Megs Jenkins as Mrs. Bedwin
- Hugh Griffith as the Magistrate
- Kenneth Cranham as Noah Claypole
- Wensley Pithey as Dr. Grimwigg

Musical numbers

- Overture (heard before the film begins)
- Main Title (heard over the opening title sequence)
- "Food, Glorious Food"/"Oliver!"
- "Boy for Sale"
- "Where is Love?"
- "Consider Yourself"
- "Pick a Pocket or Two"
- "It's a Fine Life"
- "I'd Do Anything"
- "Be Back Soon"
- Entr'acte (heard during the film's intermission, just before the second half begins)
- "Who Will Buy?"
- "As Long As He Needs Me"
- "Reviewing the Situation"

- "Oom-Pah-Pah"
- "Reviewing the Situation" (reprise)
- Finale ("Where is Love?"/"Consider Yourself")
- Exit Music

The words and music were written by Lionel Bart, and were supervised, arranged and conducted by John Green.

The song "Boy for Sale" was expanded in the film version with an extra stanza, plus a faster middle section, where Mr. Bumble tries unsuccessfully to auction off Oliver at three pounds ten, in a slower section, where nobody bids for Oliver. Also, The song "Where is Love" has a newer lyric when Oliver repeats the last half of the song.

While the song "My Name," sung by Bill Sikes in the stage version, was not included in the finished film, there is evidence that it may have been sung and filmed before being deleted. The melody features prominently in the film's main title theme, overture and consistently throughout its underscoring. No evidence of filmed footage or vocal recording has ever been released.

The pre-credits Overture as heard on the actual soundtrack of the film is not included on the soundtrack album. Instead, an abbreviated version of the Main Title is labelled "Overture". For the convenience of the original LP, the order of some of the songs was shuffled, and several songs were cut and shortened, but this was not corrected on the CD issue; instead, the film soundtrack CD is an exact duplicate of the LP - nothing on the CD has been expanded to its full-length, as on other CD soundtrack albums. The movie's soundtrack was originally issued in the US on Colgems Records; it was later reissued on compact disc on the RCA Records label.

Mark Lester's singing voice in *Oliver!* (1968) was dubbed by Kathe Green, the daughter of Johnny Green, the musical director on the film. She was brought in when it was found that Lester couldn't sing, although this was not made public until 1988 during an interview with Johnny Green on the 20th anniversary of the film (he stated that Mark Lester was "tone deaf and arrhythmic"). He originally had two boys (William Lloyd and another, unknown) who dubbed Lester's singing live during the original filming at Shepperton Studios, but during post production, it was felt that, in some of the musical numbers, their voices did not match Lester's look, so they used Green's daughter instead.

Production

Casting



Clockwise from left: Mark Lester as Oliver, Ron Moody as Fagin and Jack Wild as the Artful Dodger.

The film used mostly young unknowns, among them Ron Moody (Fagin), Mark Lester (Oliver), Shani Wallis (Nancy) and Jack Wild as The Artful Dodger, but also featured Hugh Griffith, an Oscar winner for *Ben-Hur*, in a cameo role as the Magistrate. Harry Secombe, who played Mr. Bumble, was well known in Britain but not in the United States, and Oliver Reed, who played Bill Sikes, had just begun to make a big name for himself. Ron Moody recreated his London stage performance, after Peter Sellers, Dick Van Dyke and Peter O'Toole reportedly turned down the role. Elizabeth Taylor turned down the role of Nancy as well. Julie Andrews was also considered. Director Reed also had Shirley Bassey in mind, but his choice was rejected by Hollywood studio bosses who felt that the public was not ready for a Black Nancy. Classical actor Joseph O'Connor, not well known in the U.S., played Mr. Brownlow.

Shooting at Shepperton Studios, England, began on 23 June 1967.

Writing

The screenplay was adapted from both Lionel Bart's musical and Dickens's novel. The screenplay was written by Vernon Harris, and the film was directed by Sir Carol Reed, who was also Oliver Reed's uncle. A few of the songs from the stage production were not

used in the movie, although they often make appearances in the incidental music. For example, the music of Sikes' song "My Name" can be heard when the character first appears, and several other times whenever he is about to commit some nefarious deed.

Comparisons to the source material

The film was largely faithful to the stage musical, but included extended choreography sequences not found in the original show, and some additional scenes which expanded the role of Bill Sikes, making him closer to the Sikes of the original Dickens novel. In the stage version, he did not even make his entrance until the second act. The songs that Sikes sang in the stage version were omitted.

The magistrate at Oliver's trial, who is played by Hugh Griffith, is called Mr. Fang in the Dickens novel, but simply known as "The Magistrate" in the film. He does not appear in the original stage version; Act I of the stage version ends immediately after Oliver is mistakenly arrested, and Act II begins after he has been exonerated. Oliver's mother was changed from being Mr. Brownlow's daughter to his niece. And as in the novel, Bet became Nancy's best friend instead of her sister.

Music

Two of the songs sung by Mr. Bumble and the Widow Corney, whose roles are larger in the stage version than in the film, were omitted, as well as nearly all of the reprises of several of the show's other songs, giving the second half of the film a more serious, gloomy quality than Act II of the stage production had had, with the exception of the songs "Who Will Buy?" and the comical "Reviewing the Situation".

"Food, Glorious Food" and "Consider Yourself" were sung by the choristers of the Temple Choir in London, conducted by Sir George Thalben-Ball.

Additional notes

The beginning section of Dickens's novel, in which Oliver is born in the workhouse, was never filmed, although there is evidence that it was supposed to have been. Still photos of this section exist in an *Oliver!* novelization for children, published in 1968.

In this same *Oliver!* storybook, Nancy has a final moment in which, after being fatally beaten by Bill Sikes, she gasps out her dying words to Mr. Brownlow, but there is nothing to indicate that this

was actually filmed, so it may have been dramatic license on the part of the authors of the storybook. However, when Brownlow runs down the steps of London Bridge toward Nancy, she is clearly still alive - her feet are seen to be moving. The film, rather than following through on this, then cuts away to a scene showing Sikes trying to kill his bull terrier for fear that the dog may lead the police to him, and when the film returns again to Brownlow, Nancy has already died.

Reception

The film earned \$10.5 million in rentals at the North American box office (US/ Canada rentals) and took \$77,402,877 worldwide, making it the seventh highest-grossing film of 1968. *Oliver!* and *Funny Girl* (both made by Columbia Pictures which would went on to Oscar success at the 41st Academy Awards) were the only musical films in 1968 that achieved the same level of terrific enthusiasm and brilliant acclaim from critics and audiences as other great musicals of the 1960s (*The Jungle Book*, *Mary Poppins*, *The Music Man*, *My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music*, and *West Side Story*), while *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *Finian's Rainbow*, and *Star!* were terrible disasters as the musical film genre was dying and no longer in favor with audiences anymore as it had been before.

Oliver! received extremely positive acclaim from critics and audiences. It was hailed by Pauline Kael in her *New Yorker* review as being one of the few film versions of a stage musical that was superior to the original show, which she suggested she had walked out on. "The musical numbers emerge from the story with a grace that has been rarely seen since the musicals of René Clair."

Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times awarded the film four stars out of four and was highly enthusiastic about the film, saying "Sir Carol Reed's *Oliver!* is a treasure of a movie. It is very nearly universal entertainment, one of those rare films like *The Wizard of Oz* that appeals in many ways to all sorts of people. It will be immediately exciting to the children, I think, because of the story and the unforgettable Dickens characters. Adults will like it for the sweep and zest of its production. And as a work of popular art, it will stand the test of time, I guess. It is as well-made as a film can be." He really admired Carol Reed's working relationship with the children in the film: "Not for a moment, I suspect, did Reed imagine he had to talk down to the children in his audience. Not for a moment are the children in the cast treated as children. They're equal participants in the great adventure, and they have to fend for themselves or bloody well get out of the way. This isn't a watered-down lollypop. It's got bite and malice along with the, romance and humor." Even though that he was really annoyed about the film having a roadshow

presentation, he loved the production design, musical adaptation score, and casting and acting, particularly that of Ron Moody and Jack Wild. He concluded, "*Oliver!* succeeds finally because of its taste. It never stoops for cheap effects and never insults our intelligence. And because we can trust it, we can let ourselves go with it, and we do. It is a splendid experience." He later named the film as the seventh best film of 1968.

Awards

1968 Academy Awards^[10]

- Best Picture - John Woolf **(WON)**
- Best Director - Carol Reed **(WON)**
- Best Actor in a Leading Role - Ron Moody (nominated)
- Best Actor in a Supporting Role - Jack Wild (nominated)
- Best Writing, Adapted Screenplay - Vernon Harris (nominated)
- Best Cinematography (nominated)
- Best Musical Adaptation Score - John Green **(WON)**
- Best Art Direction - Set Decoration **(WON)**
- Best Sound **(WON)**
- Best Costume Design (nominated)
- Best Film Editing (nominated)
- Honorary Academy Award - Onna White "for her brilliant achievements in the art of choreography on film for *Oliver!*" **(WON)**

Oliver! is the only G-rated film (since the development of the MPAA rating system in 1968) to receive an Academy Award for Best Picture (though some pre-1968 Best Picture winners were rated G when re-released to cinemas after 1968), as well as being the last movie musical to win the Academy Award for Best Picture of the Year until *Chicago* thirty-four years later, though others have been nominated: *Hello, Dolly!*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Cabaret*, *All That Jazz*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Moulin Rouge!*. *Oliver!* also had the distinction of being the last British film to win Best Picture until *Chariots of Fire* thirteen years later.

1968 Golden Globe Awards

- Best Motion Picture – Musical or Comedy **(WON)**
- Best Director - Carol Reed (nominated)
- Best Actor – Motion Picture Musical or Comedy - Ron Moody **(WON)**
- Best Supporting Actor - Hugh Griffith (nominated)
- New Star of the Year - Actor - Jack Wild (nominated)

1969 Moscow Film Festival^[11]

- Special Prize - Carol Reed
- Best Actor - Ron Moody