



The Main Feature

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The Personal History of David Copperfield

UK/USA 2019

119 mins. Certificate PG

Director	Armando Iannucci
Screenplay	Simon Blackwell, Armando Iannucci
Cinematography	Zac Nicholson
Music	Christopher Willis

Cast

David Copperfield	Dev Patel
Mr Dick	Hugh Laurie
Betsy Trotwood	Tilda Swinton
Mr Micawber	Peter Capaldi
Uriah Heep	Ben Whishaw
Steerforth	Aneurin Barnard
Peggotty	Daisy May Cooper
Daniel Peggotty	Paul Whitehouse



The novel *David Copperfield* first appeared in monthly magazine instalments, beginning in the spring of 1849. Even as it was being serialized, stage adaptations were under way, despite the fact that producers didn't—couldn't—yet know how Dickens would conclude his tale. It finally appeared in book form in November 1850, and on January 6 1851 a dramatised (and drastically shortened) version opened at the Lyceum Theatre in New York.

Like *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield* is a shape-shifter story, blessed from birth with a rare pliability—so resilient and so resourceful, that it can survive whatever you make of it, whether you read it alone, or aloud, or act it out. Armando Iannucci, is instantly alive to this wealth of possibility. We start in a crowded Victorian theatre, where the adult David (Dev Patel) sports a brocaded waistcoat and wonders, echoing the famous opening of the novel, whether he will turn out to be the hero of his own life.

The film is a fresh and distinctive take on Charles Dickens' semi-autobiographical masterpiece, chronicles the life of its iconic title character as he navigates a chaotic world to find his elusive place within it. From his unhappy childhood to the discovery of his gift as a storyteller and writer, David Copperfield's journey is by turns hilarious and tragic, but always full of life, colour and humanity.

Even if you've never read *David Copperfield*, or if you read it long ago, it can still feel as familiar as a fairy tale. Hence the noisy incursion of Betsey Trotwood (Tilda Swinton), the sister of David's late father; she looks witchy enough to be wicked, and is appalled that David should be so ill-mannered as to be born male, yet her heart is sound and kind. By contrast, David's stepfather, Edward Murdstone (Darren Boyd), and his sister, Jane (Gwendoline Christie), really are wicked, turfing the boy out of his

home and exposing him to the iron rigors of warehouse work. Little Red Riding Hood was lucky in her predators. She had nothing worse than a lone wolf.

The novel is more infested with carnivores than its cheerful reputation might imply. It resounds with feats of cruelty and snarling expressions of contempt. Even minor figures, encountered en route, speak as if they were spitting; you keep hearing phrases like "If I could hunt her to her grave, I would," and "Oh, my lungs and liver, what do you want?" All of which ought to be meat and drink to Jannucci. After all, his previous film, *The Death of Stalin* (2017), was so farcically foul that not a single stray act of benevolence was allowed to intrude. It's easy to think of him, in that vein, leaning toward the vengeful murk of Dickens's later books – *Hard Times* or *Little Dorrit* say, both of which specialize in the squeezing and crushing of souls. There is no one better qualified to bring out the strain of nightmare in *David Copperfield*.

Interestingly, Jannucci took colour-blind approach to casting. Dev Patel plays the titular character. Speaking to BBC News at the film's Toronto premiere, Jannucci said: "When I wanted to make *David Copperfield*, I instantly thought of Dev Patel, who has those qualities of naivety, awkwardness, and yet strength at the same time. He instantly was, for me, David. And Dev said yes, thankfully, because I couldn't think of anyone else, I didn't have a plan B. And I wanted it to feel contemporary, although it's set in 1840. For the characters in it, it's the present day, so it should feel like the present day, and feel reflective of now. I didn't want to feel bound by how you make a costume drama."



Actors who have previously played the role of David have been generally white - such as Harry Potter actor Daniel Radcliffe, who made his acting debut as the young Copperfield in a 1999 adaptation on the BBC. Dev Patel, who was Oscar-nominated for 2016's *Lion* and starred in 2008's *Slumdog Millionaire*, which won eight Oscars, commented on the film that he hoped that young children in schools would look at this movie and find a face they can relate to.

Jannucci, is best known for his biting political satire, particularly in his creation of TV series *Veep* and *The Thick of It*. *Copperfield*, therefore, marks a slight change in tone for the director. It's a softer and more human character study, with significantly less swearing than is usual for a Jannucci project. "I've never really thought of myself as someone who specialises in swearing," he laughs, "it just so happens that [those shows] conveyed worlds in which people do an awful lot of swearing".

Dev Patel, commenting on the film, said that Jannucci's casting "opened the movie up". "However, what I did want to make sure was that we didn't shy away from quite tough moments. The physical abuse of a child, the working conditions, the homelessness. I didn't want to shy away from that, but I also wanted this to be a film that any generation could come and see."

Hugh Laurie commenting on his character, said to BBC News "Mr Dick is an unusual character in that it's one of the first efforts that I know of in novel to deal with a character who suffers from mental illness, who has been traumatised and has become in some cases delusional and actually psychotic. And to see not exactly healing of that problem but to see the joy in him, which he's still capable of, to see that develop through his relationship with David Copperfield is a beautiful thing. Remember this was a time when the mentally ill were very often consigned to institutions, where there was no real prospect of a way out, or of any sort of care. That was just the sort of understanding we didn't have of mental illness." Speaking about the themes of the novel more widely, Laurie said; "I hope that it's fresh and relevant after all these years because the basic constituents are eternal. It's love and it's home and it's finding your place in the world, it's loss, and grief. It is all of these things."

Mike Widdup

Dickens on film

It is a truth universally acknowledged that Charles Dickens was a great story teller, so it is no surprise that he has appealed to film makers for over a century. My first experience of Dickens on screen was on television, rather than in the cinema, shortly after we acquired a television in 1958 (to watch the Commonwealth Games in Cardiff that year, my mother insisted). The BBC ran dramas for family viewing on Sundays at teatime, and I jumped out of my skin when Pip is surprised by Magwitch, the escaped convict, in the graveyard at the start of *Great Expectations*, screened in 1959.

What follows is my personal selection of Dickens films – feel free to disagree!

David Copperfield (1935)



Brilliantly directed by George Cukor, but inexplicably not Oscar-nominated, *David Copperfield* was the first American film for young, ten-year-old Londoner Freddie Bartholomew, who is endearing in the film without being cloyingly sweet. All the stars, especially Basil Rathbone, Jessie Ralph and Roland Young, represent the exquisite, ideal casting throughout the movie. Edna May Oliver, with her comic eccentricity, could have easily stolen the show if awarded a larger part. It's W.C. Fields, however, who gives the most memorable performance. Charles Laughton, originally assigned the role of Micawber, bowed out, feeling he wasn't doing it justice and recommended Fields. Unable to do an English accent, Fields was at least compelled to adhere strictly to the script and eliminate, for the first and only time in his films, his notorious ad-libbing. He proved ideal for the part, though he retained his unhurried, protracted delivery, with those rolling tones out of the side of his mouth. (classicfilmfreak.com)

Oliver Twist (1948)



Oliver Twist was David Lean's second adaptation of Dickens, which was preceded in 1946 by *Great Expectations*. With a cast including Robert Newton (Bill Sykes), Alec Guinness (Fagin), and Kay Walsh (Nancy) as well as John Howard Davies (Oliver), Anthony Newley (The Artful Dodger) and the splendid Kathleen Harrison as Mrs Sowerberry. The supporting cast includes Maurice Denholm, Peter Bull and – though you will miss her if you blink – Diana Dors. The film is shot in atmospheric

black-and-white (some of the early scenes in the workhouse are particularly striking) with some great set pieces, including the last scene when Bill Sykes goes up to the roof. Alec Guinness was criticised for his stereotypical interpretation of Fagin, but for my money the performance that jars is that of John Howard Davies as Oliver, who seems to me far too well-spoken to come out of the workhouse. He went on to a career in producing television comedy.

A Christmas Carol (1951)



I am a fan of Alastair Sim, not only on film but on the stage, where I was fortunate to see him towards the end of his career in

Pinero's farce *The Magistrate* in 1969. He plays the quintessential Scrooge, supported by Michael Horden (Marley), Jack Warner, George Cole and Kathleen Harrison with the narration by Peter Bull. The film was directed by Brian Desmond Hurst. It's a rather dark reading of the text, though that makes Scrooge's redemption at the end more striking. According to the Monthly Film Bulletin at the time, the film "as a whole lacks style" and Sim resembled more a "dour dyspeptic" than a miser, but concluded "the film may please in its good-natured reminder of Christmas joys, and much praise is due to Kathleen Harrison for her inimitable playing of the true Cockney."

Oliver! (1968)



Musical adaptations of novels can be hit-and-miss, but Carol Reed's version of Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* is certainly a hit. The score is memorable, the lyrics clever and

the whole comes together in a way which enriches the story rather than imposing on it. Oliver Reed plays a convincing Bill Sykes, Ron Moody is a more sympathetic Fagin and Mark Lester shines as Oliver. The underrated Megs Jenkins supports as Mrs Bedwin, with Harry Secombe and Fred Emney among others. It was nominated for 11 Academy Awards, and won six including Best Director. The Chicago Sun-Times said "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 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."

Michael Hipkins

Comments and reactions to: **The Crimson Pirate**

No of reaction slips received = 19

Average score = 6.42

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	~	2	1	4	3	2	3	4	~

Camp as Butlin's but with some clever set pieces

Not really my choice

Hokum on the high seas

Not my type of film, but entertaining

Some great action sequences, but really just high-class hokum

Burt Lancaster certainly improved with age. Too long. A new take on the age of enlightenment

Good entertaining film. Great choice!

Very enjoyable Xmas film

The short was just as swashbuckling as the main film! Great choice

Very entertaining

Fantastic rubbish

Burt in his swashbuckling prime, all teeth and rippling biceps

Position	Film	Average score
1	Nomadland	7.13
2	Parasite	7.07
3	The Farewell	6.85
4	Permission	6.60
5	The Crimson Pirate	6.42
6	Baby Driver	6.19
7	Bait	5.35

Forthcoming attraction: 27 January 2022 – **Pain and Glory**



pain and glory

Antonio Banderas gives the performance of his career as a fictional stand-in for the Spanish director in a drama that blurs the line between art and life.

Mark Kermode, The Observer

Pedro Almodóvar's Pain and Glory is the kind of indulgent and self-absorbed film that only a director with such a glittering career behind him would be allowed to get away with. It's about a filmmaker looking back on his past, mulling over his life and relationships. Imagine a Spanish version of a Bergman or Woody Allen film about love and loss and you will come close to its essence. It's a wonderfully evocative affair with a subtle, soulful performance from Antonio Banderas. The Independent