



Bugsy Malone (1976).

Production: dir. Alan Parker, Rank Pictures

Certificate: U

Run time: 93 minutes

If you liked this try: *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1939); *Some Like it Hot* (1959); *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967); *The Sting* (1974); *Freaky Friday* (1976); *The Great Muppet Caper* (1980); *Press Gang* (TV-1989); *The Commitments* (1991); *Little Man Tate* (1991) and *The Offer* (TV-2022).

On paper *Bugsy Malone* is a generic gangster film, part Capone, part Cagney, and a plot to control illicit good and the means to enforce that control. It was half remembered plots from films such as *Public Enemy* (1931) and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1939), alongside snatches of the real events of prohibition and the Valentine's Day massacre which informed a series of stories about a fictional gangster that writer and would be director Alan Parker, improvised for his children on long car rides. The idea to turn his fictional hero Malone into the subject for a film was prompted by Parker's desire to find a project that might resonate with American audiences – and financiers. The idea that 'the heroes should be played by children' was Parker's son Alex's – and Parker ran with it not only designing the film for an all child cast, but integrating elaborate pedal cars and cream firing Thompson machine guns, in a way that not only made the production possible and family friendly, but added a playful Brechtian rejection of realism. Parker's other son Nathan went on to be Oscar nominated for his screenplay for *Moon* (2010).

The late 60s and early 70s saw a huge retro-craze for 1920s/30s fashion and subjects, particularly in Hollywood. Films from *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Sting* (1973) or *The Great Gatsby* (1974), which reinvented older properties, to new stories dressing modern allegories in fringed dresses and straw boaters—*They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969), *Paper Moon* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), were commercial and critical successes in a period of real depression for Hollywood. Many of these films coming from Paramount under the guidance of studio head Robert Evans, while Paramount distributed the British made *Bugsy Malone* in the US, it was without Evans' personal backing and to modest box office returns – a family film with appeal to children was at odds with Paramount's adult orientated business model, languishing as the lower half of a double feature.

One of Britain's more overlooked directors, Alan Parker's output both at home and in Hollywood, is one of both quality and variety. His grittier films: *Midnight Express* (1978), *Birdy* (1984), *Mississippi Burning* (1988), *Come See the Paradise* (1990), *Angela's Ashes* (1999), all receiving critical plaudits at the Oscars, BAFTAs and Cannes; while his music centred films: *Fame* (1980), *Pink Floyd: The Wall* (1982), *The Commitments* (1991) and *Evita* (1996) have been popular and commercial successes. Many of these, alongside his more fantastic works - *Angel Heart* (1987),

The Road to Wellville (1994) - have found longer lives as cult films. In many ways film *Bugsy Malone*, his first feature film, foreshadows all of these elements of his career, his willingness to move between the US and British industries, his ability to make political and social issues palatable and entertaining for audiences, the bizarre eclecticism of his imagination and a desire to make films that last in the memory rather than burn briefly at the box office. It is these things also, which have made him less easy to pigeonhole and less easy to celebrate in either auteur or box-office terms.

Many of the young cast would go on to have further careers in film and TV. Parker and his team reviewed hundreds of tapes of school Christmas plays and went into New York schools and US airbases in the UK as well as the usual talent agencies looking for children to cast. Scott Baio in the title role had appeared in commercials but disliked the work, *Bugsy Malone* was his first film, but despite its poor showing in the US he went on to star in US TV shows through the 70s and 80s (*Happy Days*, *Joanie Loves Chachi* and *Charles in Charge*). John Cassisi was discovered after Parker had asked a class of Brooklyn schoolchildren who the naughtiest kid in the class was – and Cassisi was unanimously and proudly outed – he went on to further juvenile film and TV work, but as an adult, perhaps inspired by his mafioso role, ran a construction company finally going to jail for corporate fraud. Italia Conte alumnus Bonnie Langford had spent several years on the West-end stage before *Bugsy Malone* and has continued to do so, alongside a TV career which emerged after the film, including long runs in *Just William* and *Doctor Who*. Dexter Fletcher was an early graduate of the Anna Sacher Theatre, and his cameo performance of Baby Face launched an acting career film working with David Lynch and Derek Jarman, before the moving into regular TV work with *Press Gang* and *Band of Brothers*, but in the last two decades has become one of the most successful British film directors with *Sunshine on Leith* (2013), *Eddie the Eagle* (2015), *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) and *Rocketman* (2019).

Clearly the film is in many ways stolen by the twelve year old Jodie Foster as Tallulah. Acting since she was six, and making *Bugsy* immediately after making *Taxi Driver* (1976) her second film with Martin Scorsese (in which she also plays a sex worker), Foster has gone on to become not only one of the most lauded actresses of her generation but also one of the most successful directors and producers. Parker himself noted in 2015:

*Jodie was impeccable and extremely "set savvy", she'd made more films than I had, so probably knew more about filmmaking. I think she directed me as much as I directed her. She was extremely knowledgeable of the filmmaking process—she could have complicated technical conversations with the camera crew and script supervisor that were beyond her years. Even then, when she was twelve, I joked that if I got sick, she could take over.*¹

¹ Alan Parker 'Bugsy Malone: The Making of the Film' 2015