



## **The First Fagin (Documentary - Australia-Israel)**

By *Richard Kuipers*  
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A Ronin Films release of a Wild Fury, Roar Film, Rosenthal Films production in association with ZDF, ARTE, Screen Tasmania, Melbourne Film Festival Premiere Fund, Screen Queensland. (International sales: Flame Distribution, Artarmon.) Produced by Veronica Fury, Alan Rosenthal, Stephen Thomas. Executive producers, Hugh Marks, Shaun Miller. Co-producer, Helen Gaynor. Directed, written by Alan Rosenthal, Helen Gaynor, based on the book "The First Fagin: The True Story of Ikey Solomon" by Judith Sackville-O'Donnell. With: Ryk Goddard, Carrie McLean, Guy Hooper, Rogan Brown, Chris Cornish, John Menezies, James Casey, Mel King, Thomas Byers, Mat Burton, Amery Jackson, Natalie Gartlan, Miriam Margolyes. Narrator: Miriam Margolyes.

**An engaging combo of dramatic reconstruction and talking-heads docu, "The First Fagin" charts the life and crimes of 19th-century criminal Isaac "Ikey" Solomon, said to be the inspiration for Fagin in "Oliver Twist." Tracing Solomon's colorful career from London to Gotham and the Van Diemen's Land penal colony, the pic can't always synch its period-drama ambitions with its modest budget, but few auds will feel short-changed. World-premiered at Melbourne, and cleverly timed to coincide with the bicentennial of Dickens' birth, "Fagin," which goes out theatrically Down Under on Nov. 15, should attract plenty of fest invitations and broadcaster interest.**

Acknowledging that Solomon's influence on Dickens' famous character is known and widely accepted in literary circles, the docu is fashioned primarily as an eye-opener for viewers with little or no knowledge of the connection. Following the path of 2002 book "The First Fagin: The True Story of Ikey Solomon" by Aussie author Judith Sackville-O'Donnell, what unfolds is a ripping yarn that would command attention and no small measure of amazement even without the link with Dickens.

Making up the bulk of the running time are reconstructed drama segments, starting with one showing Solomon (Ryk Goddard), the son of a Jewish criminal, graduating from pickpocket to the most successful receiver of stolen goods in early 19th-century London. In and out of custody most of his adult life, Solomon served six years in a squalid prison hulk (a decommissioned naval ship converted into a floating jail), and acquired folk-hero status with a spectacular escape from Newgate prison and a flight to New York in 1827.

Occasionally speaking directly to camera, Goddard's Solomon appeals for sympathy with tales of how anti-Semitism contributed to his career path, and how, as an "honorable" crook, he did everything out of love for wife Ann (Carrie McLean) and their large brood. High on his agenda is correcting false assumptions his activities were the inspiration for Fagin's worst habits, such as organizing gangs of young pickpockets.

Nicely weaving in illuminating analysis by Aussie historians and unobtrusive voiceover narration by British thesp Miriam Margolyes, co-helmets Helen Gaynor and Alan Rosenthal move swiftly from one extraordinary event to the next. Because of an appalling frame-up that saw Ann convicted of theft and transported to Van Diemen's Land in Tasmania, Solomon ends up in the same penal colony, where his supposedly airtight immunity from further prosecution proves no match for the extreme wrath of Sir George Arthur (Guy Hooper), the island's notoriously severe governor.

In their first major acting roles, Goddard and McLean are convincing as the couple whose plight will evoke sympathy, particularly in Australia, where convict ancestry is widely embraced as a source of pride.

Although the movie's lean budget is distractingly obvious in several sequences, the story's power and standout photography of historic locations in Tasmania help win the day. The rest of the technical aspects are fine.

Camera (color, HD), Jaems Grant; editor, Wayne Hyett; music, Guy Gross; production designers, Neil Angwin, Tim Burgin; costume designer, Jane Hyland; sound (stereo), Michael Gissing; associate producers, Kath Symmons, Storry Walton; assistant director, Damien Grant; casting, Jane Binning, Jo Rippon. Reviewed at Melbourne Film Festival (Australian Showcase), Aug. 16, 2012. Running time: 87 MIN.