

Encore's in Concert Performance Of Lionel Bart's...

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# Encore's in Concert Performanc e Of Lionel

**Bart's <sup>^</sup>  
"Oliver!" At  
City Center,  
Saturday,  
May 13th,  
2023  
Reviewed**



Iman Lababedi | May 14, 2023

Medium Cool, Theatre

Lionel Bart



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Can you write about Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist" without discussing the repulsive way England in the Victorian era treated their children? "Oliver Twist" was a protest novel wrapped in a typical Dickens

protest novel wrapped in a typical Dickens cliffhanger; his subject matter, from David Copperfield, Great Expectations, to Nicholas Nickleby to, yes, "Oliver Twist", and more, was child abuse. Dickens wrote about children in extreme jeopardy because he had been a child in extreme jeopardy at the age of twelve when his father was stuck in debtors prison and Dickens was forced to work at Warren's Blacking Factory pasting labels on shoe polish containers to provide for the family.

I know more about child labor than I wish I did because my father, Charif, in Damascus in the very early 20th century, was sent to work pre-teenager, and went to school as he could (where he was so smart he was paid to teach the other children). His father had died in some long forgotten war and his mother ended up in a lunatic asylum (known today as a psychiatrist ward). He was raised by his beloved big sister, and she died after he had been shipped out Nigeria as a fifteen year old to make his fortune. The family feared to tell him because they were scared he would stop sending money, and when he returned to Syria to discover his loss he was heartbroken. While Charif didn't discuss it with his children, he probably should have warned us how tenuous our lives were.

These were all things I didn't much understand when I saw the glorious musical motion picture at the tender age of

twelve as well – a young rat myself, and it took myself and the other kids at school by storm with us becoming amateur pickpockets for the entire Christmas term.

But even besides child labor and, though not mentioned but read between the lines, child prostitution. If Bill Sykes -the violent henchman at the heart of the story-significant other Nancy wasn't set to work the streets it is only because Victorian slum prudery would have stopped Dickens from spelling it out. This is dark as night and if Lionel Bart manages the expectations of a family friendly entertainment with the brutal life of London in the late 1830s (Queen Victoria came to power in 1837, the year the first installments of "Oliver Twist"), it doesn't change the sad truth. We are worse to our offspring than many other mammals.

"Oliver!" was a wonderful movie and only one of two musicals (the other was "The Sound Of Music") I can sing from one end to the other. The composer, Lionel Bart (born Begleiter) was Jewish despite the racism poured all over the great Ron Moody's portrayal of the pound of flesh-er Jewish character Fagin. The music was a mix of Jewish traditional (listen for the violins that back Fagin). UK music hall, and mainstream pop balladeering. The musical is a (food) glorious (food) thing, the ballads, "When will I Be Loved" and "As Long As He Needs Me" no less than "Oom-

Pah-Pah” and “You’ve Got To Pick A Pocket Or Two”.

But I had not seen in on stage till yesterday. The first production opened on the West End in 1960, moving to Broadway in 1963, and the last Broadway production was in 1984 (if I had had the money I would have certainly gone) with Ron Moody (did I mention what a wonderful actor he was?) and (wait for it) Patti Lupone as Nancy: personally, I should have sold my mother for a ticket. While there was a 2009 revival on the West End with Rowan Atkinson as Fagin, it didn’t make the trip.

So... 39 years after the last time New York got to see Oliver, we see it again... for two weeks (it closes today but will probably be resuscitated for the 2024 season). It is part of City Center “Encore” series where they have two weeks to rehearse and then put on a show with open book. If you are a theatre fan you certainly know the Encore series, “Oliver!” is their 84th production (their 85th is arriving in June, “The Light in the Piazza” by Adam Guettel -our best living musical theatre composer since the loss of Stephen Sondheim).

“Oliver!” doesn’t and couldn’t be a great production the way director Lear deBessonet’s “Into The Woods” (which transferred to Broadway [here](#)) was. For all I loved about “into The Woods” it is very like “Chicago” (which in 1996 went from

Encores to Broadway... where it remains), in that it lacks production values which is an "of course, what did you think?" but Into The Woods didn't need them and Oliver does not necessarily for Encores but will if they move to Broadway). Before you charge me \$500 a tix show us the money you have (will spend) to get us in the theatre.

But the orchestration is perfect and its best performers are magical. I haven't seen Raul Esparza on Broadway since 2012's "Leap Of Faith" but he remains a top Broadway leading man and his performance as Fagin owes not all that much to Ron Moody. Ron was 100% Jewish and even so, he went right to the edge of anti-Semitism (not Bob Dylan Jewishness but Shylock) and only the good humor of the entire production saved him. Raul is the least Jewish performance of Fagin you will see: by the end, with Raul leaning at the side after losing everything, his lack of Jewish finds him a charming criminal and all the religious bigotry dissipated in a performance that includes a "Reviewing The Situation" for the ages. If Esparza is great then so is Lilli Cooper as Nancy and she sings everything exceptionally well whether fast, slow, main or not.

As for Oliver himself, Benjamin Pajak is a star. At twelve years of age he is a pro (and, of course, how about child labor?

Apparently, entertainment is the only place

Apparently, entertainment is the only place it is acceptable) , last year he was a standout in the Wintergarden revival of "The Music Man" ([here](#)) and his take on "When Will I Be Loved" is a standard bearer. Otherwise, the performances aren't quite good enough. The performance lacks the charm it needs.

I believe "Oliver!" will make its way to Broadway, Cameron Mackintosh has the skill set to get it there, but if they don't put the money in it won't do very well. And if they don't hurry up Benjamin Pajak will age out of it.

Grade: B



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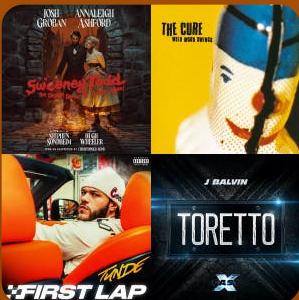


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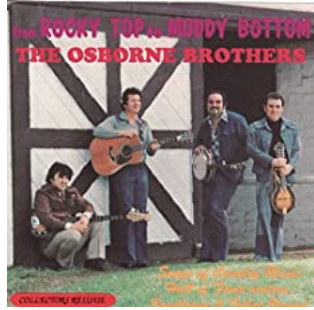
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