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New York City Center Encores!: Oliver!

An energetic, entertaining revival of a Golden Age of Broadway musical not seen in New York in 40 years.

Posted on May 7, 2023 by Joel Benjamin in Musicals, Off-Broadway

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Joel Benjamin,
Critic

The day I saw the original Broadway production of *Oliver!* there was a full eclipse of the sun as I left that matinee. Even without the additional excitement of an astronomical phenomenon, the New York City Center Encores! production of this Lionel Bart gem is, in every way, just as wonderful and exciting as the original.

When Mary-Mitchell Campbell's baton brought out the first notes of the *Oliver!* overture from the Encores! Orchestra, the memorable tunes just flowed and didn't stop until more than two hours later at the standing ovation and exit music. Lionel Bart's score is rich in melody, the lyrics and the libretto evoking Dickens while still being theatrical. (The late William David

still being theatrical. (The late William David Brohn did the lavish orchestral arrangements.)



Raúl Esparza, Benjamin Pajak, Lilli Cooper and cast in a scene from the Encores!' revival of Lionel Bart's "Oliver!" at the New York City Center (Photo credit: Joan Marcus)

Lear deBessonet, the show's director (and the Encores!' artistic director) has fashioned a fast-moving evening filled with great performances starting with the sweet, fresh-faced Oliver of Benjamin Pajak and the incredibly talented ensemble of kids who gambol about with abandon.

The plot of *Oliver!* is a distillation of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*: a poor orphan boy cast out of a workhouse taken in by a band of juvenile pickpockets led by the nefarious Fagin who finally finds happiness with his true family.



Julian Lerner, Benjamin Pajak and cast in a scene from the 'Encores!' revival of Lionel Bart's "Oliver!" at the New York City Center (Photo credit: Joan Marcus)

The role of Fagin, leader of the kiddy gang is played by Raúl Esparza who eschews the obvious Jewish colors to present a more nuanced emotional portrait of this controversial character. His two solo numbers, "My Name!" and "Reviewing the Situation" are well-balanced between humor and pathos.

Lilli Cooper plays the tragic heroine, Nancy with sensuality and a huge, clarion voice that put over her two great numbers: "It's a Fine Life" and, particularly, "As Long As He Needs Me," a "My Man" type song which she imbued with passion. The object of her love is Bill Sikes, played by the handsome, realistically menacing Tam Mutu.



Brad Oscar, Benjamin Pajak, Mary Testa and cast in a scene from the Encores!' revival of Lionel Bart's "Oliver!" at the New York City Center (Photo credit: Joan Marcus)

Theater veterans Mary Testa, Brad Oscar, Rashidra Scott, Thom Sesma and Michael Siberry played and sang the comic characters with glee. As The Artful Dodger, Julian Lerner was deft in movement and song.

From the rough-hewn, wooden, multi-tiered set by David Rockwell (shades of original designer Sean Kenny!) to the atmospheric lighting of Justin Townsend, this *Oliver!* belies the short preparation and rehearsal period these productions have. Sarafina Bush's costumes are colorful and period perfect. Lorin Latarro's energetic choreography takes full advantage of the set and the ensemble's talents.



Cast of "Oliver!" and Community Youth Ensemble in a scene from the Encores!' revival at the New York City Center (Photo credit: Joan Marcus)

Encores! hits another bulls-eye with *Oliver!*. Perhaps a Broadway transfer is in the future?

New York City Center Encores! *Oliver!* (through May 14, 2023)

New York City Center, 131 West 55th Street, in Manhattan

For tickets, call [212-581-1212](tel:212-581-1212) or visit <http://www.NYCityCenter.org>

Running time: two hours and 30 minutes including one intermission

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Lilli Cooper

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Mary-Mitchell Campbell

Michael Siberry

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Oliver!

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Raul Esparza

Sarafina Bush

Sean Kenny

Tam Mutu

Thom Sesma

William David Brohn

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About Joel Benjamin (492 Articles)

JOEL BENJAMIN was a child performer on Broadway and danced with leading modern dance and ballet companies. Joel has been attending theater, ballet and opera performances ever since childhood, becoming quite opinionated

over the years. He was the founder and artistic director of the American Chamber Ballet and subsequently was massage therapist to the stars before becoming a reviewer and memoirist. He is a member of the Outer Critics Circle.

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2 Comments on New York City Center Encores!: Oliver!



Craig Plaxe // May 10, 2023 at 6:23 am // Reply

I just read Joel Benjamin's review of the Encores production of Oliver!

He mentions Raul Esparza (as Fagin) singing two solos including "My Name".

That song is performed by Tam Mutu as Bill Sykes.

Such a pity that your journalist specifically mentions a song by the wrong actor/ character. 😞

I am saddened that a theater critic can include such an obvious error in his review.

It makes me wonder if he even saw the show at all. Or took the time to glance through his playbill.

This is not as serious as incorrect political reports..... but it does fall under the category of "fake news"!!



Cassandra kaye // May 12, 2023 at 1:08 pm //

Reply

I saw "Oliver!" a few nights ago and Raul Esparza as Fagin did sing "REVIEWING THE SITUATION." and was great!

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