

## New York Stage Review



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# OLIVER!: PLEASE, MAY WE HAVE SOME MORE

By **David Finkle**

★★★★★ Raul Ezparza stars and Lear deBessonet directs this nourishing Encores! revival of the Lionel Bart classic

*Benjamin Pajak and Raul Esparza in Lionel Bart's  
Oliver! Photo: Joan Marcus*

Hey, what's with the City Center Encores! series since Lear deBessonet grabbed the artistic director reins three seasons back? She may not be clinging like barnacles to the institution mandate—along the lines of discovering the lost musicals—but she's certainly stirring up a fracas in the move-to-Broadway category. In the last year she's sent *Into the Wood* (Michael Arden directing) and *Parade* (which she directed) to the Great White Way, totaling between them 14 Tony nominations just this Tony-crazed week.

And now she's brought back a genuine classic, Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* (premiered London 1960, New York 1963, won the Oscar 1968), which sure-as-shootin' looks like another production the Encores! nabobs must be considering for a Main Stem transfer, and sure-as-God-made-little-green-apples looks to be another Tony-nom flypaper strip. If they aren't thinking in that direction, it's a story for the entertainment pages.

The only challenge this marvelous *Oliver!* look-see offers a dazed, make-that-dazzled, reviewer is

offers a dazed—make that, dazzled—reviewer is where to start piling on the encomia. Probably makes sense to start with the focal Charles Dickens figures, 9-year-old Oliver Twist (Benjamin Pajak), here described as 11, and the larcenous Fagin (Raúl Esparza). Because their performances enhance the revival equally, the only fair way to approach this is alphabetically.

One of Broadway's most accomplished leading men—and without question one of the top two or three leading men in musicals (his “Buried Alive” for the second-to-last *Company* revival is definitive)—Esparza hasn't led a tuner since the unfortunately ill-fated *Leap of Faith* (2012). His return as Fagin draws on talents, like high-kick dancing, he hasn't exhibited before. The singing remains movingly full-throated. This Fagin isn't the completely evil menace previous Fagins have stressed. He plays the part with a more humorous edge and makes much of the man's delight in the jewels he has amassed for his old age. It works a charm. At last Esparza, long missed, is back as good, if not better, than ever.

Pajak, now 12, isn't the revelation in this role he might have been if he hadn't displayed his unmistakable talent as Winthrop in last season's *The Music Man*, where he all but stole scenes from Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster. The clever

preadolescent knows how to be vulnerable when that's called for, as when pleading for some more gruel. When egged on to speak up, for instance, in defense of his deceased mother, he's got the grit. His singing? It may be that no Oliver to date has delivered the first of the orphan lad's two question songs, "Where is Love?" with such sweet force. (The second is "Who Will Buy?") The strength of his voice and, perhaps even more so, his mature phrasing is sure, heart-rending, instinctive. Bravo.

The rest of the cast? Again, where to start? Lili Cooper's Nancy brings the appropriate high spirits to "It's a Fine Life" and the double-entendre "Oom-Pah-Pah." All the same, Nancys are judged by how they deliver "As Long As He Needs Me," and the verdict is in: She builds the romantic anthem about abusive lover Bill Sykes exactly right the first time and again in the reprise, which must have been inserted by Bart to clinch its place as the show's primary Top 40 candidate. Though Nancy insists in the lyric that "I won't betray his trust," she does on Oliver's behalf and pays the price. Cooper is up to the task.

What of the many supporting players? Julian Lerner is a puckish Artful Dodger of whom there definitely is not enough. Tam Mutu elicits thrills and chills as Bill Sykes, his "My Name" virtually icicle-forming.

Brad Oscar and Mary Testa, the two always effervescent, are effervescent again as the forever feuding Mr. Bumble and Widow Corney. Thom Sesma and Rashidra Scott shine as the conniving Mr. and Mrs. Sowerby. Michael Siberry, as Oliver's benefactor Mr. Brownlow, radiates goodness and integrity. In two smaller roles, Alma Cuervo has her moments.

Then there are Fagin's pick-pocketing boys, not credited singularly, but certainly a credit to Geoff Josselson and Jimmy Larkin of the casting Telsey office. It's been sometime since a chorus of young dancers this athletic has been scoped on a Broadway stage, which is also a tribute to Lorin Latarro, who choreographs the entire ensemble with buoyant finesse. There's one number including umbrellas as carriage wheels that's a true inspiration.

Who else needs be crowned with laurels? Mary-Mitchell Campbell, who conducts the endlessly cheerful, endlessly rousing score, easily takes care of that assignment and with a proper-sized orchestra. David Rockwell's set adheres to the evidently limited budget Encores! allows. As usual, he does it with imagination. Notably, he pays homage to the raised runway reached by two staircases that original designer Sean Kenny introduced for much lively use. Also, shoutouts to costumer Sarafina

Rush, lighting designer Justin Townsend, and sound designer Alex Neumann.

Is this revival missing anything? Yes: Bill Sykes' terrifying hound Bullseye is only heard barking offstage, thanks to designer Neumann. His onstage presence would have added to the general scarification. But perhaps practicality rules in these circumstances.

Otherwise, the only final comment to make on this *Oliver!* can be cadged from a Bart lyric: "Cheerio, but be back soon."

**Oliver! opened May 3, 2023, at City Center and runs through May 14. Tickets and information: [nycitycenter.org](https://www.nycitycenter.org)**

David Finkle is a freelance journalist specializing in the arts and politics. He has reviewed theater for several decades, for publications including *The Village Voice* and Theatermania.com, where for 12 years he was chief drama critic. He is also currently chief drama critic at The Clyde Fitch Report. For an archive of older reviews, go [here](#). Email: [david@nystagereview.com](mailto:david@nystagereview.com).

## OLIVER!: A PROBLEMATIC CLASSIC BENEFITS FROM A RECONSIDERED VILLAIN

BY [SANDY MACDONALD](#)

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BY STEVEN SUSKIN

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BY ROMA TORRE

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BY SANDY MACDONALD

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PETER PAN GOES WRONG: HEAP O'  
CORNBY, CHEESY MAYHEM GOES  
RIGHT

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## SWEENEY TODD: GOD, THAT'S GREAT

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## BOB FOSSE'S DANCIN': A LOVE STORY OF RHYTHM AND RHYME

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