



THEATER

# ***Oliver!* Review: Benjamin Pajak Leaves Audiences Wanting More in Lumpy Revival**

Never before has a boy triumphed more.

by [Dan Rubins](#) · May 6, 2023 ·



No matter where fate propels Oliver Twist—from the workhouse to the funeral home to the hideout of a master pickpocket—the orphan maintains a fierce sense of who he is, plus a willingness to stand up for himself and, yes, even ask for more in his pursuit of a loving home. And Benjamin Pajak, the actor who plays him, is on a similarly dogged quest: a nearly one-kid glorious mission to rescue the New York City Center's lumpy revival of Lionel Bart's 1960 musical adaptation of Charles Dickens's classic novel *Oliver Twist*.

If it felt like hyperbole to praise the 10-year-old playing Winthrop Paroo in the revival of [\*The Music Man\*](#) as the most electrifying performer on stage, there's no need to pull punches now that he's taken on a title role. Indeed, Pajak, now 12 years old, is a marvel in *Oliver!* For one, his

vocal control in “Where Is Love?,” Bart’s most beautiful ballad, is astonishing. He weds each gradation of vibrato or backphrasing to Oliver’s evolving emotional experience throughout the song, and while “Where Is Love?” is simple enough to perform with one plaintive tone, Pajak imbues his delivery with subtle shifts as Oliver moves from despair to hope and even to rage.

This is also an angry Oliver. He’d rather be polite, but he’s unafraid to fight for himself when he’s in a bind, the fleeting waves of ferality hinting at the depths of the trauma of his young years. In a company that’s often tonally scattered, Pajak just plays each beat with thoughtful honesty and not a moment of mugging: When Oliver finally joins the dancing in the spirited “I’d Do Anything,” we fully believe that he’s grown comfortable enough in his new, strange environment of the London criminal underworld to join the other boys.

*Oliver!* hasn't had a major New York City production since the ill-fated 1984 Broadway revival starring Patti LuPone as Nancy and Ron Moody, who also starred in Carol Reed's best picture-winning film adaptation from 1968, as Fagin. Its greatest asset remains its score, not only because Bart's tunes are both catchy and, in the cases of "Where Is Love?," "Who Will Buy?," and "As Long As He Needs Me," gorgeous, but also because the songs feel so closely tied to character, harmonically idiosyncratic in a way that

honors Dickens's ensemble of eccentrics. Under the baton of Mary-Mitchell Campbell, the Encores! orchestra sounds characteristically delightful playing William David Brohn's 2009 dramatic orchestrations.

As artistic director of Encores!, Lear deBessonet has been on a tear, with last year seeing both her production of [\*Into the Woods\*](#) and Michael Arden's production of *Parade* transferring to Broadway lickety-split (they'll duke it out for the best revival Tony next month). With *Into the Woods*, deBessonet's tendencies toward self-aware on-stage antics paid off, with Sondheim and Lapine's cerebral second act serving as a counterbalance for the giddiness of some of the staging choices. But as great as much of *Oliver!* can be, it's not cerebral, and when deBessonet overcooks the silliness, the show's meatier elements aren't strong enough to even things out.



Benjamin Pajak and Raúl Esparza *Oliver!* © Joan Marcus

What made deBessonnet's *Into the Woods* such a miraculous pleasure, too, was her total trust of the text and her rigorous casting of actors who dug into the show's words and melodies to find every last diamond. But the cast for *Oliver!* too often looks elsewhere than Bart's clever lyrics and charming, if occasionally over-simple, dialogue for inspiration.

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As the cruel Mr. Bumble and Widow Corney, Brad Oscar and Mary Testa bulldoze through the mild wit of their courtship number, “I Shall Scream,” playing it unrepentantly brassy and bawdy. By staging “My Name,” a song usually delivered by Bill Sikes (Tam Mutu) to a quaking bar full of Londoners, as a soliloquy to the audience, deBessonnet makes Bill less a menace than a meathead. (That last choice, at least, just makes a bad decision worse: Bart should never have given a song to sing to the impenetrably inhumane Bill Sikes in the first place.)

Then there’s Fagin (Raúl Esparza), whom Bart re-energized, sanding down Dickens’s anti-Semitism and imagining the character as a sort of charismatic trickster. But Esparza isn’t a natural comedian. He’s historically been most successful in roles that are moodier, like Bobby in *Company* and Wilson Mizner in *Road Show*. As a result, most of Fagin’s

scenes, especially the book scenes, feel especially sleepy, and since his rapport with the boys in his care is never fun to watch, it starts to grow more discomfiting and creepy than intended. (Esparza's standby, Gavin Lee, who played Squidward in *The Spongebob Squarepants Musical*, is a really gifted physical actor, so it would be interesting to see what he might do with the role.)

Luckily, Pajak's Oliver is well-matched in Nancy, the pickpocket school alumna whom Dickens, but not Bart, explicitly labeled as a prostitute, played with steely tenderness by Lilli Cooper. Cooper's eager warmth toward the kid thieves suggests how much Nancy, feeling trapped in an abusive relationship with Bill Sikes, longs to escape back into a more carefree childhood.

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It's that tensely violent pairing that yields the heartbreaking "As Long As He Needs Me," which Cooper delivers with gritty self-loathing. Anyone who's misinterpreted the song as a defense of domestic abuse need only hear Cooper's performance to recognize how desperately Nancy tries to justify staying with the only person she imagines to have the as-yet-unrealized potential to make her feel less alone. It's the musical's most psychologically real and complex showpiece.

But the grisly climax of Nancy's self-actualization is a bit of a mess. This

production sometimes seems caught clumsily between exuberant extravagance (who *doesn't* do a backflip in this ensemble?) and stripped-down, self-conscious concert staging (the adult ensemble singers sometimes carry scripts even though they've clearly all memorized their lyrics). The busy action sequences especially, like Bill's rooftop chase and Oliver's flight from the police at the end of act one, become hard to follow.

Throughout, there's far more attention to Lorin Latarro's choreography than to the book scenes—not to mention the accents, which are all over the place.

It's easy, though, to blissfully ignore a lot when you're blinded by a 250-watt light, as Pajak doesn't just steal the show, he saves it. He not only delivers a searingly sweet, smart performance that transcends the production, he's so convincingly engaged in Oliver's adventures that he makes his scene partners seem more alive.

*Oliver!* is now running at the New York City Center.



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## Dan Rubins

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