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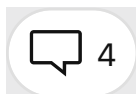
At the Philharmonic

At Carnegie Hall

'Oliver!' Review: Tunes, Glorious Tunes, in a Grimly Cheerful Revival

The Encores! production, directed by Lear deBessonet, looks to deepen and darken a musical that resists the change. But it's still delightful.

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Who dares ask for more food? From left, Mary Testa as Widow Corney, Brad Oscar as Mr. Bumble and Benjamin Pajak as Oliver, with in the Encores! production of “Oliver!” at New York City Center. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times



By **Jesse Green**

May 4, 2023, 3:36 p.m. ET

Oliver!

Though the orphan boys at the workhouse are beaten regularly and fed only gruel, the sign looming above them reads “God Is Love.”

That grim irony, underlining the practice of child labor in the supposedly advanced society of 19th-century London, is echoed in the spooky sounds you hear as [the](#)

[Encores! production of “Oliver!”](#) begins: As murk, woodwind rasps and stringy insectlike buzzing. Has Lionel Bart’s musical, based on the Dickens novel

“Oliver Twist” and first seen on Broadway in 1963, been turned into “Sweeney Todd”?

The version that opened a two-week run at City Center on Wednesday, directed by Lear deBessonet, is certainly grimmer than any “Oliver!” I’ve seen, which isn’t many; it’s seldom done professionally, for both casting and structural reasons. But the underlying high spirits of Bart’s adaptation, stuffed with tunes that are merry even when they’re sad, cannot long lie dormant. Soon the boys — a wonderfully uncloying ensemble — are bursting with mirth as they sing and dance to “Food, Glorious Food,” a number so irrepressible (with choreography by Lorin Latarro) that even a heavy concept can’t weigh it down.

Which is not to say a serious approach is unwarranted. Recall that Dickens, who was himself sent to work in a boot polish factory when he was 12, refers to Oliver in the first sentence of the novel as an “item of mortality” — more a death-in-progress than a life. And Bart, at least in his lyrics, does not stint on bleakness; even the bouncy title song is violent, proposing various ugly fates for the boy who dares to

ask for more food.

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“What will he do when he’s turned black and blue?” Mr. Bumble, the workhouse beadle, asks gleefully, in six-eight rhythm.

Foreground from left: Lilli Cooper, Raúl Esparza and Pajak deliver terrific turns in Lear deBessonet's production, our critic writes. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

But deBessonet's entertaining and beautifully sung production, featuring terrific turns by Lilli Cooper as the proud doxy Nancy and Raúl Esparza as the criminal den leader Fagin — as well as a touching one by Benjamin Pajak in the title role — is at this point still too muddy to be convincing as sociology, let alone drama.

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'Harmony': The musical, about a German singing group upended by the rise of Nazism, will finally open on Broadway this fall with songs by Barry Manilow and Bruce Sussman.

The Maestro Wore Blue: Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Metropolitan Opera's music director, wears custom-made outfits tailored to each production, challenging creative norms.



Partly that's the result of the extremely short Encores! rehearsal period, which compresses what probably needs months into 12 days. The staging is sloppy in places, and the violent bits involving Bill Sikes (Tam Mutu), which in a rethinking like this should be shocking, aren't. Spoiler alert: It appears that Nancy's dress, not Nancy herself, is bludgeoned to death at the end.

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The other difficulty in reframing "Oliver!"

for 2023 is built into the material. Like many musicals made from doorstep novels, it cherry-picks the plot so vigorously that what's left can hardly support the songs. (The Encores! production uses a further abbreviated script.) Oliver's transit from the workhouse to an undertaker's establishment to Fagin's hide-out, spread across eight chapters in the Dickens, takes what seems like a blink of an eye here. It becomes thin gruel indeed.

And the songs themselves are problematic. Though there is barely a dud in the score, and many (like "I'd Do Anything" and "Oom-Pah-Pah") are so hummable that the audience joins in almost subliminally, they are not so much dramatizations of the action as ditties vaguely suggested by it. "Consider Yourself," the number in which Fagin's pickpockets, led by the Artful Dodger (Julian Lerner), welcome Oliver to the gang, opens out illogically into a full-

company number featuring buskers, laborers, flower girls and 20 extras — children from New York City schools — in a way that screams unreconstructed musical comedy.

Julian Lerner, center left, as the Artful Dodger in a number with Pajak, other cast members and students. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

You wouldn't want to prevent that; there's too much pleasure to be reaped. Bart was an untrained tune savant, a latter-day Irving Berlin; if the songs are so hummable it's probably because his composition method was built on humming them to an amanuensis.

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Oliver!” that meant delightful numbers even where a modern musical would say none was needed. “I Shall Scream!” served up with raucous good humor by Brad Oscar and Mary Testa as Mr. Bumble and Widow Corney, is utterly beside the point, as is “That’s Your Funeral,” a similarly bouncy number for Mr. Sowerberry and his wife (Thom Sesma and Rashidra Scott) even though they are funeral directors.

However inapt as drama, and however much real estate they steal from the development of a richer plot, such songs serve an important function, like the witty prose of the novel. They make the darkness of the tale bearable, almost literally — bearing you through the story

bearing you through the story.

Nor is it just the music that has that effect, though it's always jaunty. (Except when, in songs like "Boy for Sale," "Where Is Love?," "Who Will Buy?" and "As Long as He Needs Me," it's show-stoppingly lovely.) The lyrics do similar uplifting work.

Though [deBessonnet has referred to them as "harrowing,"](#) that quality is often undermined by the intricate rhymes, many built on cockney pronunciations (uppity/cup o' tea) that can't help but produce a smile.

That makes the project of darkening the show difficult. Though the busily atmospheric orchestrations by William David Brohn, created for a 1994 production at the London Palladium, expand the number of musicians to 21 from 12, I'm not sure that the originals, with more of a music-hall than a symphonic quality, didn't match the material better. Likewise, the overlay of deBessonnet's vision sometimes

obscures more than it reveals.

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But perhaps we do not need “Oliver!” to be a Gesamtkunstwerk. Dickens intended the tale, after all, as popular entertainment, serialized over the course of two years and highly indulgent of gaudy melodrama.

Also, of course, in its presentation of Fagin, indulgent of antisemitism. Compulsively referred to as “the Jew” in the novel and often played with a prosthetic nose and a Yiddish accent in earlier productions, Fagin is an awful caricature even though Bart, born Lionel Begleiter, was Jewish.

Esparza — sallow-eyed, greasy-haired and perpetually sniffly, but without prosthetics

— dials that down almost to zero, though the music still bears traces of Fagin’s religion in the klezmerlike violin-and-clarinet accompaniment to the song “Reviewing the Situation” with which deBessonnet thoughtfully ends this production.

The song asks: “Can somebody change?” Fagin’s doubtful answer is “S’possible.”

I too am doubtful about the possibility of change, at least for musicals like “Oliver!” (And keep in mind that in the Dickens, Fagin is eventually executed.) They can’t all be “Sweeney”; they don’t have the bones for it. But that doesn’t mean it’s not worth reinvesting in what made them meaningful in the first place, if dividends of delight keep coming. For that, I’d do anything.

Oliver!

Through May 14 at New York City Center, Manhattan;
nycitycenter.org. Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes.

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