



THEATER →

'Oliver!' Review: Young Star Benjamin Pajak Shines in Mixed Revival

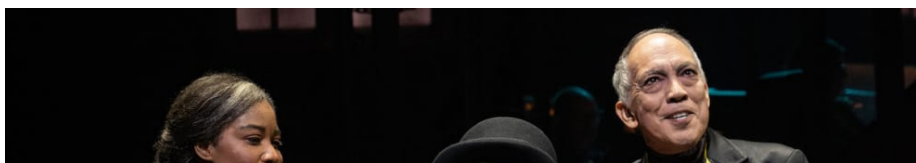
| FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD! |

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📷 Joan Marcus

It would be wrong to say “a star is born” when it comes to Benjamin Pajak. The star of the Encores!’ production of *Oliver!* (New York City Center, to May 14) may only be 12, but he already has a sterling Broadway credit to his name, as a charming scene-stealer in *The Music Man*. But wait till you hear “Where Is Love?” as sung by Pajak, Oliver’s cri-de-coeur and plaintive question to the universe around him.

A young orphan, who is terribly abused and whose foggy parentage is the plot’s major mystery, his is not simply a song of victimhood. Oliver scrappily stands up to all the villains around him, as he tries to find—
against a background of workhouses and

against a background of workhouses and venal exploiters—some kind of happiness and security. “Where is love?” is a genuine question, a both sweet-voiced and disbelieving interrogation of unseen forces, Oliver claiming love for his own as something he deserves as much as wants. If only the show burrowed into that questing, determined personality more.

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Pajak sings the song so well—you can get a taste of how much with [this Playbill rehearsal video](#)—it almost brings the show to a standstill. There are other moments like this

in Lear deBessonet's production (deBessonet is also artistic director of Encores!)—familiar crowd-pleasing numbers sung with gusto by Pajak and the whole cast. But there are other moments that jar. And then there is the musical itself, whose themes and tonal shifts and characterizations seem even more queasy and weird in 2023. *Oliver!* is a curious beast that sometimes zings with old-fashioned musical theater pizzazz and sometimes feels less sure about what it is showing, and even less sure in what it is saying about what it is showing.

This All-Star 'Into the Woods' Is a Perfect Sondheim Tribute

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Tim Teeman



Still, there is excitement about this show. Think about Encores!' present garland-laureled, transfer-to-Broadway strike rate.

Into the Woods and *Parade*, which both began life under the same revival-of-old-classics umbrella at City Center, have 14 Tony nominations between them this year. Given *Oliver!*'s basket-overfloweth list of toe-tappers, it should feel like a shoo-in for the next Broadway transfer.

Maybe it will. The achievement of mounting *Oliver!* in such a short space of time for a two-week run is an impressive feat in itself. This is not merely a concert-sung route through famous tunes, but a fully staged production, with dazzling choreography by Lorin Latarro, and Mary-Mitchell Campbell conducting a bracing, note-perfect orchestra. The problem is the story, and the smiles intended to be elicited by wonderful songs like “Food, Glorious Food,” which really is about child hunger and exploitation—the uniformly excellent young person’s chorus holding aloft bowls and clutching their empty tummies desperately.



Benjamn Pajak, left, and Raúl Esparza in 'Oliver!.'

📷 Joan Marcus

Oliver himself is physically and verbally abused by every adult he comes into contact with early on, but the musical and book are not really interested in interrogating what this means. The cruelty is a comical and

this means. The cruelty is a comical and musical means to an end, but today it is impossible to watch what he goes through without that being informed by a modern awareness of child exploitation (economic and sexual), child trafficking, and child abuse. Just because these things may have been unquestionably embedded in the time of Dickens, on whose novel the musical is based, does not mean they translate so easily to now.

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Lionel Bart's musical, first performed in Britain in 1960 and New York three years later, also shows its age with Nancy Bill

later, also shows its age with Nancy, Bill Sikes' (Tam Mutu) abused girlfriend. Lilli Cooper plays her with formidable heart and voice in this show, but her big torch song, "As Long as He Needs Me," which lays out why she will never betray the appalling Sikes, today—no matter how commandingly Cooper nails it—echoes as something sung by a terrified and gaslit victim of abuse.

In 2023 terms, Nancy is a victim of coercive control, and her famous song is a perverse hymn to her suffering of the same, and applauding it feels bizarre, no matter how well Cooper sells it. Mutu is a no-joke, chilling Sikes; the stage flushed with apposite devilish red light when he appears. However, when it comes to his and Nancy's deaths, the challenge of staging the show so fast is humorously visible; air is stabbed around Nancy, while Sikes falls winsomely off stage from a gunshot. (The best stage death in the show sees a character make a humorous point of how impossible it is to die and disappear easily, moving off stage like a retreating crab.)



“Oliver himself is strangely de-centered as the show goes on; often sighted but not that heard.”

Brad Oscar and Mary Testa as Mr. Bumble and Widow Corney (in the poorhouse), and Thom Sesma and Rashdra Scott as Mr. and Mrs. Sowerby (as undertakers), play Oliver’s early adult tormenters with comic zeal, but suffer with a book that jettisons them too quickly. Oliver himself is strangely de-centered as the show goes on; often sighted

but not that heard. He becomes his own cypher, acted upon, searched for, held both affectionately and hostilely, yet rendered weirdly voiceless as the show continues.

The fact that Fagin, played with an off-kilter charm and shiftiness by Raúl Esparza, is both exploiting all the boys under his charge, as well as aiming to be a paternalistic carer feels plain odd, no matter how well Esparza sings and acts his role. Who is Fagin, and what is his sphere and division of TLC and exploitation? What is his special interest in Oliver based on? It feels both creepy and heartfelt. The whole musical is like this—you wonder at its lack of inquiry and depth, and as you do so it dazzles you with another of its cheery, beautifully performed ear-worm songs, like “Consider Yourself,” “Oom-Pah-Pah,” and “I’d Do Anything”—and quickly you are delighted again. How did they pull this together in so few days, and still throw in stage acrobatics and touches like using parasols for carriage wheels? Fantastic!

How does *Oliver!* solve its staging and narrative problems? A bit of editing would

narrative problems: A bit of cutting would help—one ponderously played scene with Fagin contemplating his stash of jewels seemed without end. If *Oliver!*'s passage to Broadway continues, it may face other creative decisions around what it shows and how it shows it. This seems a trickier task, because how do you reorient, and indeed should you, *Oliver!*'s mixture of dazzle and deeply troubling? What do you lean into and lean away from? *Oliver!* is a theatrical puzzle, asking its audience to enjoy its spectacle—and not ask too much about its darkness.

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RUSSIA →

Humiliation for Putin's 'Unstoppable' Superweapons Plotted Out of Sky by U.S.

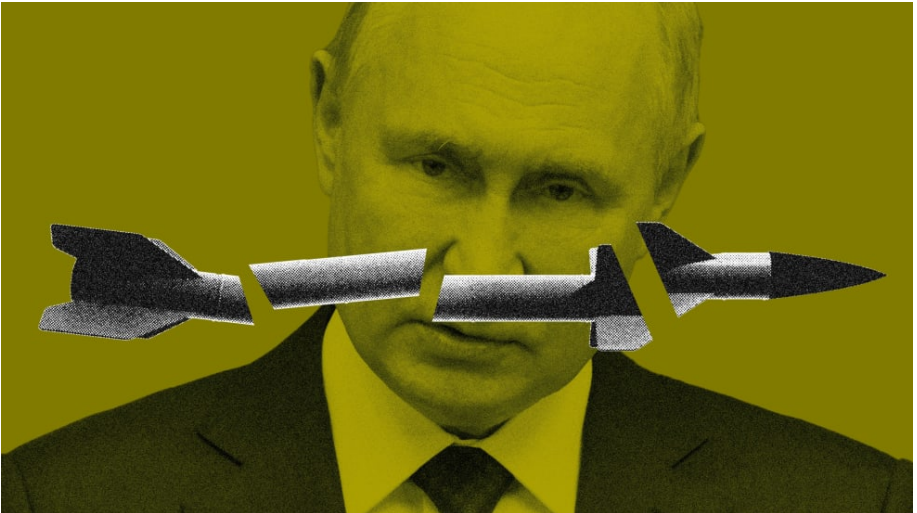
Blasted Out Of Sky By U.S. Defense System

| **GAME-CHANGER** |

Marcel Plichta

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📷 Photo Illustration by Luis G. Rendon/The Daily Beast/Getty/Reuters

Russian officials must be reeling in utter disbelief after six of their most sophisticated missiles were blasted out of the sky in an incredible night of drama over Kyiv.

When Ukraine's Defense Express outlet reported that just one Kh-47 "Dagger" missile had been shot down with a U.S.-made Patriot air defense system earlier this month, it prompted fury in Russia.

On Saturday, U.S. officials told CNN that the Russian missile attack on May 5 was targeting the Patriot itself. Russian officials called the interception "wishful thinking"—even as Ukrainian and U.S. officials made statements to the contrary. The Kremlin had believed these weapons were all but "unstoppable."

Those Russian claims were left in disarray early Tuesday when a further six Kh-47s were reportedly shot down in a single night.

In one of the most intense aerial assaults on the capital since the war began, Ukrainian air defenses took down 18 missiles that were targeting the city.

The night sky over Kyiv was rocked by explosions as the new Patriot missile defense system responded to an unprecedented

system responded to an unprecedented, coordinated barrage of missiles.

Six of the highly acclaimed Kh-47 missiles were launched from MiG-31K aircraft, three S-400 cruise missiles were fired from land, and a further nine Kalibr cruise missiles were launched from the Black Sea.

All of the missiles targeting the city were taken out, according to the Ukrainian air force, with no casualties reported. Russia, however, claims that one of the Kinzhal missiles did take out a Patriot missile battery, which could have repercussions for the rest of the conflict. It is unclear how many batteries have been sent to Ukraine but a single battery is estimated to cost around \$1 billion.

Serhiy Popko, the head of the Kyiv military administration, described the attack as “exceptional in its density—the maximum number of attacking missiles in the shortest period of time.”

The interceptions are an embarrassment for the Russian military. Back in 2018, Russian

President Vladimir Putin billed the Dagger, or Kinzhal in Russian, as a “next-generation” Russian weapon. Russian officials claimed that the missile can go 10 times faster than the speed of sound, reach any point in Ukraine, and is able to evade all but the most sophisticated air defense systems. Experts questioned those claims, arguing that the missile is just a modification of an existing missile that Putin was trying to rebrand.

Even if Russia was lying about the Kinzhal’s speed and survivability, it still poses a big threat to Kyiv. Ukraine’s pre-war air defense systems, which are older and stretched thin trying to protect the front from Russian aircraft and major cities from missiles and Iranian drones, had a vanishingly low chance of shooting them down.

That’s why Kyiv’s clamor to get hold of the American Patriot defenses was so acute.

Ukraine has always taken the Kinzhal very seriously. The mere possibility that Putin could fire a Kinzhal sets off every air raid siren in the country at once. Ukraine’s air

defenders can intercept most Russian missiles and drones, but the Kinzhal could not be shot down by any Ukrainian air defense system—until now.

Before the incredible events of early Tuesday morning, it was still unclear how the Patriot system would respond. That's why claims about shooting down the first Kinzhal were so controversial and so cautiously managed by Kyiv.

Ukrainian officials initially stated that they had no information that a Kinzhal was downed and briefly denied it, but officials later admitted that they did indeed shoot down the missile in early May.

There are a few explanations for the confusion. In addition to the possibility that spokespersons were improperly briefed about the intercept, Ukrainian commentators explained that officials hesitate to talk about something as sensitive as air defense capabilities over the capital city.

On May 9, the Pentagon press secretary

repeatedly confirmed that Ukraine shot down a Kinzhal with a Patriot. The day after, Ukraine put the wreckage of the missile on display for journalists from the German newspaper *Bild*, which posted a video on Twitter.

Russia used its Kinzhals sparingly for much of 2022, but recently started using them more as Moscow's stock of less-advanced missiles declined. In March, Russia used six in a day as part of a larger attack on Kyiv and other cities across the country. Its survivability against Ukrainian air defense made it a particular concern for Kyiv, which activates air raid sirens if they detect the MiG-31 aircraft that can launch the missile.

Special Delivery

The arrival of several Patriot air defense systems and other sophisticated weapons from the U.S. and Europe changes Ukraine's air defense prospects. Since Putin's terror bombing of cities across Ukraine in October of last year, NATO and other countries have gradually sent advanced air defense systems to Kyiv.

The German Iris-T arrived in October and has since shot down more than 60 targets.

The Franco-Italian SAMP/T and Patriot were pledged in December and only recently arrived, along with trained Ukrainian crews. These so-called Kinzhal superweapons have actually been intercepted by a system that entered U.S. service 40 years ago (although it has been heavily modernized since.)

Knowing that advanced air defense systems would challenge Putin's terror bombing campaign, Russian officials eagerly issued threats against the U.S. for sending Patriots.

Last November, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, who is now deputy chairman of the Russian Security Council, claimed Patriots sent to Ukraine "would become a legitimate target" for Russia's armed forces and that NATO should be "dissolved" if it agreed to send them. After the U.S. announced it would send Patriots, Russian officials stated that there could be unspecified "consequences" for the U.S. before dropping the subject entirely.

Why Russia Is Terrified of This New U.S. Weapons Delivery

| HITTING WHERE IT HURTS |

Marcel Plichta



The Kinzhal interceptions are good news for President Volodymyr Zelensky, but they don't mean the end of Putin's missile campaign. The Patriot has a range of up to 100 miles depending on which kind of interceptor is used, but Ukraine has a lot of airspace to defend and a limited number of Patriot batteries.

If the first missile was indeed targeting the Patriot battery itself, then Ukraine will have to be more cautious about moving them. The city of Kyiv might be safer, but less secure urban centers like Odesa and Zaporizhzhya are frequent targets for Russian missiles.

So long as Russia has sufficient long-range missiles and drones to strike Ukraine's cities, Zelensky will be after more and better air

defense. Ukrainian officials consistently ask partners for aircraft like the F-16 to improve their air defense, but NATO and especially the U.S. are nervous about providing Western-made jets.

Much like the discourse about Patriots in late 2022, detractors argue that F-16s are too expensive, complicated, and of limited benefit. If the debate about jets follows the same track as Patriots, Ukraine may manage to convince its partners that they will make a difference.

As the Kinzhal interceptions show, Ukraine's air defenders will use everything they can to defend their skies, and the advanced U.S. weaponry is making Putin look weaker by the day.

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