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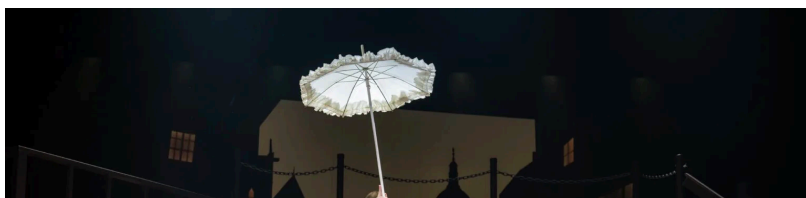
Published 4 May 2023

Review: Oliver! at New York City Center

NEW YORK CITY CENTER • 3 MAY-14 MAY

This Encores! revival may leave you asking for more. Lane Williamson reviews.

LANE WILLIAMSON





"Oliver!" at New York City Center (Photo: Joan Marcus)

After a string of stellar productions, two thirds of which have moved to Broadway, New York City Center offers its next Encores! show: a revival of Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* directed by Lear deBessonet. Because City Center is in its transfer era, anticipation is high, particularly for the stroke of genius in casting Raúl Esparza as Fagin and Lilli Cooper as Nancy, both of whom exceed those expectations. Benjamin Pajak makes a delightful Oliver, too, with some of the best singing you're likely to hear on any stage this month. The rest of the

this month. The rest of the production, though, may have you quoting the title character, “Please, sir, I want some more.”

deBessonnet’s production is clumsy and the actors never feel like they know where to go or what to do. There’s so much *business* handed out to everyone. Someone is always running across the stage or scrambling up and down stairs. Lorin Latarro’s choreography doesn’t feel like it’s spaced properly. Clusters are always slightly off kilter, someone is always out of formation or slightly ahead of the person next to them. The orchestra and the singing is so great I found myself closing my eyes, because what was happening onstage was so ungainly. It’s not just the musical numbers—there’s a book

scene in Act Two between Mr. Brownlow and the doctor that played like the two actors had never met or read the scene before. I get that rehearsal times are abbreviated, but remember what Josh Rhodes was able to do with *Dear World* in March? Maybe to its detriment, *Encores!* has developed a reputation for more polished stagings than this one delivers.

The pace is frantic in Act One, which adds to the chaotic feeling. *Oliver!*, by nature, starts slow as the grimness of the workhouse gives way to the macabre funeral parlor before opening up into the streets of London where Oliver meets the Artful Dodger. It's usually in that number, "Consider Yourself", where the show takes off, about halfway through the

on, about halfway through the first act. That's a structural challenge, when most musicals of its era have big numbers much earlier. It feels like deBessonnet is trying to get through the first bit to enjoy the second, but the rushed pacing doesn't relent. Even when Esparza makes his entrance, it doesn't feel like we have time to luxuriate in the decadence of his performance. The whole first act came in just slightly over an hour of runtime. I'm grateful for that, but I would have sat there for fifteen or twenty more minutes if it meant the material and the actors had space to breathe.

Then in Act Two, after Cooper sings a rousing "Oom-Pah-Pah" and the ensemble stumbles its way through some choreography

around her, the whole show stops, for a long time, while Tam Mutu delivers “My Name!”, a dirge of a sprechstimme tune that, in this context, only feels slightly above a villain in a British pantomime. I fully expected some booing and hissing from the audience. Mutu shouts several lines of the songs so fiercely you can’t understand what he’s saying. Even when the show ceded a little space for Pajak’s beautiful “Where is Love?” in the first act, it’s nothing compared to what Mutu has. Bless him for trying to make that song work, but there’s a reason it’s often cut.

This revival doesn’t attempt to “fix” any of the problematic elements of the show. Nancy sings, “Tho’ you sometimes do come by / The occasional black

come by / The occasional black
eye, / You can always cover one
/ ‘Til he blacks the other one”
and the orchestra pauses for
Cooper to give a half-hearted
laugh. But that only shows that
Nancy is exhausted. And she’s
still kind of amused? It’s
perplexing. “As Long As He
Needs Me” is played without
commentary. Bill Sikes has
backhanded her and thrown her
on the floor, but she loves him,
so she’s going to deal? Cooper
sounds incredible and she does
her best to ground the lyrics in
Nancy’s strength, but how much
work can that do to fix a
fundamentally flawed song?

Likewise, the Yiddish violin that
features prominently in Fagin’s
music here feels a little anti-
Semitic. When Bill Sikes hands
Fagin a diamond ring he stole,

Fagin googly-eyes it and the violin swoops in to let us know Fagin *looooves* money. The character is Jewish and does love money, but the musical cues are doubling down on a stereotype. Like Cooper, Esparza creates a believable character and has Fagin's objectives clearly identified. But in his just-past-eleven o'clock number, "Reviewing the Situation", he's got so much staging the lyrics get lost. Esparza can do so much with so little—[watch him sing "Being Alive"](#) sitting at a piano. I craved for him to have a moment to own the stage and convey the text.

If David Rockwell's scenic design were a person, it would be wearing a shirt with no pants. The top half looks great, especially the side drops that

especially the side drops that light up with windows and the London skyline behind Mary-Mitchell Campbell's orchestra. But descending the steps, there's nothing there. The main playing space is blank and bringing in some loose chairs or hanging handkerchiefs doesn't do much to create the environment. Sarafina Bush's costumes are fantastic, though. Cooper's yellow dress feels like she was born wearing it.

This production fares poor-to-middling when, lately, the results at City Center have been excellent. *Oliver!* is a fun show, domestic abuse aside, but this production never delights in the absurdity of someone like Widow Corney, even as she's played by a mugging Mary Testa. That should be capital-C *Camp*,

but it isn't. Julian Lerner's singing lacks energy and force—he's almost stopped singing by the end of every phrase—so Dodger's mischievous nature feels half-baked. The boys' ensemble brings a hefty dose of joy (each one of them is a star), but the production desperately needs something else to juice it up. Or maybe it can just come and go, like *Encores!* shows of the past, when everything wasn't looking for a commercial producer and a Broadway house. What a novelty.



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LANE WILLIAMSON

Lane Williamson is a theatre writer and editor in New York City.

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PRODUCED BY New York City Center, by special arrangement with Cameron Macintosh

DIRECTED BY Lear deBessonet

WRITTEN BY Lionel Bart

CHOREOGRAPHY BY Lorin Latarro

SCENIC DESIGN David Rockwell (set), Sarafina Bush (costumes)

LIGHTING DESIGN Justin Townsend

SOUND DESIGN Alex Neumann

CAST INCLUDES Neo Andre, Angélica Beliard,

Michael Cash, William Thomas Colin, Lilli Cooper, Alma Cuervo, Kaitlyn Davidson, Julian Marcus DeGuzman, Zachary Downer, Sam Duncan, Raúl Esparza, William Foon, Ethen Green-Younger, Jeff Kready, Nina LaFarga, Gavin Lee, Julian Lerner, Devin Miles Lugo, Erica Mansfield, Morgan Marcell, Tam Mutu, Dario Naturell, Benjamin Pajak, Adam Roberts, Lindsay Roberts, Eliseo Roman, Rashidra Scott, Thom Sesma, Michael Siberry, Mary Testa, Tanairi Vazquez, Sir Brock Warren, Jacob Keith Watson, Ryan Worsing

ORIGINAL MUSIC Lionel Bart

LINK

Show Details & Tickets

RUNNING TIME 2hr 15min

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