

Review(ing the Situation) Benjamin Pajak, Raúl Es...

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Reviews

Review(ing the Situation): Benjamin Pajak, Raúl Esparza, and Lilli Cooper in *Oliver!* at Encores!

Lionel Bart's pitch-black Charles Dickens musical returns for the first time in 39 years.

David Gordon | **New York City** | **May 5, 2023**

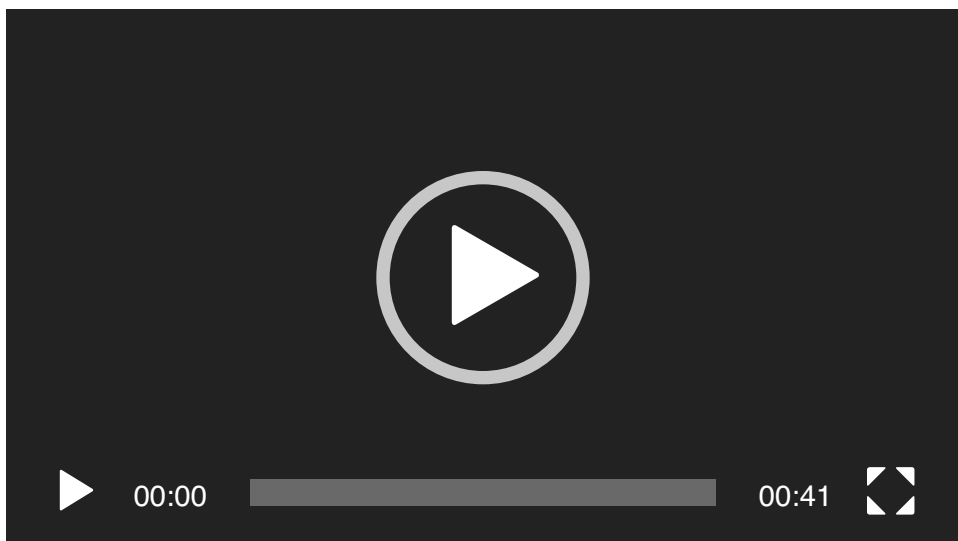




Benjamin Pajak and Raúl Esparza in *Oliver!* at New York City Center Encores!
(© Joan Marcus)

Let's face it: There's a reason why Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* hasn't had a major New York City revival since 1984. Actually, there are a lot of reasons, from the obscure — tonally, this Charles Dickens adaptation is all over the place, simultaneously light as a feather and grim as death — to the obvious — despite every single song being a hit (and having the most gorgeous musical defense of domestic abuse since “What's the Use of Wondrin'”), it's just plain not a very good show. In that respect, it fits the City Center Encores! model to a T, and director Lear deBessonet gives it a fitfully melancholy production with a cast that's clearly having a great time reveling in the Dickensian gloom. (Those are compliments, by the way.)

If anything, this *Oliver!* is a showcase for its cast. The angelic Benjamin Pajak (most recently Winthrop, a.k.a. the best part of the Hugh Jackman-Sutton Foster *Music Man*) is our hero, the orphan boy who's sold from workhouse to funeral home all because he asks for a little bit more gruel. Had the orchestra not cut it off, Pajak could have gotten a mid-show standing ovation for his downright glorious "Where Is Love?," ripe with devastating innocence and puppy-dog longing (even still, the applause for Pajak deservedly blew the roof off the place, and City Center has an extremely high ceiling).



Bart's musical is a series of escapades. After being sold by workhouse matrons Mr. Bumble and Widow Corney (Brad Oscar and

Mary Testa doing their best Thénardier auditions) and fleeing the funeral home (presided over by the daffy Thom Sesma and Rashidra Scott), Oliver falls in with the Artful Dodger (Julian Lerner), who invites him to join the gang of young thieves led by sinewy Fagin (Raúl Esparza). Esparza makes a more-than-welcome and overdue return to the stage, giving us a more dotty than scary Fagin, whose biggest issue seems to be a teeny tiny heroin habit. He's not quite on the same page and telling the same story as everyone else, but it's just so fun to watch his antics in "You've Got to Pick a Pocket or Two" and "Reviewing the Situation" that I'm happy to forgive it.

While in Fagin's lair, Oliver meets the kindly Nancy (Lilli Cooper), one of Fagin's older associates who's in love with the burglar Bill Sykes (Tam Mutu). Mutu is terrifying enough to send shivers down your spine; quite frankly, he's so scary it's not quite easy to understand why someone with such a big heart as Nancy would fall under his spell (a failing of Bart's script, and Mutu is just following orders). For her part, Cooper is the best she's ever done and her version of "Com

best she's ever been; her versions of "Oom-Pah-Pah," "It's a Fine Life," and "I'd Do Anything" are imbued with happy-go-lucky charm, while her voice soars on in "As Long as He Needs Me," practically defining the word "showstopper" in the process.

Oliver! gets darker as it goes on, and by the end, with physical abuse, murder, and a near bridge-tossing of our hero, it becomes almost too much to bear. While the stage combat is hardly believable, director deBessonnet and her designers (David Rockwell on multi-level set, Sarafina Bush on appropriately grimy costumes, and Justin Townsend on the dour lighting) bring the Victorian bleakness to life in this musical that's at odds with itself. Yet it's filled with songs, glorious songs that sound wonderful (a credit to Alex Neumann, who allows us to hear the intricacies of William David Brohn's orchestrations). It's worth it for that alone.

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