

Strong lead performances make 'Oliver!' a solid...

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# PALM BEACH ARTSPAPER



## Strong lead performances make 'Oliver!' a solid Maltz closer

March 21, 2023 By Hap Erstein — 0 Comments

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**Benjamin Pajak (center left) and cast in *Oliver!*  
(Photo by Jason Nuttle)**

In the early 1960s, long before Andrew Lloyd Webber and others sent a steady stream of mega-musicals from Britain to Broadway, a London songwriter named Lionel Bart scored a big hit on both sides of the pond with *Oliver!*

Based, of course, on Charles Dickens' classic novel *Oliver Twist*, Bart erased much of its crusading social message in favor of bouncy tunes and adorable tots. Those values are presumably what led the Maltz Jupiter Theatre to choose the audience-friendly show and slot it as its season-ender, a time when subscribers are making their renewal decisions.

In case you were not paying attention in English Lit class, you should know that Dickens was writing about his country's woeful welfare system by focusing on a plucky parentless lad at a dreary workhouse orphanage who has the temerity to ask for more gruel to eat. For this he is sold off to an undertaker, but he escapes and is befriended by an artful pickpocket who recruits him for a gang headed by the wily, unscrupulous crook Fagin.

There he meets the comely Nancy, sanitized by Bart from a prostitute to more of a music hall singer and den mother. After proving to be inept as a thief, Oliver is taken in by the wealthy Mr. Brownlow to whom the boy turns out to be related in one of those far-fetched Dickensian coincidences.

Bart fills the show with bouncy, infectious songs ("Consider Yourself," "Be Back Soon," "It's A Fine Life") which crowd out much of the novel's plot. He is adept at tunes and lyrics, but took on one hat too many trying to adapt and harness the intricate storyline.

While the material is now sunnier than it deserves to be, director-choreographer Denis Jones (last at the Maltz with 2020's *Chicago*) does what he can to darken the production's tone. In this, he is aided by scenic designer Michael Schweikardt, whose intricate set features a stage-wide catwalk bridge and a pair of winding staircases that slide into place frequently. Also contributing to the visual effect are Kirk Bookman's moody lighting and period projections by Zak Borovay.

Heading the cast as Fagin is Jon J. Peterson, who nimbly oozes his way about the stage and scores with his 11 o'clock number, "Reviewing the Situation," a consideration of late-career redemption. South Florida theater veteran Lindsey Corey makes her Maltz Jupiter debut as Nancy, impressing with her delivery of the score's best number, "As Long As He Needs Me," her celebration of masochistic devotion to brutal baddie Bill Sykes.

Casting the title character is a trickier matter, but the Maltz has a first-rate Oliver in Benjamin Pajak — direct from Broadway's *Music Man* revival — capably handling such rangy assignments as "Where is Love?" and "Who Will Buy?" Filling out

the cast as Fagin's gang and the workhouse boys (and girls) are a well-drilled troupe of local youngsters, many drawn from the Maltz's training conservatory.

The result is an entertaining package geared to the whole family, except perhaps the very young and fidgety or the staunchest Dickens purists.

**OLIVER!**, Maltz Jupiter Theatre, 1001 E.

Indiantown Road, Jupiter. Through Sunday, April 2.

\$68-\$120. [561-575-2223](tel:561-575-2223) or visit

[www.jupitertheatre.org](http://www.jupitertheatre.org).

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