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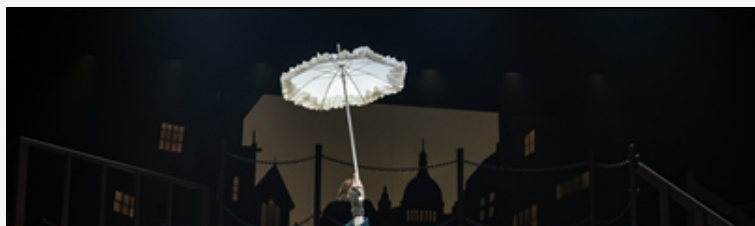
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Off Broadway Reviews

Oliver!

Theatre Review by [James Wilson](#) - May 6, 2023

In
his





Raul Esparza, Benjamin Pajak, Lilli Cooper, and Cast

Photo by Joan Marcus

1963 New York Times (mixed) review of *Oliver!*, critic Howard Taubman lamented that the show "too often settles for stridency, smoke, easy laughs and facile showbiz razzmatazz." Thankfully, except for the smoke, the current Encores! production, which runs through next week, doesn't merely settle for those qualities, it celebrates them. While downplaying the musical's dark social undertones and horrific violence, this *Oliver!* is a buoyant, swirling, and candied Victorian confection.

Under Lear DeBessonet's direction, the show begins grimly. The seemingly enervated orphan boys, lined up like the "At-the-End-of-the-Day" poor people in *Les Misérables*, sing a dirge-like "Food, Glorious Food." Before you can say "gru...el," though, the pacing ramps up, and they're doing no-handed cartwheels, flips, and round-offs across the workhouse dining hall. (David Rockwell designed the scaffolded set, which allows for seamless scene transitions. Justin Townsend's lighting and Sarafina Bush's costumes effectively convey 1850s London.) The show's energy rarely flags after the exciting opening number.

Lionel Bart, who wrote the book, music, and lyrics, distills Charles Dickens' novel to a series of scenes that serve as set ups for his magnificent songs. The characters are drawn in broad strokes, and unlike *Annie* (which resembles *Oliver!* in many ways), for instance, the episodic show doesn't tug at the heart even as the

episodic show doesn't tug at the heart even as the melodramatic twists, turns, and Dickensian coincidences come fast and furious. The 1968 film, which arguably improves upon the stage version, runs about thirty minutes longer and fleshes out the characters and increases the tension in key scenes.

But, oh, that score, and here it is given its full sensational due under Mary-Mitchell Campbell's music direction and by a topnotch cast. William David Brohn orchestrated, and the songs sound every bit as sumptuous as they did on the original Broadway cast LP—which was presented in "Living Stereo"—that I wore out as a kid.

Benjamin Pajak is outstanding as Oliver Twist, the hapless waif who finds himself in increasingly dire circumstances until he lands in the lap of luxury. Pajak's "Where Is Love?" is thrilling, and he adds a scrappiness to the character that one doesn't often see, except when he's responding to the taunting Noah (Dario Ntarelli), the bully in Mr. Sowerberry's funeral parlor. (Thom Sesma and Rashdra Scott as Mr. and Mrs. Sowerberry are droll and darkly amusing in their delivery of "That's Your Funeral.")

Brad Oscar and Mary Testa may score easy laughs (to riff on Taubman) as Mr. Bumble and Widow Corney, the detestable orphanage administrators, but they are a brash and funny pair. The 1984 revival of the show excised "I Shall Scream!," and mercifully it is put back in where it belongs. Almost immediately after that number, Oscar demonstrates his impressive vocal range with the haunting and plaintive, "Boy for Sale."

Julian Lerner is very good as the Artful Dodger, and he is charming in two of the show's most tuneful songs, "Consider Yourself" and "I'd Do Anything." Nevertheless, the part isn't as meaty as it is in the film (and for which Jack Wild was nominated for an Academy Award), and the show's final image is not nearly as satisfying without

Dodger and his partner in crime going off into the sunset together.

The success of *Oliver!* depends on the casting of the central performances of Fagin and Nancy, and Raúl Esparza and Lilli Cooper not only do not disappoint, they exceed expectations. In one moment, Cooper is motherly and optimistic with Fagin's boys, assuring them that "It's a Fine Life," and in the next she is coquettish and playful in "I'd Do Anything." She is the epitome of music-hall boisterousness with "Oom-Pah-Pah," and she performs a definitive version of the now standard torch song "As Long as He Needs Me." Her voice, rich and textured, seems to be tailor-made for Bart's gin-soaked melodies. If her fate weren't already determined, she'd seem to be a formidable match for the villainous (here, sans pit bull) Bill Sikes (a suitably dastardly Tam Mutu).

Fagin is often a controversial character because of the anti-Semitic associations of the literary original. In Dickens' novel, Fagin is referred to as "the Jew" dozens of times, and the narrator describes him as "a very shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair." Lionel Bart, who was Jewish, avoided direct connotations, but Fagin's big second-act song, "Reviewing the Situation," includes Klezmer-style musical motifs. There are, then—at least in the score—subtle references to his background. The *Encores!* program lists scholar Alisa Solomon, who writes about representations of Jewishness in theatre, as a production consultant, so Fagin's delineation was certainly something they considered.

Fortunately, Esparza eschews broad stereotype and offers a complex and nuanced depiction while exuding effortless musical comedy showmanship. Some performers lean in on the broad, grotesque and vaudevillian qualities of the character, but Esparza's Fagin

is fatherly and protective over the boys (who all adore him), and he seems to treasure them as much as he does his trinkets and treasures. His "Reviewing the Situation" is performed as a rueful soliloquy in which the character weighs ethical behavior with practicality. In the end, practicality, of course, wins out.

DeBessonnet directs the show at a fever-pitched clip, and the production, perhaps inspired by the film (brilliantly choreographed by Onna White), appears to be more dance heavy than usual with Lorin Latarro's choreography. While the ensemble, which includes an appearance by the Community Youth Ensemble in "Consider Yourself," has energy to spare, Latarro's dance vocabulary tends to favor leaps, handsprings and acrobatics. There are times it feels that this *Oliver!* were *Newsies* on steroids. Indeed, the staging would have benefitted from more care focused on the chase scenes, which as presented are anti-climactic. Still, under the constraints of putting on an Encores! show, one can forgive such deficiencies.

It is hard to believe that New York has not seen a full professional production of the musical since the unfortunate 1984 revival. (It has not, however, been neglected by high schools and community theatres, and there have been several London productions over the years.) *Oliver!*'s razzmatazz will be on view for just two weeks, but audiences might clamor and ask for more. If so, producers would be wise to acquiesce.

Oliver!

Through May 14, 2023

Encores! at City Center, West 55th Street, between 6th and 7th Avenues, New York, NY

Tickets online and current performance schedule:

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