

This 'Twist' is a classic

Lisa Brock, October 24, 2011

On Stage

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Let's get one thing straight: Park Square Theatre's "Oliver Twist" is not to be confused with "Oliver!" Lionel Bart's happy, bouncy 1960 musical. But while this version may not leave its audiences humming catchy tunes, it's a richly textured and blackly funny piece of work that thoroughly conjures Dickens' original.

Chock-full of theatrical flourishes, inventive staging, songs and a dizzying array of characters, this adaptation by Neil Bartlett, artistic director of Great Britain's Lyric Hammersmith Theatre, is marked more than anything by its sheer exuberance. Director and scenic designer Joel Sass has created a moldering, dilapidated box of a set that easily transforms itself into a workhouse, a bridge, a thieves' den or a luxurious home through a few simple props, gestures and sound effects. Similarly the ensemble of 13 actors slips in and out of a multitude of roles to recreate the various characters of Dickens' episodic novel.



After an opening scene in which the ensemble pointedly gathers around a book, the action quickly jumps to Oliver's birth, his mother's death and the famous scene in which the hungry child asks for more. The story of Oliver's journey through the lowest echelons of criminal society, his rescue, abduction and final redemption is relayed through a combination of narration and action, against a backdrop of penny-dreadful style melodrama, exaggerated sentimentality and sinister foreboding that aptly conveys the tone of Dickens' work.

Sass has assembled an outstanding cast, and they offer a uniformly dazzling display of versatility in their dozens of roles. Stephen Cartmell is particularly notable in his double duty as an acerbic narrator and a glibly appealing Artful Dodger. Eric Gravez lends a deeply sinister note as



Steve Hendrickson & Noah Coon. photo © Petronella Ytsma

Bill Sikes, while Hope Cervantes' Nancy reveals genuine decency beneath her pragmatic exterior. Noah Coon gives an assured performance in the title role, displaying an Oliver who is more determined survivor than hapless victim.

The standout performance, however, is Steve Hendrickson's Fagin. From his initial wily machinations as he seduces Oliver into his criminal network to a final scene in which he has been reduced to a gibbering wreck of raving desperation, Hendrickson creates a layered portrait of avarice and depravity that is utterly chilling.

Throughout, Sass infuses this "Oliver Twist" with a conscious theatricality, rollicking comedy and an almost percussive energy that are enormously appealing. Indeed, the deliberate flaunting of stage devices -- the creaking curtain, the rigging used to hang Bill Sikes, the reeling off of place names to signify a journey -- is uniquely suited to translating the work of an author who himself delighted in employing devices. It's a stunning production that does Dickens proud.