

Steve Hendrickson returns for grotesque 'Oliver Twist'

We haven't seen Steve Hendrickson on our local stages for quite some time, but that doesn't mean the veteran actor hasn't been working. In the past year, he's performed in Arizona, Washington D.C., and in the Berkshires, before finally returning home this month as Fagin in Park Square Theatre's *Oliver Twist*.



Photo by Petronella Ytsma

"I can't afford the luxury of unemployment," says Hendrickson, who has children in college. "Artistically, it was great, but emotionally it was tough to be away from my family. And there's nothing like being away from this community to deepen your appreciation for all of the arts and culture that are here. It's a terrific place to live."

Noah Coon (*Oliver Twist*) and Steve Hendrickson (Fagin) from Park Square Theatre's *Oliver Twist*.

He returns for a new adaptation of Dickens's classic work by Neil Bartlett, under the direction of the always-inventive Joel Sass. Hendrickson is excited for audiences to experience this twist on the story.

"The style of the show comes a great deal from melodrama, and I use that word in the best and admirable sense. It's a strong story to begin with, and what Joel has done is to focus on two of the elements that have made it last over the years: the really horrific world that Oliver lived in, and the very harsh and cruel way the society acted towards its weakest members," Hendrickson says.



The melodrama comes in through the staging and the music, which underscores the action throughout the piece. "It was very common in the day [the 19th century] for plays to have complete scores written for them. They weren't musicals as we think about them, but used the power of music the way movies do today," Hendrickson says. "The use of footlights also gives it a strong 19th-century quality. You get a sense that you are looking in at the world of 19th-century London as if you were an audience member attending a play in the 19th-century."

The set does that as well. "We walked in the first day and Joel showed us this amazing shoebox set. It literally looked like a shoebox -- a horrible, disturbing

Photo by Petronella Ytsma

shoebox. The world is grotesque, and it is very easy to draw from that for your performance. Fagin is one of the great villain archetypes of the 19th and 20th centuries," says Hendrickson.

Other touchstones Hendrickson mentions for his performance is *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Robert Weine's landmark German Expressionist silent film; and the grotesque musical *Shockheaded Peter*, which he saw when it toured a number of years ago.

All of this focuses attention on the story, which still has a strong resonance today with current political debates about the poor and political actions, like the current Occupy Wall Street protests that have spread throughout the world.

"I can't think of a better time to do this play, with what our society and country is going through, such as the polarization of attitudes towards the poor and disenfranchised," says Hendrickson.

Much of that comes from Dickens himself, who lived in on the wrong side of the poverty line in his early days and, once he had risen in society, never forgot where he came from. "Through his work, he focused public attention of the time on reforms."