

“Oliver Twist” Orphaned by Literary Ambition

Brad Richason, October 24, 2011

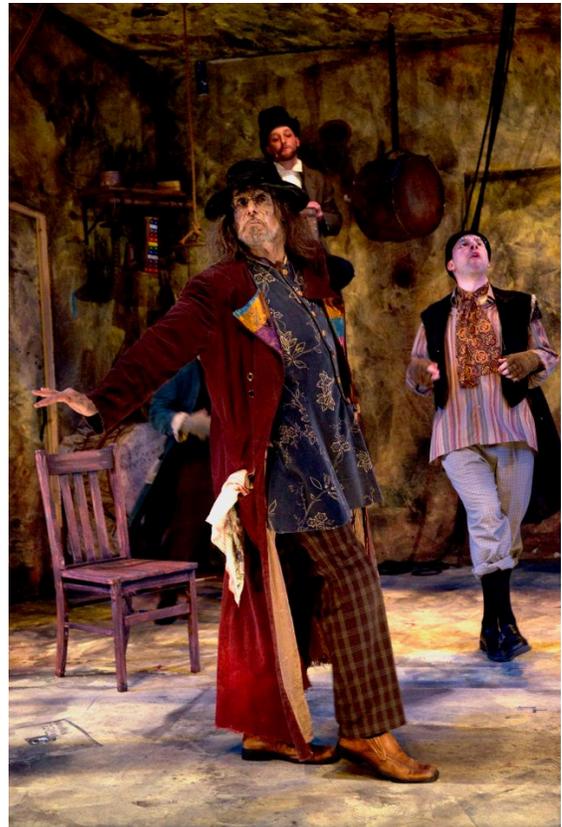
If the overheard comments of nearby audience members at a recent preview performance are any indication, there’s bound to be some confusion when Park Square Theatre’s *Oliver Twist* kicks off without the melodic strains of “Food, Glorious Food.” Had these befuddled patrons perused the program more carefully, however, they would have realized that this particular staging of the Charles Dickens’ classic is not the well-known musical by Lionel Bart (differentiated by the title *Oliver!*), but a far more dramatic adaptation by contemporary playwright Neil Bartlett. Premiered in 2004, Bartlett’s version distinguishes itself by aligning closely to Dickens’ original text, delving into the alienated lives of the impoverished underclass of Victorian England. But while the production features some remarkable performances and inspired design choices, the audacious narrative is so overstuffed that *Oliver* himself is often neglected into the background.

Opening with the ensemble cast reading from Dickens’ novel, it’s clear from the onset that *Oliver*



Steve Hendrickson & Noah Coon.
photo © Petronella Ytsma

Twist aims for a close association with the source material. Once the background is set, director Joel Sass swiftly moves to recall *Oliver*’s early life, depicting his birth to an unwed mother (who dies upon his delivery), wretched years of toil in a workhouse, a forced apprenticeship to a pitiless undertaker, and his subsequent escape to the streets



of London. Before long *Oliver* has fallen in with John “The Artful Dodger” Dawkins, a youthful swindler who introduces the runaway to the morally corrupt Fagin, the exploitative ringleader to a band of adolescent pickpockets. Before *Oliver* can be entirely seduced by crime, however, fate places the boy in the care of a respectable family who promises the long denied dream of compassion and affection. Fagin and his vile compatriots (including the homicidally volatile Bill Sikes), however, aren’t about to relinquish custody of *Oliver* so easily...

As can be guessed from the winding storyline, Sass has a formidable task in keeping the multiple plot lines untangled. To the director’s credit, the narrative never falters, moving smoothly from one complication to the next, hitting Dickens’ carefully placed plot points with a storyteller’s natural precision. Allowing Sass to maintain such a fluid



factors work in conjunction as Hendrickson oozes sinister joy in the pursuit of his nefarious schemes. And while Hendrickson's take on Fagin leads with shameless nastiness, the actor drives the role into depths of emotion unsuspected from a surface reading.

For that matter, the vast majority of the ensemble cast exhibits a similar conviction. Stephen Cartmell, in particular, volleys between a charmingly lyrical narrator and the dashing disreputable Artful Dodger, flavoring both parts with wit and style. On a more gripping note, Hope Cervantes' portrayal of Nancy, a wayward woman struggling with her conscience, gives emotional weight to an

pace is the decision to limit the set design (also envisioned by Sass) to a tightly contained rectangular structure with shifting panels and exposed openings (including one in the ceiling) for rapid changes. Facilitating the narrative further, while simultaneously regulating the work's tone, are the synchronized orchestrations of lighting designer Michael P. Kittle and sound designer C. Andrew Mayer.

While the narrative is consistently energetic, however, the storyline is so sprawling that little time is given for emotional investment. Sight gags and sound effects might help retain a buoyant mood, but the overall production is simply stretched too thin to establish any genuine depth, especially in regard to the title character.

Bereft of family or friends, Oliver is the archetypal child hero, set adrift in a perilous world without any guidance, overcoming adversity by relying upon his innate moral compass. This production, unfortunately, spends precious little time with Oliver. Though Noah Coon is strong in the titular role, the character is never afforded a standout moment. Instead Oliver is pushed to the margins of his own story, rendered more of a plot device than a protagonist.

That the second act fares better than the first is largely due to two factors; a slowing of the pace to focus on the central conflict and a wonderfully wicked turn by [Steve Hendrickson](#) as Fagin. Both



often overlooked character. Motivating Nancy's fear is her abusive criminal paramour, Bill Sikes, played with frightful intensity by Eric Gravez. Lest the tone get too dark, however, the production offers no shortage of comedic flourishes, particularly in the boisterous bantering of E.J. Subkoviak and Cheryl Willis as, respectfully, the callously clueless managers of the workhouse, Mr. and Mrs. Bumble. Park Square offers much to appreciate in *Oliver Twist*, putting forth a refreshingly ambitious adaptation that dares to approach a cherished tale from a more literary angle. Considering the carefully crafted design, it's especially unfortunate there wasn't enough space to properly accommodate the title character.