

Review: *Oliver Twist* at Park Square Theatre

By Lauren Peck November 9, 2011

Strong ensemble, staging and sound effects make this version of Charles Dickens' classic a keeper.

Park Square Theatre's production of *Oliver Twist* isn't afraid to portray the grimness of the Dickens' classic. Featuring a cast complete with shabby clothing and dark circles under their eyes, this version of Neil Bartlett's adaptation of the Dickens' novel does a fantastic job capturing the hard life of an orphan in 19th Century England.



The show follows the orphan boy Oliver Twist, who struggles to survive in the workhouse and the mean streets of London, where he falls in with a band of pickpockets and their dangerous underworld.

The ensemble cast of *Oliver Twist* is great, portraying the hardships of street life while also being darkly funny. In particular, Steve Hendrickson as the oily criminal Fagin is fabulous. Playing the role of the creepy older man who teaches orphaned boys to pickpocket, Hendrickson captures the character's humor and manipulative nature in every scene.

Stephen Cartmell as the Artful Dodger is also impressive to watch. Cartmell is streetwise and cunning, talking a mile a minute, and one can't help but appreciate his criminal charm.

The only slight problem with this show is the titular character, Oliver Twist. Young actor Noah Coon is the perfect choice for a boy described as "the principal of good," but Bartlett's adaptation doesn't

allow a lot of opportunities for Oliver to shine on his own.

Coon is a convincing, endearing Oliver, and audiences will fall in love with him when he's allowed a moment to take center stage, but these moments are far and in-between. Half of Oliver's lines seem to be reduced to "yes, sir/no, sir," and the character can feel overshadowed at times by bigger personalities, even as the entire show is about him.

Whatever faults *Oliver Twist* may have it more than makes up for with its staging. While the set never changes from a grungy dilapidated room, the cast and director/set designer Joel Sass easily transform the space from

Fagin's hideout to the home of the respectable gentleman Mr. Brownlow with just a few changes of props, opening and closing of doors and lighting.

Park Square's use of sound effects and music is also particularly exciting. Actors use everything from drums to chimes to whistles to add layers to the performance, changing the mood from hysterically funny to ominous in a moment. The show also draws on Victorian musical hall tunes, and while not a traditional musical, the production employs a great deal of music and singing to illustrate Oliver's tale.

Overall, *Oliver Twist* captures the familiar Dickens characters we've grown to love while still adding its own unique flavor to the production with a stellar cast and impressive staging.



Steve Hendrickson and Noah Coon. photo ©