

# Oliver: Southern Light Opera at King's



For those of us of a certain age, *Oliver* means one thing: **Carol Reed's** 1968 film with **Jack Wild** as the Artful Dodger and **Mark Lester** as the eponymous orphan child – but *Oliver* was of course written for the stage, and Southern Light Opera's production at **King's Theatre** this week stays true to **Lionel Bart's** original score, whilst bringing a fresh and invigorating enthusiasm to this much-loved version of **Charles Dickens'** famous novel.



On a dark and wintry night, a pregnant woman staggers to the workhouse door; that is the last we see of her, for within seconds the curtain rises on the dining hall within. Ten years have passed and the woman's baby is now one of hundreds of urchin boys collecting their gruel: on the wall above, a plaque announces 'God Is Love'. This may or may not be true, but the boys see precious little love – or food – in **Widow Corney's** care, and soon the inmates launch into **Food Glorious Food**, with its long lists of all the dishes the boys dream of. In this production there are two casts of children, and although Wednesday night's group started their singing in a slightly tentative manner, they soon found their stride. Jumping on and off tables whilst keeping the beat is a challenge even for adult performers, but these young people were well rehearsed and evidently enjoying themselves.



Workhouses were not abolished in England until 1930, and many

stayed open until the passing of the **1948 National Assistance Act**. It is sometimes easy to get swept up in all the jollity of Bart's script and forget the underlying horrors that Dickens so much wanted to expose, but SLO manage to achieve a fine balance between the two. When Oliver has the famous temerity to ask for more, he is soon out on the streets with the pompous Parish Beadle **Mr Bumble**, who simply wants to sell him to the highest bidder.



**Alex Morrison** plays Oliver with exactly the right blend of vulnerability and spirit – his willingness to try hard at any job is heartbreaking, but when he ends up as a coffin follower in a funeral emporium ('he has a look of melancholy that is very interesting') the almost slapstick humour of the owners, **Mr and Mrs Sowerberry** prevents the pathos of his situation descending into sentimentality (not that Dickens ever minded a bit of that). **Alan Hunter** is an excellent Mr Sowerberry, his voice both clear and creepy at the same time, and both he and **Averyl Nash** as Mrs S give polished performances as the argumentative married couple. The costumes throughout this production are very good indeed and whoever had the idea of painting the Sowerberrys' faces a sepulchral grey deserves to be congratulated. Oliver's fight with the apprentice undertaker **Noah Claypole** (well played by **Greg Williamson**, who in this short scene manages to convey the chip on the shoulder that lies beneath Noah's thuggish behaviour) is perhaps a little unconvincing, but when Mrs Sowerby joins in the punch-up there is no doubting the sincerity of her blows.



Oliver runs away to London, where he is soon befriended by the **Artful Dodger**. So great was the late Jack Wild's ownership of this role that I almost expected to see him appear on the stage, but **Max MacDonald Paterson** soon claimed it for his own and did a good job of keeping up the cockney accent throughout

the show. When Fagin's gang arrive to sing ***Consider Yourself***, the contrast between their colourful clothes and the workhouse boys' rags is most effective – the street boys are no better off in many ways, but they are at least free from the tyranny of the Parish. The gang's dancing is again well rehearsed and full of energy; if any of them do drop something or put a foot wrong, their recovery is both instant and professional, showing that if you just keep smiling – and keep going – you will carry the audience with you. The choreography in this show is polished throughout; one of the adult couples especially stood out for me, she wearing a checked skirt and he a green waistcoat – both showing exceptional skill and enthusiasm. The only slight issue with this scene is the music, which seems at times to drown out the singing – but this may well be a fault of the score rather than the orchestra, which performed very well for the rest of the evening. An entertaining interchange between **Fagin** and a violinist ('You're not making any friends you know') was worthy of Topol.



In fact it is not until the end of Act One that we meet **Fagin**. **Charlie Munro's** performance is the shining star of this production, bringing out every facet of the old man's mercurial temperament. Fagin is kind to the boys – but they must commit crimes for his benefit; he is good to **Nancy** – but only until he has to choose between her and **Bill Sikes**; he brooks no nonsense from the Dodger and his friends 'Shut up and drink yer gin' – but he provides them with some sort of home in a city that offers them nothing else. Charlie Munro is a fantastic singer; the clarity of his voice in ***You've Got To Pick a Pocket or Two*** means that every word can be heard even when the orchestra is in full throttle – but it is not just technique that makes this actor stand out; he is able to make Fagin's character shine through in every song – as reflective in the final reprise of ***Reviewing the Situation*** as he is

devious in *Pick a Pocket*. There is a huge amount of movement in his performance – comic dancing in *Back Soon*, tearing around the stage in *Pick a Pocket* – but even when sitting down counting his takings, Munro's Fagin communicates as only great actors can; every gesture tells us more about this complex character.



**Bill Sikes** is one of Dickens' most terrifying creations, second only perhaps to Magwitch. His first appearance on stage is silent and hugely effective; he comes to Fagin's den late at night with the loot from his burglaries. Black coat, black hat, no words; the bag is deposited and he is gone. To this short scene **Lech Boron** brings all the menace and threat that make Sikes such a formidable character. He has been brought up on the streets as one of Fagin's boys, but unlike Fagin there is no humour about him. He is a hard man with no soft edges. He will not be crossed. **Bullseye**, Sikes' dog, is traditionally a bull terrier and a scary one too (having been ill-treated by Sikes for years); SLO have awarded the role to **Kym**, a gorgeous ex-rescue Staffie\* – Kym may not be very scary, but boy does she enjoy her moments of glory – you've never seen a tail wag so fast. Did the audience like her more than Oliver? Probably, but I expect he'll forgive her.



Kym trying out her  
stage lead

And so we come to **Nancy**, Bill Sikes' prostitute girlfriend. Like him, Nancy has been on the streets for a long time – but unlike him she has retained a heart. **Lori Flannigan** is an excellent Nancy – brash and loud, caring and loving – and ultimately doomed by her obsessive love for Sikes. *As Long As He Needs Me* may profess to be a song about loyalty, but underneath it is about abuse. Nancy is already the victim of

this cold, calculating villain before he beats her to death in a horrific, jarring scene – one very different from the rest of the show, its red lighting emphasising that we are no longer in the world of happy songs and happy endings. Flannigan's voice did seem to be suffering a tiny bit towards the end of the first act, but it returned to top form in the reprise of *As Long As He Needs Me*.



In the end, of course, after a frantic chase across London Bridge and two violent deaths, Oliver falls on his feet when – in one of Dickens' trademark co-incidences – he meets up with his late mother's father and is welcomed into the grandpaternal household. **Scott Walker** gives us an entertaining turn as a **Dr Grimwig** straight out of Dr Findlay's Casebook, and **David McBain** and **Margo Dunn** as Oliver's bereaved grandfather and his kindly housekeeper provide a sharp middle-class contrast to the London underworld. The show is drawn to a close with Fagin's poignant reprise of *Reviewing the Situation*.



This is an exuberant and layered interpretation of a classic that we all think we know; SLO have succeeded in bringing new depths to the story, and in **Charlie Munro** they have discovered a star.

**Oliver** is at the King's Theatre until Saturday 7th March 2015.



\*Kym was saved from Doggy Death Row in 2014 by **Staffie Smiles Rescue**, a non-profit organisation that rescues and rehomes 'pound dogs' About 7,000 unclaimed strays were put down last year; Staffie Smiles Rescue ensures that any dog it helps to save is healthy, up-to-date with its vaccinations and neutered before it is rehomed. Staffie Smiles Rescue relies on

donations and fundraising events to carry out its work. Kym lives with her adoptive family in Fife; she is an amateur to acting but hopes to advertise the Staffordshire Bull Terrier breed, as she is such a loving, loyal little dog and so eager to please. If you would like to find out more about Staffie Smiles Rescue visit [www.staffiesmilerescue.com](http://www.staffiesmilerescue.com).

