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Society : Panda Players  
Production : Oliver!  
Date : 10<sup>th</sup> March 2018  
Venue : The Elgiva  
Report by : Jacquie Stedman

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## Show Report

I was very pleased to have the opportunity to come along to your latest production of *Oliver!* This always proves to be a popular show with audiences, not least because it provides a good opportunity to showcase the children.....and sell more tickets to friends and family!!!

My thanks to Helen Turner for making us so welcome and looking after us. It was lovely to see her again.

Overall the show worked well, and if the audience come out saying what a good evening/show that was and they will come again then you have done the job you set out to do, which is to entertain. It is, therefore, always difficult to write a constructively critical report because it isn't written from the audience viewpoint – it is a fresh pair of eyes that haven't been involved in rehearsals and do not, necessarily, know the intricacies of the Director's vision. Rightly or wrongly, one assumes that whatever is seen in the finished production is the Director's interpretation of the piece – although we know that some players can do something entirely different come the week of the show. And please understand that whatever is said in a report is there to help you improve your standards and thus provide your audience with a good value-for-money theatrical experience.

Your excellent set with different levels to enhance the playing area worked well throughout and was used well. It really made for some interesting 'pictures' within the production, although I did not understand why there were two people eating on the upper level during the scene in the workhouse – it seemed rather incongruous. However, congratulations to Paul Lunnon on his achievement...it gave some interesting spaces for performance and entrances and exits.

Lighting design and operation was in the capable hands of Steve Urry – some good atmospheric states created there, and the sound design and operation by Christian Ashby worked well apart from the odd loss of sound on personal mics, although not enough to detract from the action. The Stage Crew under the leadership of Adam Stephenson, Stage Manager, made swift changes in the dark when necessary to ensure that there was no drop in the pace of the story.

Costuming a period piece is never easy and can prove very expensive and Helen Turner, Wardrobe Mistress and Frances Newman, Seamstress, collaborated well in providing some very convincing costumes. However, there were some areas that I felt could have been improved. The children's clothes could have been a bit 'grubbier' – they were, after all in the workhouse and shouldn't they have worn some form of cap or mopcap? The ladies

would all have worn bloomers of some kind preferably finishing at the knee, and I think the doctor might have worn trousers and a frock coat as a professional gentleman. In the 1800s all married women would have worn a hat/cap of some kind, indeed all respectable ladies wore their heads covered in some form or another, even the children out with their governess, and no one would have worn a modern white shirt with a skirt. In the main though the costumes were suitable for the characters wearing them – although please be careful about jewellery, one of my pet hates. It should only be worn if appropriate to the character, so earrings should be removed and gold wedding rings removed or covered. I was very pleased to see no tattoos on show, though.

Make up and hairstyles for this period are always tricky. The workhouse children would have had dirty faces (to go with their clothes), as would Fagin's gang of youngsters. I noted that some people wore a lot of make up and others hardly any. Everyone needs it under a lot of stage lighting. I know that most men don't like it at all, but features disappear without some form of colour on faces – especially lips. It doesn't have to be heavy, just sufficient to give some definition. Also be sure that hair styles reflect the times. Fagin's prosthetic nose looked convincing (I had to check his picture in the programme), but his beard on the Saturday evening, was a bit short on width. The whole effect, though, did make him look the part. Bill's scar across his eye gave credence to his violent nature.

We came on Saturday evening and so saw the Ruffians team – all animated and working together well, both in the workhouse and in Fagin's gang. They sang well, remembering all their words and moves without looking at each other for reassurance. Well done to you all!

As part of the Ruffians team we had Finn Wilcox as The Artful Dodger. Finn obviously relished the part of the cheeky pickpocket and related well to Oliver throughout. He was confident, as shown in the number with Nancy and Bet 'It's a Fine Life' and 'I'd Do Anything'. He has a strong melodic voice which will stand him in good stead for the future. Be careful not to rush the dialogue though.....words can sometimes get lost, and whilst you know what the words are because you have had months of rehearsals, the audience only gets the one chance to hear what you are saying.

Oliver is a difficult role, I think, because he could so easily be played as a wimp. Thomas Edwards didn't do this. His Oliver was nervous and frightened, but we saw a bit of steel when defending his mother's good name and in his defiance of the Sowerberrys. His belief in Fagin and acceptance of his situation within the gang was well done. He delivered some lovely songs – 'Where is Love' always a poignant one, and 'Who Will Buy?' a song of hope for the future, and which was picked up well by the chorus. There was quite a pause before Oliver's song in the funeral parlour and this could have been covered by a bit of business with the blanket and making himself ready for sleep on top of the coffin.

Well done to both Finn, Thomas and all the youngsters on their performances.

Mr Bumble (Frans van den Berg) and Widow Corney (Amber Dye) worked well together, particularly in the Workhouse Parlour and their song together 'I Shall Scream'. It's only later in Act II that we see the true character of Widow Corney, who only wanted a husband and the sorry plight of Mr Bumble after he had succumbed to her 'charms'. I don't think it was necessary to have his trousers open under what looked like a tea towel though. However, they were a pair well matched as the selling of Oliver to Mr Sowerberry proved (a good

rendition of 'Boy for Sale') together with the interview with Mr Brownlow and the lies about Oliver's mother's locket.

The Sowerberry family, Mr Sowerberry- Andy Hockey (with super facial expressions), Mrs Sowerberry – Anita Rollingson, and Charlotte Sowerberry – Felicity van den Berg, were a very tight unit with varying degrees of financial ruthlessness and lack of consideration as far as Oliver was concerned. 'That's Your Funeral' was very well delivered – full of animation and ghoulish enjoyment. I did miss the flirting that is often portrayed between Charlotte and Noah Claypole (Laurence Hockey), although the latter was as unpleasant as is expected.

Fagin was in the capable hands of David J Martin whom, I was pleased to see, didn't play the character for laughs. There are comical elements which show in his interaction with his gang, but otherwise he is a shrewd and, often, worried man. 'Reviewing the Situation' in Act II shows a frightened man contemplating his future with some trepidation, and he is genuinely concerned about Bill's violent relationship with Nancy. Violence doesn't sit well with him and he is fond of Nancy and Bet.

Nancy (Joanne Day) was well sung with clear diction and good timing, especially with the youngsters in Fagin's gang. She could well be referred to as a tart with a heart, because although she lives outside the law, and is both loyal to Fagin and Bill, there is a softer side to her nature which shows in her eventual confrontation with Bill Sykes over Oliver, and especially in her song 'As Long as He Needs Me', (possibly one of the best known from the show), when alluding to her, often violent, relationship with Bill. She and Bet (Abigail Luggar) made a strong pair of 'working girls', obviously firm favourites with Fagin's youngsters and loyal to each other. 'It's a Fine Life' was full of fun (and irony) with everyone enjoying a lighthearted interlude in an otherwise very rough existence. Bet's horror and upset at Nancy's death was well portrayed too.

Bill Sykes (Haydn Davis) is the real baddie of the piece and maintained a threatening presence throughout, starting with his entrance in the Three Cripples with his signature song 'My Name', without his dog which was a shame. His build and stance compounded his menace, although sometimes quieter can be more effective than volume. His attitude to Fagin and Nancy was overpowering and his was going to be the final word...always. There appeared to be no atom of softness in his character at any point (well done) which makes Nancy's song all the more incredulous.

Mr Brownlow (David Lewis) and Mrs Bedwin (Marion Raeburn-James) together created the homely atmosphere that Oliver had lacked all his life, showing kindness and consideration for his well-being in conjunction with a down-to-earth Doctor Grimwig (John Jenner).

As always, a good chorus supports and enhances the production and yours was no exception. So many of them were also minor principals – almost unrecognizable I'm pleased to say, thus boosting the standard of singing and the volume. When they entered in Scene 5 on Paddington Green, a bit of underscoring might have alleviated the silence and created more of an atmosphere. But this aside they all played their parts in character throughout and contributed greatly to the overall enjoyment of the production. There were lots of smiles and enthusiasm from everyone.

My congratulations to the Production team of Director Trish Lewis, MD Lou Marron and Choreographers Stephanie Stewart and Jayne Scott who had obviously worked so hard with the cast to ensure a successful show.

I thought your programme was most informative about the show and the society – and the piece from Shani Wallace was quite an eye-opener. Perhaps you might like to enter it for the Programme and Poster Competition. You can send off five copies with an entry form from the website now in time for judging next year.

Thank you for an enjoyable evening and I wish you well with your next production.

Jacquie Stedman  
Regional Councillor – NODA London