



Society : KINGSTON VALE THEATRE GROUP
Production : "OLIVER"
Date : 25 October 2014
Venue : Adrian Mann Theatre, Ewell
Report by : Stephen Macvicar

Report

Thank you very much for inviting me to Kingston Vale Theatre Group's production of "Oliver" recently at the Adrian Mann Theatre. Thanks also to Debbie Arthur for making the ticket arrangements.

This is one of those shows that never fails to capture an audience with its imaginative telling of Dickens's story 'Oliver Twist'. The story is of the fall of the infant Oliver from a reasonably well to do family into the depths of Victorian criminal London and his eventual redemption following a series of adventures. The book was written in 1837 just after Queen Victoria came to the throne and Dickens wanted to draw attention to how wretched life was for the poorest members of society.

Lionel Bart's 1960 musical based on 'Oliver Twist' was a success from the start and went on to be an equally successful film. The show is a hugely popular stalwart of the amateur oeuvre. It offers great scope for a company in terms of parts and characters. There is also a great range of musical numbers varying in style from sentimental ballads such as 'Where is Love' to songs of clamorous excitement such as 'Food Glorious Food'.

The audience was greeted with an open stage that was an impressively atmospheric 'workhouse'. I thought that it was a good way to set the scene for the opening of the story.

The children's chorus marched into the workhouse to open the show (I have to apologise for missing the first minute). They gave a disciplined display of highly drilled choreography which culminated in a belting version of 'Food Glorious Food'. The high energy of the number was then overshadowed by Oliver bravely asking for more. Oliver was played by Mark Chilcote at the performance I attended. Mark was able to convey the picture of sweet innocence yet with an inner strength that was to carry him through his various trials and tribulations. Oliver is a huge part and it was performed to a high standard; well done.

Presiding over the opening proceedings was the formidable presence of Mr Bumble the Beadle. John Pyle was surly and resplendent in his red costume and used his well-honed vocal skills to give the part an added gravitas. I liked his 'business' when he was playing opposite Ann Richards as the rather flighty Widow Corney who provided a feisty foil for Bumble.

The Sowerberrys' Will Prescott, Rachael McDougall and particularly Emma Blake as Charlotte were accomplished in conveying the meanness of the funeral business and providing a cold welcome to Oliver. The part of Noah was given a robust delivery by Sam Clunas which made it all the more surprising when Oliver was able to best him in their tussle. When Oliver met the Artful Dodger we entered into the heart of the story. Joe Gibson was excellent as Dodger he had just the right demeanour and cheeky quickness that endeared the character to the audience. Dodger duly delivered Oliver into the den of thieves run by Fagin. Fagin epitomises Dickens's London. The role was played by Andrew Hamel-Cooke who was wonderfully costumed, made up and coiffured. The part of Fagin is often described as one to die for because it offers so much scope. Andrew certainly came across as a kind hearted and lovable villain but also the character has to show signs of the meanness of a seasoned survivor. This unfortunately was lacking.

It was however Helen Burgess-Bartlett who as Nancy really took the show to a higher level. I think that Helen was a perfect choice for this fabulous part. She sang her songs with great skill and conviction. Helen moved fluidly around the acting space and looked to be in her element. She really was the tart with a heart who sacrificed herself for the sake of Oliver. Roberta Doherty as Bet was another strong performer who gave good support to the story. Your choice of Matt Brading as Bill Sykes was interesting. Matt is younger than your average Bill Sikes and spoke with a northern accent however due to his menace and physicality it actually worked for me.

The sweetness of the of the Brownlow household was plain for all to see Guy Brew as Mr Brownlow was a calm grandfatherly figure and was aided by the suitable maternal Mrs Bedwin played by Annie Amos. Dr Grimwig, the extremely dotty house doctor was played by Tommy Cawkwell.

Oliver's brief respite at the Brownlow's was brought to an abrupt end when he was abducted back into Fagin's gang. Eventually all ends well for everyone, apart from Nancy who met an undeserved brutal end and Bill Sykes who got what was coming to him. Fagin once again was 'Reviewing the Situation' and the whole company led a lively finale to bring a good afternoon's entertainment to an end.

Other smaller roles were taken by Callum Murphy (Charley Bates), Siobhan Doyle (Milkmaid), Sophie Piedallu (Strawberry Seller) and Louise Voss (Chairman / Old Sally) - all to a good standard.

The small company worked hard in delivering the show particularly the children's' chorus. Both worked their socks off. The 'Who Will Buy' number was staged to great effect and beautifully sung. I could see that it had brought a tear to the eye of more than one member of the audience. 'Consider Your Self' was also performed to a high standard. My main negative observation about the production on show was the lack of numbers in the adult cast. I'm sure this is due to the rebuilding / reshaping of the society which is currently taking place and I'm sure numbers will swell but it was a detraction. It is unfortunate when Widow Corney, Mr and Mrs Sowerberry and a couple of others (albeit it out of character) have to turn up in 'Consider Yourself' not to mention singing solo lines in 'Who Will Buy'. There was also quite a few mistakes by the cast at the matinee but I'm sure this was the exception. Otherwise I enjoyed the show very much.

The production team with Amber Ould as Director, assisted by Rachael McDougall ensured that the story was told with a sufficiency of pathos and excitement. There was good use of the acting space and the various levels available. The company moved with energy and with purpose. The band was accomplished & musical under the assured Musical Direction of James Marr. The music was balanced and always supported the action or singing; it never threatened to overwhelm or distract the audience.

The stage management team, headed by Jan Smith and Ros Sainbury did an excellent job of striking and setting the various scenes of which there were a large and varied number. They were a good and practiced team.

One of the difficulties in staging the show can be the need to double cast the children's parts. You were fortunate that you did not have to completely double cast the children's chorus although you did have to double cast Oliver and Dodger. I am sorry that I was unable to see Ethan Murphy or Joey Langton King but I am sure that they were just as talented, well-rehearsed and accomplished in their performance as Mark and Joe.

Once again your costumes need a special mention considerable effort had obviously been made in all areas – a big thank you to Jan Smith.

The lighting design (David Boyd) was clear and it added considerably to the show as did the clarity and balance of the sound system (Richard Eliot).

I'm not a huge fan of A4 programmes but it was a very stylish programme. I particularly liked the, the photographs that accompanied the biographies, the wallpaper background and interesting society information. It was hugely impressive and demands congratulating.

Once again thank you for inviting me to the Adrian Mann Theatre and best wishes for your next production.

I look forward to seeing you again soon and if I can be of any assistance at any time, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kindest Regards

Stephen Macvicar
NODA Rep
London Area 3

steve.macvicar@hotmail.co.uk