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Theater Review: Temple Theatre's 'Oliver' Balances Youthful Exuberance with Heavy Themes



Gavan Pamer (*Fagin*) and Noe Cangas (*Oliver*) in the Temple Theatre production of *OLIVER*.

You don't have to pick too many pockets to see the worthiness of the Temple Theatre Company's production of *Oliver*.

With a classic score by Lionel Bart, the 1960 West End musical is based on the Charles Dickens' 19th century novel *Oliver Twist* about a willful orphan. Unlike its little American orphan counterpart *Annie*, however, which is lighthearted and sugary sweet, *Oliver* is dark and very British.

The show opens with its large youth ensemble assembling in a workhouse for mealtime under the watchful eye of a brooding beadle named Mr. Bumble, aptly played by a growly Jonathan

Laverentz. After two big back-to-back musical numbers (*Food, Glorious Food* and *Oliver*), the title character, played opening week by 10-year-old Ethan Martin, escapes the workhouse, is retained by Mr. Bumble, and sold to an undertaker. Up to this point, the show feels a little muddled and flat, a possible sign of opening weekend jitters. Fortunately, however, it is just after these set-up scenes that the show really begins with young Oliver running away from the undertaker's home and meeting up with the Artful Dodger, played by Patrick Holt. Holt, a theater teacher at Temple, seems to have a knack for reigning in the youth ensemble, drawing out their best performances, and truly getting the show on track with the show-stopping number, *Consider Yourself*. The only downside to Holt's performance is that the track key of some of his solo numbers, seems to be a bit out of his vocal range, but he easily overcomes that with his overall charismatic charm and stage presence.

Dodger lures Oliver into the Thieves' Kitchen, where the audience is introduced to two of the show's central characters Fagin and Nancy. Gavan Pamer as Fagin and Blaire Thomson as Nancy easily deliver the show's best performances and lead the most memorable musical numbers, including *I'd Do Anything*, *You've Got to Pick a Pocket or Two*, and *It's a Fine Life*. Thompson's belting of *As Long as He Needs Me* truly anchors a disjointed second act and captures the essence and gravitas of the story, while Ike Wellhausen's commanding portrayal of Bill Sikes is truly fearsome. Even Bullseye, the dog, seemed uneasy with Wellhausen's characterization, a testament to his fine performance.

Visually, there are some beautiful moments in this production. Scenic designer Tab May's atmospheric set is impressive and functional and the set transitions, of which there are many, are quick and seamless. Alex Allison's period costumes and wigs are colorful and appropriate without being too caricatured.

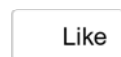
This is a lofty show with a lot of moving parts, and for the most part, it succeeds in balancing its bright, shiny, youthful exuberance with a story that is anything but. For younger audiences, much of the weightiness and even some of the innuendo of the Temple Theatre production of *Oliver* will go over their heads. Older audiences perhaps might be reminded of Dickens' satirical style or commentary on social, economic, moral and even physical abuse, issues that feel timely. Either way, there is a resilience to *Oliver* and a wholeheartedness to this production, which makes it worthy of a trip back to not-so-jolly-old England via Sanford, North Carolina.

Oliver runs through September 29th at Temple Theatre in Sanford. For more information visit <https://www.templeshows.com/showsandevents/2019-2020/oliver> or the [RDU on Stage Calendar Page](#) for a performance schedule. Note: Noe Cangas assumes the role of Oliver through September 22nd and Jude Stumpf assumes the title role 9/26-9/29.

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