

Broadway Bound Vista Theatre Project Makes Auspicious Debut with “Oliver!”

Review by [August Krickel](#).

Theatre history is being made this weekend on Pulaski Street in the Vista, as the Broadway Bound Vista Theatre Project presents its inaugural production of *Oliver!*, Lionel Bart's famous musical adaptation of the Charles Dickens novel *Oliver Twist*. The Broadway production (featuring a pre-Monkees Davy Jones as the Artful Dodger) was nominated for nine Tony Awards, winning three including best score, while the movie version was nominated for eleven Oscars, and won six, including best film. Revivals abound, at the professional, community theatre, and high school level, but a challenge is always the large number of children the material requires.

Director/choreographer Dedra Daniels Mount has taught musical theatre skills to a couple of generations of youngsters in Columbia dating back to the 1980's, and she has chosen her cast well, stacking the deck with some veteran adult performers in key character roles. The result is an enjoyable rendering of a beloved classic.

Dickens's novel is a complex and gloomy representation of life among the lowest depths of society in 1830's London. Children are starving, predatory adults look out for themselves, and lawlessness abounds. Most editions of the novel are weighty tomes of 500 pages or more, but Bart wisely condenses the Byzantine plot into an accessible two hours; the stark indictment by Dickens of the British class system is made more palatable, while retaining the basic elements of orphans, poverty, and crime. It's like a *Cliff's Notes* version of Dickens, with each chapter of young Oliver's life distilled down to a quick vignette of 2-3 minutes, followed by a song that sums up the theme being depicted. Even if you've never seen the play or movie, you'll likely recognize a half dozen familiar tunes, including "Consider Your Yourself," "I'd Do Anything," "Food, Glorious Food," and "Where Is Love," memorably played over the end credits of a *Mad Men* episode set in the year when Don Draper and his colleagues would surely have taken a client to see *Oliver!* on stage. Most of the show's 22 musical numbers also last only 2-3 minutes, although some are brief reprises of earlier songs.

Oliver (Jadon Stanek) isn't so much the hero, however, as he is a catalyst for events that take place around him. We follow his journey from orphanage/workhouse (the kind where Dickens's Scrooge would have relegated all the poor) to apprenticeship with a coffin-maker, to a life of crime with Fagin (Lee O. Smith), commander of an army of homeless children whom he trains as pickpockets. Casting Smith as the conniving yet loveable-in-spite-of-himself Fagin is like tossing the rabbit into the briarpatch, but Smith shows restraint, emphasizing Fagin's shrewdness and impishness. He adopts the satyr-like make-up and hair common in portrayals of the character, although they really aren't necessary. Smith's English accent comes and goes, but in his two principal songs, he sings out with the nice, rich voice one often forgets he possesses. Other name-brand local actors turn up as comic villains and authority figures, including Tracy Steele as Mr.

Bumble, who gets more than he bargained for when he romances the *zaftig* Widow Corney (Cindy Read Durrett.) Jami Steele as Mrs. Sowerberry generates plenty of laughs via some broad physical comedy, including gamely taking a glass of water to the face, while Jerryanna Williams is amusing as her daughter Charlotte, a manipulative teenage flirt reminiscent of Regina from *Mean Girls*.

Allen Inabinet as the thuggish Bill Sikes is chillingly menacing, although he goes for more of a Bluto-like characterization and image than the seductive bad-boy vibe. This is probably a good thing, as I've always been a little disturbed by how appealing this abusive character can be. As Nancy, the object of much of that abuse, Shelby Sessler delivers the Broadway-caliber performance that one has come to expect. Her Nancy is simultaneously loving and maternal (although only a few years older than Oliver, with whom she bonds) and heartbreakingly tragic. Inabinet is nearly a foot taller and twice the body mass of Sessler, and he swings her around the stage like a rag doll. Both actors and the director are to be commended for the extreme realism of these moments; I must stress that thanks to careful blocking and choreography no one is hurt, but I have to give Sessler credit for the professionalism and willingness to be smacked down on the stage at least three times. Her solo "As Long As He Needs Me" is sadly all too familiar to audiences of Dickens's era and our own, as she explains why she still loves, and returns to, an abusive lover. As she sang, I noticed her gripping the arm of a chair, as if to somehow draw strength for survival from its solid structure. Moments like that indicate the inventive hand of the director, which is seen across the board, with touching and/or amusing little character-centric flourishes to be found everywhere, even in a funny moment of only a few seconds, with Riley Campbell as a particularly defiant child felon nabbed by the police. Traditionally, however, whoever plays the Artful Dodger, Fagin's star pupil, steals the show, and this incarnation is no different, with Mattie Mount as a resourceful female Dodger. When she launched into "Consider Yourself," I suspect legislators debating the flag six blocks away could have heard her. I found myself imaging the show's original opening night audiences in London and then New York - I suspect it was at that specific moment that they realized they were witnessing not just another pleasant musical, but something timeless that would endure and remain relevant, decades later.

Musical director Christopher Cockrell provides accompaniment on piano, and manages to elicit excellent clarity from the cast, even from the youngest of singers. Acoustics in the CMFA ArtSpace are not the greatest, but I could understand every word in the large ensemble numbers, and I was impressed to hear British accents maintained even while singing. His skill is particularly noticeable with an intricate arrangement of the plaintive and hauntingly beautiful ballad "Who Will Buy," which I had completely forgotten was in this show. This number and the raucous and bawdy drinking song "Oom-Pah-Pah" are performed by gifted older teens and young adults including Jerryanna Williams, Hannah Mount (who will fill in as Nancy at the Saturday matinee), Imani Ross-Jackson, Samantha Moore, Leighton Mount Rossi, Sarah Krawczyk, and Brianna Taylor. Their costumes are especially appealing to the eye, with the rags of the urchins and the finery of the upper-class appropriate to their respective stations. Costumes are by Shelby

Sessler - yes, the Nancy actress, who incredibly *also* designed costumes for *Into the Woods* at Harbison just a few weeks earlier.

I mentioned how history was being made. The director once told me that her goal for this new production company was to give young performers who are learning their craft the opportunity to perform for live audiences in "real" musicals alongside adult actors, as opposed to doing recitals after a class for their parents. I feel that's a tremendously important mission, and *Oliver!*, with children a significant part of the plot, is a natural choice with which to debut. Material doesn't get any better than Dickens by way of Bart, and Mount and Cockrell have provided excellent guidance for their cast members, young and old. All of that said, remember that the performance venue within the Columbia Music Festival Association building at 914 Pulaski Street is truly a black box. The ArtSpace is a vital and indispensable asset for the performing arts community in the Midlands, but it's a bare stage, no curtain, four walls, and a hundred seats. So don't expect anything fancy: the point is the people, the tunes, and the story. Seating consists of sturdy, high-backed plastic chairs like you might find on your deck or beside a pool, so dress comfortably, dress casually, and dress for the 100-degree weather outside, since this is a small space. *Oliver!* runs through Sunday July 12, with evening performances Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, and matinees on Saturday and Sunday afternoon.