

## Review

### Oliver!

By Lionel Bart

Directed by Emma Slater

100<sup>th</sup> Production: November 2009

There was certainly a buzz in the air at St Andrew's before the opening performance of RoCo Dramatic Society's 100th production, which was the musical *Oliver!* Al and I were fortunate to get first night tickets and duly took our seats near the back row in anticipation of an enjoyable evening ahead. As we sat waiting for the lights to go down I wondered how the complicated geographical locations in the *Oliver!* story could possibly be presented on the St Andrew's stage. Obviously, no problem for the RoCo crew, as the set and props – all carefully made from recyclable materials – easily conjured up the familiar backdrops for the rich and colourful musical extravaganza which followed.

The first act was presented in seven scenes and quickly introduced members of the cast in their different roles. From the start the show was excellent, the opening scenes introducing Mr Bumble, Widow Corney, the workhouse boys and of course, Oliver. A rousing rendition of *Food, Glorious Food* introduced the familiar story.

Beth Wilkins excelled in the starring role as Oliver and she sang beautifully throughout. She was supported by a wonderful cast, and each seemed to match the well-known film characters perfectly, which added to the enjoyment of the performance.

In scenes 1 and 2 we saw Oliver taken from the workhouse to the undertaker's, and the story unfolded through the poignant songs *Boy for Sale* and *Where is Love?* The latter part of Act 1 introduced new characters as Oliver heads into London and eventually meets the Artful Dodger, Fagin and the Gang, and Nancy and Bet. The singing and acting talent of each new character was really amazing. Nancy and Dodger, played by Lynn and Jack Hewitt, I thought were exceptional. A lot of work must have gone into finding and making all the costumes; they were a delight. The choreography throughout the first act was also very good, set to music played by Sarah Clarke on piano, with musical accompaniment from the orchestra, composing clarinets, flutes and percussion under the direction of Una Robertson, and amply supported by members of the Chorus.

The audience was invited to partake of food and drinks between Acts 1 and 2 and the Memorial Hall was buzzing with conversation and laughter. A lot of people seemed to be voicing their delight at the high standard of the production.

The second Act soon got under way with a rousing *Oom Pah Pah* from Nancy and Company in The Three Cripples Pub, followed by an assertive *My Name* from Bill Sykes and *As long as he needs me* from Nancy. The story moved on to the Brownlows' house and the Street, introducing yet more characters and familiar songs such as *Who Will Buy?* The London stage scene and props were realistic and set the scene beautifully, and the colourful costumes of the characters added a sense of excitement to the familiar songs and dance routines.

As it becomes apparent that Oliver is Mr Brownlow's grandson and he must be rescued and returned to his rightful family, the scene changes to London Bridge at midnight. Here the eventful final chapter of the story concludes with the deaths of Nancy and Bill Sykes and the rescue of Oliver. Fagin, dressed so convincingly as the 'real thing' takes no time in *Reviewing the Situation* as the final scene draws to a close.

The rousing Finale summoned all the applause the audience could muster and was so well deserved. The show and cast were exceptional in every way. Well done to everybody, you gave us all a wonderful night of entertainment.

A performance of this calibre could not have been possible without a host of skilful, but invisible, people: those who managed the lighting and sound system perfectly on the night; the production team or 'crew'; the theatre management team, and members of the orchestra and chorus, all under the superb direction of Emma Slater.

Thank you one and all for a most memorable and enjoyable evening.

**Gill Waterhouse**

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Going to see RoCo's production of Oliver! I had high expectations, which were magnificently exceeded by the cast and crew. The whole thing was thoroughly professional, and you could feel the energy emanating from the stage (and from the central aisle, where some of the action took place). The time just flew by, thanks to what was a thoroughly entertaining show.

If I had expected one weakness, it was the kids, of which there are a multitude in the cast, but I have to admit that they were not only cute but also extremely impressive in their performances, not least Beth Wilkins, the miniscule girl who played Oliver. I almost panicked when I realised that she had a song, *Where Is Love?* alone on stage, but she pulled it off like a seasoned pro. Much the same can be said of ten year old Jack Hewitt, who showed an amazingly commanding stage presence as The Artful Dodger.

Among the adult actors, Chris Hoyle, playing Bill Sykes, is a brilliant, experienced actor who managed to make Sykes genuinely scary, and I was surprised to hear that this was the stage debut of Lynn Hewitt, playing Nancy; the way she confidently and beautifully belted out her songs made me think that she had been doing this for quite some time. John Haywood's (Mr Bumble) stentorian voice provided another vital asset to the show.

And then there's Pete Grocock. Fagin is a great part, but it takes a special talent to give him that much life, and Mr Grocock has it in spades. Alone on stage doing *Reviewing the Situation* he was absolutely mesmerising.

It would just be wrong not to mention Kim Tomlin's ingenious (and eco-friendly) sets on a low budget, and of course "Madam Director" Emma Slater, who must have all but killed herself pulling off this ambitious project.

Do I have anything bad to say? Not really. There was a slight spot of sound trouble at the beginning of the second act. These things happen even in professional theatre. I was thoroughly impressed with the whole production and with the dedication and talent of the many people involved.

I would also like to add an extra round of applause for Doreen Galbraith, the grand old lady of both the show and of RoCo.

#### Mikael Nilsson

Mikael Nilsson is Swedish and had never seen an amateur production before.