

NODA review of Barton Players production of Oliver on 6th December
2018

Review by Richard Fitt

Oliver, Lionel Bart's absolute classic, loved by audiences since it first premiered in 1960 and certainly loved by Barton Players as they bravely reprise it for the second time in 9 years and with a lot of the same actors and back stage personnel involved. It promised to be a great evening.

The stage under the set building control of Keith Bowie and stage managed by Milly Badham was, I have to say, huge, taking up half the hall allowing plenty of room for the action. Good decision! Mostly played to blacks with various appropriate flats designed by Milly Badham and furniture brought on to set the scenes from the workhouse to the undertakers, the thieves kitchen, to London Bridge and with clever use of the extension stage right, to represent the parlour and the Brownlow's house. But the opening scene deserves special mention as it was an absolute masterpiece of set design and lighting ingenuity. With upstage, perfect precision triangular down lighting alternatively in light and shade with added stage mist and the cast of orphans dispersed in a line, it certainly took your breath away. Great start! However, I'm afraid there is a sting in the tail to an otherwise great sets as some of the set changes were exceeding long and did affect the show's pace at times, which was a bit of a shame. Might have been better to have continued the action during the scene changes where possible..??

As already stated about the opening scene, lighting by Keith Bowie was first class throughout the show, creating all the correct atmospheres for the various scenes. Sound by Adam Bowie was crystal clear and all lyrics completely audible, so the balance between the sound track and the live singing was spot on, although I'm not sure all the youngsters' mics were working at the very beginning of the show..?

I have been searching my memory banks to recall if I have ever seen a musical done entirely to backing tracks before and so far I can't, so this was a novel experience. In the main I'd say it worked extremely well indeed and certainly allowed the sound engineer to obtain the balance required. My jury is still out on which is better.

Costumes sourced by Ann Holloway and Viv Morris were of course perfectly authentically spot on, and again particular mention to the outfits in the opening number for the orphan children. But all costumes were rich

in colour and contrast from Mr Bumble to Fagin, to the Artful Dodger to Mr Browlow and indeed right through to the chorus in the various street scenes. All topped off with some splendid props sourced by Ann Osborne, particularly loved Bill Sykes club!

Milly Badham, who has certainly put her mark on this production popping up in various roles on and off the stage, together with Sophie Bryant did a splendid job with the choreography especially with the youngsters and particularly that wonderful opening number, Food Glorious Food.

Directors Sophie Bryant and Clare Coffey certainly had a ball putting this on with some great touches and some splendid performances.

Harold Liberty positively revelled in the part of Mr Bumble and I wouldn't disagree with Debbie Radcliffe's husband who is quoted in the programme as stating that Widow Corney is the perfect part for her. Excellent pairing! Lovely comedic version of 'I Shall Scream.'

Oliver was played by Olivia Horwood on the night I saw it (and Erin Monaghan on alternate performances). Again, another first, a girl playing the part, which I have to say she did very well indeed and a lovely voice she has too. I'm getting used to this modern genre neutral casting, it certainly appears to work well.

John Murphy and Christine Ayres were suitably nasty undertakers as Mr and Mrs Sowerberry giving us a great version of 'That's Your Funeral.' And a very impressive fall into the coffin by Christine after Matthew Hall and Milly Badham as Noah Claypole and his girlfriend Charlotte respectively had locked Oliver in it.

The Artful Dodger was once again split between three actors Isobel Morgan, Matthew Thompset and on the night I saw it Leo Williamson who did an excellent job of portraying the streetwise Dodger.

And then we come to the 'tour de force' that is Keith Badham who gave us his all as the evil Fagin, looking every bit the part and thoroughly enjoying himself, especially with those famous numbers 'Pick a Pocket or Two' and 'Reviewing The Situation.' Great stuff!

But my outstanding performance was definitely Chloe Badham as Nancy. She totally commanded every scene she was in with fantastic stage presence, as demonstrated in 'Oom Pah-Pah,' and what a voice. Her rendition of 'As Long as He Needs Me' was about as powerful as it gets and still resonates in my ears as I write this. It quite rightly received the

loudest individual applause of the evening. Rachael Bowie backed her up very well indeed as her sidekick, Bet.

Enter the super evil Bill Sykes played by Mick George, and appropriately nasty he was too, looking every bit the part and letting rip with a powerful version of 'My Name' whilst threatening everybody with his bone club. Loved it!

Kirsty Badham as Mrs Bedwin added the pathos with a lovely version of 'Where is Love' whilst Oliver sleeps. And nice little cameos by Gill George as Old Sally and Kathy Williamson as The Old Lady telling The Bumbles about the gold locket from Oliver's dying mother.

Philip Hargreaves gave us the kindly Mr Brownlow and Chris Radcliff played Dr Grimwig.

The youngsters were perhaps the stars of the show particularly in the dance routines, with some very confident performances from Team Plummy: Erin Monahan, Isabel Morgan, Tallulah Belle Smith, Beth Westwick, Aimee Parish, Emma Walsh, Ashley Riley, Leo Williamson, Harrison Hunt, Chloe Burnett, Sophie and Elana Trapp.

Finally also well done to the adult chorus, splendidly attired and in fine voice: Judy Barclay, Andrea Riley, Haley Bloodworth, Logan King, Paige Franks, Sharon Maltby, Derryanne Blunt, Sam Huntley and Liam Batty.

In the main this was a well-directed, well-acted show but it did lack a little pace in places where lines were lost and there were lengthy pauses between scenes, but who am I to criticise a society whose web site told me it had sold out days before it opened. Long may Barton Players continue in the same vein. Always a pleasure to visit with their warm welcome and kind hospitality.