

Oliver!

a Wheelock Family Theatre Study Guide

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Oliver! is a highly charged and constantly boisterous musical based on Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*. Although the musical numbers and the differences in some of the characters in *Oliver!* create a lighter mood than that found in the Dickens novel, the ideas remain the same: despite society's inequities and man's inhumanity to man, life is worth living. There is always hope for a better world.

A Note to Teachers and/or Parents of Young Children...

We suggest the following activities as being especially appropriate for younger children. They may be used separately or along with other activities in this guide.

Listen to the recording of *Oliver!*

- Sing along.
- Choose and graph your favorite songs.
- As you listen, draw a picture of what you think Fagin's den might look like, or the streets of London in Dickens' time in the fog or in the snow.
- Imagine what it would be like to be one of Fagin's gang—or an actor in the play.

Dictate a story about or draw a picture of what a typical day might be like for the members of Fagin's gang. Pantomime something that they would do in a day—for example, pick a pocket or two.

Listen to "Food, Glorious Food."

- Have you tasted any of these foods?
- Draw a picture of your favorite food. Use this picture to make a graph.
- In the song, the children think of lots of adjectives to make the food sound especially appealing. Think of as many adjectives as you can to describe your favorite food or your snack or lunch today. Use adjectives/clues to have classmates guess to which food you are referring.
- What other songs do you know that include references to food?
- Retell the story through art, writing, drama, language experience chart.
- Who was your favorite character? Why?
- What was your favorite part of the story? Why? Share through art, discussion.
- What makes you happy, sad, angry, frightened, confused?
- Discuss elements of the play – rehearsals, actors, set, props, lights, choreography, etc.
- Act out your own version of *Oliver!*

In studying *Oliver!*, it is useful to examine the novel, its author, and the London of Dickens' childhood.

Charles Dickens, 1812—1870

Charles Dickens grew up quickly at the age of 12 when his family went into debt. His mother, father, and younger brothers and sisters lived in a debtor's prison while Charles earned a paltry salary of six shillings a week working in a rat-infested warehouse down by the river. From this experience came the harsh reality of the workhouse in *Oliver Twist*. Later, when he worked as a reporter, he saw the slums, thieves' kitchens and night-shelters that provided the images for the haunts of Fagin, Bill Sikes, and Nancy. Although by the age of 14 Dickens was never to know poverty again, he was compelled to write about the horrors of the England he knew in the hope that it would not always be that way. For Dickens believed firmly in the "certain triumph, in the end, of right over wrong. He never denied the power of evil, but with all the strength of his genius he affirmed the greater power of good. His fiery indignation against wrong, his glowing faith in humanity, never showed more clearly than in this story of an embattled child holding fast to goodness and honor." (May Lamberton Becker, Introduction to *Oliver Twist* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1949)

The Triumph of Right over Wrong

Questions for Discussing, Writing, and Thinking:

- Do you believe that right always triumphs over wrong?
- Give an example of when right triumphed over wrong – in your life, in history.
- Give an example of when right did not triumph – in your life, in history.

In spite of the abuse Oliver suffered and the violence, poverty, and crime to which he was exposed, he maintained his goodness and his faith in the goodness of others.

- What were the qualities in Oliver that enabled him to hold on to his set of values?
- Have you ever been in a situation in which someone wanted you to do something you considered wrong? Did you say no? Why or why not?
- What are the elements that can lead a person to a life of crime (for example, environment/heredity)?
- Make a list of those things you consider wrong (murder, theft, vandalism) and prioritize them from most to least offensive. Compare and discuss the different opinions.
 - Does everyone have the same beliefs about right and wrong?
 - Should everyone? If so, whose values should we adopt?

- Are there ever situations in which committing a crime is justified? (For example, killing in self-defense, stealing food to survive.)
- Can you think of examples in the news of times when someone broke a law in order to uphold his/her value system? (For example, a reporter refusing to reveal a source of information, a civil rights protester.)
- Can you think of examples in literature in which the writer is trying to teach a moral?
- What is a moral in *Oliver!*?

Related Activities:

- Write a story with a moral.
- Dramatize a story with a moral (Aesop's Fables).
- Role-play situations that involve right vs. wrong. Brainstorm solutions.
- Make a poster revealing your opinion about an issue in your school, home, or community. Provide a slogan.
- Write a newspaper editorial providing your opinion about something you consider "wrong."
- Give a persuasive speech.
- Set up a debate on a controversial issue.

The Search for Love

If you listen carefully to the lyrics Oliver sings while sitting all alone in the darkness of the funeral parlor, you will discover what Lionel Bart (playwright/composer of *Oliver!*) believes is an essential element of the human condition—that the search for love is a universal quest.

WHERE IS LOVE

Where is love?
Does it fall from skies above?
Is it underneath the willow tree that I've been dreaming of?

Where is she
Who I close my eyes to see?
Will I ever know the sweet "hello" that's meant for only me?

Who can say where she may hide?
Must I travel far and wide?
'Til I am beside the someone who I can mean something to...

Where...?
Where is love?

Questions for Discussing, Writing, and Thinking:

- In real life, do you think that everyone searches for love? Are there some people who stop looking? Why might someone stop looking?
- Who is the “she” about whom Oliver is singing?
- Where can one find love (parent, relative, friend, self, pet)?
- Oliver searches for love throughout the play. Where does he look for it?
- Where does Oliver actually find love?
- Are there others in the play searching for love? Do they find it?
- Are there any characters who seem not to need love?
- What are some different kinds of love?
- How do you know if someone loves you or if you love someone?
- If a person doesn’t express love in the ways you just described does that mean he or she doesn’t love?
- In Nancy’s song “As Long As He Needs Me” she says that she must hide her love. Why does she have to hide it? What do you think Bill Sikes would have done if Nancy expressed her love for him? Do you think that Bill loved Nancy?
- Is it sometimes hard for some people to accept love? Why?
- Is it ever right to treat anyone—let alone someone you love—abusively Why?
- Have you ever felt unloved? How did it make you feel? What did you do? Was there anyone or anything that made you feel better?
- How important is love to you?

Related Activities:

- Draw or write about an important person in your life.
- Name different songs, poems, or stories about love. Share these with others.
- Write your own story about someone searching for love and where he or she finds it.
- Write your own “Love is...” slogan and illustrate it.
- Have a discussion or write in a journal about what you love about yourself.
- Make a heart-shaped mural and include all the things that you love, describing them with art or words. (For example, my dog, my mom, my dad, my new sneakers, chocolate.)

Homeless/Parentless Children

Some of us would like to view the characters in *Oliver!* as just that—fictional characters in a play. Homeless and parentless children were part of the reality of Dickens' time and, sadly, they are a very real part of our time, as well. In Dickens' introduction to *Oliver Twist*, he spoke of people who did not want to view his characters as they were but wished them to be romanticized. It was for this reason that Dickens used as much realism as he could to force people to look at what they wanted to pretend didn't exist. Today many people are struggling with the realities of homelessness. Viewing *Oliver!* can be an effective starting point for a thoughtful, productive discussion of homelessness in our world today.

Questions for Discussing, Writing, and Thinking:

- Have you ever seen a homeless person in your neighborhood, on the subway, or in a park? How did that make you feel?
- Did that person speak to you? What did you do?
- What do you think it would be like to live on the street?
- Think of as many adjectives as you can that describe what it would be like to live without a home. Now list all the adjectives that you might use to describe "home." Compare the adjectives to one another.
- In what ways would your life change if you were suddenly without parents or without a home?
- Make a list of all the things that you wish you could have. Now imagine that you are an orphan without a home. Make a new list of what you think you'd wish for if you were in that situation. Compare your lists.
- In a rich society such as ours, why do you think there are people without homes?
- What is being done to help homeless people in this country?
- In the song "Consider Yourself at Home," Dodger refers to Fagin's den as a "home." What are some things that make it a home? What are some things that are lacking?

Related Activities:

- Draw a picture of a city or a town from the view of a homeless person.
- Find out what organizations exist to help people who are homeless. Request information from these organizations regarding the homeless situation in your community and what is being done about it.
- Join in a fund-raising project to help people who are homeless.
- Research homelessness in other countries.
- Brainstorm solutions to the problem of homelessness.

- Suggestions for role-playing—imagine yourself as a person who is homeless:
 - looking for food.
 - finding money on the street.
 - meeting a rich person on the street.
 - meeting a friend from your past.
 - meeting another homeless person for the first time.
 - meeting a friend from the street.

Hunger

The opening number in the musical, “Food, Glorious Food,” illustrates the orphans’ longing for a feeling most of us experience every day – the feeling of being full after a meal. There is a vast number of people in the world today who are always hungry and who have never experienced relief from hunger.

Questions for Discussing, Writing and Thinking:

- Have you ever been really hungry? What did it feel like? Can you imagine what it would be like to feel that way every day for days, weeks, or maybe even years at a time?
- What is your least favorite food? Imagine what it would be like to have no choice but to eat that three times a day, every day, or to eat nothing.
- In the song “Food, Glorious Food” the orphans fantasize about their favorite foods. Did the fantasy help them? Have you ever fantasized about something to make yourself feel better? Did it help?
- If you were one of the orphans in *Oliver!*, what food would you have fantasized about?

Related Activities:

- Draw or paint an expression of what it feels like to be hungry. What color did you choose to represent hunger?
- The next time you walk through a grocery store, take a good look at all the food choices we have available. Then imagine what it would be like without these choices.
- Research organizations addressing the hunger problem (The Greater Boston Food Bank is a good place to start). What special skills or talents do you have that could help?

The Happy Ending

Despite all the difficulties he faces, in both the musical and the novel, everything ends happily for Oliver.

Questions for Discussing, Writing, and Thinking:

- Do you think that *Oliver!* has a happy ending?
- Is it a happy ending for everyone? What about Fagin, Nancy, Bill, Dodger?
- Do all stories have happy endings? What stories can you think of with happy endings or without happy endings?
- *Oliver Twist* has a happy ending. What does that tell you about Charles Dickens?
- In real life, is it possible to have a happy ending? In Dickens' time? Today?
- Can people really live "happily ever after"?
- Do you like happy endings? Think of your favorite story. Does it have a happy ending?
- What is it about a happy ending that helps us cope with real life?
- Is there anything about a happy ending that could hurt us when it comes to living in the real world?
- Oliver finds happiness in the home of Mr. Brownlow. Is that because Mr. Brownlow is wealthy? Would Oliver have been just as happy if he received an inheritance or if Mr. Brownlow was poor but loved him?

Related Activities:

- Imagine what happens after the story ends for different characters in *Oliver!* Draw, write, or dramatize your scenarios.
- Share your favorite story with a happy ending through reading or dramatizing.
- Keep an ongoing graph of the stories you read and note how many have happy endings.
- Write one story with two endings – one happy and one sad. Compare the differences.
- Write some alternate endings for some well-known stories.
- Think of as many ways as you can for ending a story. (And they all lived happily ever after...)

Evaluation

Questions for evaluating your experience at the Wheelock Family Theatre:

- Now that you've seen the play and discussed it, what messages do you think Dickens was trying to get across? Did he succeed?
- Did you relate to any of the different characters or situations in the play? How?
- What did you learn about yourself, Dickens, musical theatre, life, from seeing and discussing the play?
- What was your favorite part of the play? Why?
- Did anything in the play make you feel happy? Sad? Angry? Frightened? What was it?
- What would you like to learn more about the next time you have an opportunity to see live theatre?

Other Possible Topics for Exploration

- choice
- abuse
- power/influence (Fagin, Bill)
- resiliency
- friendship in spite of odds
- hope
- the time-period in England
- class distinctions
- sacrifice for love