

Wheelock Family Theatre In Studio

Added by Jeeyoon K. on January 27, 2013

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There's something magical about musical theater, even when it's performed in the WERS studio. Several of the cast members from the Wheelock Family Theatre's production of *Oliver!* stopped by the station this afternoon to give us a preview of the musical, accompanied by musical director Jon Goldberg.

For the first song of the set, Charlie Clinton, who plays the title role of Oliver himself, performed "Where is Love." The song is a moment during the show in which Oliver, an orphan, reflects on the lack of affection and absence of his parents in his life. It is a truly touching moment which Clinton captures it perfectly. His voice is young enough to reflect the innocence of the lead character, yet his control and presence are that of an actor beyond his years.

Before *Oliver!*, Clinton performed in plays at his school as well as with Boston Children's Theater. When asked why he decided to try out for Wheelock Family Theatre's production, he explains, "I've always enjoyed theater... and my aunt always said I should play Oliver."

Clinton sang with Jane Staab in the next song of the set, "You've Got to Pick a Pocket or Two." In this moment of the show, Oliver has joined a gang of child thieves led by the criminal Fagin, played by Staab. Despite the subject matter, it is a very fun moment in the story. Staab clearly has a good time playing the twisted role of Fagin. Even without a theater full of people in front of her, she completely embodied her character, using the small space she had to gesture and move about as Fagin might. Staab is an experienced actor, as well as one of the founders of Wheelock Family Theatre.

The last song of the afternoon was "As Long as He Needs Me," performed by Brittany Rolf in the role of Nancy. Rolf's character is incredibly tragic; the man she loves eventually beats her to death. To take on such a complex character may sound like a challenge, but Rolf makes it look easy. Her powerful voice commands attention and she transforms into her character in a second. The sorrow in her expression as she sings about her commitment to a man who abuses her is heartbreaking. Even her fellow actors are mesmerized. "It's very exciting to watch her onstage" says Staab. Rolf's performance is one audiences won't soon forget.

Oliver! runs January 25th through February 24th. Performing the show never gets boring, Rolf explains. "I think that's the magic about live theater, it's always different. You're never saying your line the exact same way, you're going off of what you're given. Especially with this group of actors, I feel like we get onstage, just go wild, and have fun every night!"

Wheelock Family Theatre provides theater classes year-round, and the cast encourages people who want to explore theater to take a chance and get involved. Staab says, "Act! Get involved wherever you can, whether its school, a community theater, in classes. Sing when you can, if you're interested in musicals. Just do it as often as you can. Find the opportunities where you can."

To purchase tickets for *Oliver!* and view a schedule of performances, visit their website.

Wheelock's 'Oliver!' steals hearts

By Terry Byrne



"Oliver!" stars Jeffrey Sewell (left) as the Artful Dodger and Charlie Clinton as Oliver Twist.

Charles Dickens's bleak tale of a desperate orphan boy in 19th century London hardly seems like inspiring musical theater fare. And yet, what makes the musical "Oliver!" so uplifting is composer Lionel Bart's emphasis on embracing life, no matter how small its pleasures. The Wheelock Family Theatre's production of "Oliver!" finds Dickens's sense of hope and love in the midst of degradation and despair and energizes the story with a terrific vocal ensemble of both children and adults.

In the title role, sixth-grader Charlie Clinton displays an angelic voice with a demeanor to match. His unadorned renditions of both “Where Is Love?” and “Who Will Buy?” create that delicate balance of utter loneliness and hope that fuels the emotional tone of this musical.

Clinton also has the support of every member of the cast of more than 40. From the moment the workhouse orphans march in to get their bowl of gruel singing “Food, Glorious Food” to the final moment of redemption, director Susan Kosoff and her production team attend to every detail.

Matthew T. Lazure’s adaptation of Anthony Hancock’s design is superb: A multi-level set is gray and cobblestoned, with bridges and arches suggesting the dark alleys of London complete with a bit of fog hanging over everything. With the simple addition of a table and chairs, each of the areas becomes an orphanage, a funeral parlor, a pub, or a pickpockets’ lair, with the help of Franklin Meissner Jr.’s lighting. Kosoff uses every inch of the set, creating a sense of movement to a variety of London scenes without slowing the action down for a second. Laurel Conrad’s choreography accents and amplifies important moments without becoming distracting.

Kosoff and musical director Jon Goldberg have also found some impressive talent for key roles. Brittany Rolfs has a truly stunning voice, and gives the saloon gal Nancy a rough edge that makes her willingness to risk everything for Oliver much more poignant. The emotional range Rolfs displays between “It’s a Fine Life” and “As Long as He Needs Me” offers another opportunity for Kosoff to walk that line between hope and despair.

Kosoff casts against type with Jane Staab playing Fagin, the leader of a band of young pickpockets Oliver falls in with. Staab underplays a role that often turns into caricature, and finds more pathos than expected in Fagin’s fear of growing old. Her version of “Reviewing the Situation” starts out humorously, but becomes a little fearful, even desperate. Staab’s choice to play Fagin as a woman passing as a man isn’t jarring, but doesn’t really add much to the story or the character.

But nothing in this production disappoints, with the performances driving everything, especially Jeffrey Sewell as a charming Artful Dodger, Timothy John Smith as an absolutely terrifying Bill Sikes, and the ensemble in “Who Will Buy?” practically stopping the show with their delicious harmonies.

Goldberg’s six-piece orchestra provides the perfect accompaniment for the singing actors, sending the audience out of the theater on a wonderfully upbeat note.

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The Revere Journal; Chelsea Record; Winthrop Sun Transcript; East Boston Times; Beacon Hill Times; Back Bay Sun; The Everett Independent

Wednesday, February 20, 2013

Wheelock's 'Oliver' - with a Twist

By Sheila Barth barths@comcast.net

Do yourself and the family a huge favor - see Wheelock Family Theatre's spectacular production of "Oliver!" this week. Besides enjoying this superb musical production, kids learn about Charles Dickens' classic 1838 tale of a 12-year-old orphan, Oliver Twist, when times in London were seedy and sordid - like Dickens' own sad childhood. Thieves and cutthroats preyed upon the streets of London, exploiting young orphans and homeless runaways. Thankfully, the story ends up happily for our young hero, with a delightful twist, reminiscent of another orphan a century later - Annie.

Director Susan Kosoff, the cast and production staff create their own original twists and turns, with fanciful renditions of Lionel Bart's musical score. Signs above the stage announce the change of scene, making it easy to follow.

Waif-looking sixth-grader Charlie Clinton's mien is marvelous as the outspoken, sickly-looking, orphan Oliver, who despite his small size, is spirited and fights for his rights. His soulful rendition in solo, "Where Is Love?" slices every mother's heart. His sadness and hard times are cushioned with the hearty greeting he receives from street youth Jack Dawkins a.k.a. Artful Dodger, (talented Jeffrey Sewell) in a rocking ensemble number "Consider Yourself (at Home)".

This entire cast, (including local child ensemble performers Heather Buccini of Winthrop and David Sullivan of Charlestown), is outstanding, but superlative veteran actress Jane Staab as their ringleader-mentor Fagin adds deeper insight and a new dimension here. Instead of the shifty-eyed criminal who takes in youngsters and leads them into a life of crime, Staab is more human, protective of her charges, making it fun to learn how to "Pick a Pocket or Two," while hamming it up with them, pretending to be fine ladies and gentleman, singing "It's a Fine Life," and "I'd Do Anything (for You)". She plaintively soliloquizes about her fear of a lonely, old age when she's "Reviewing the Situation".

Fagin's no saint, but shows glints of caring, unlike murderous villain-acutely evil Bill Sikes, whom Timothy John Smith portrays with such delicious malevolence, theatergoers booed him in the finale. And Sike's bawdy, bighearted girlfriend, Nancy, tries to protect young Oliver when he crosses Sikes' path. With a lusty can't-help-loving-that-man-of-mine, show-stopping performance, Brittany Rolfs belts out "As Long As He Needs Me".

Not only the stars shine in "Oliver!" Charles Baldwin's historic-looking costumes, designer Matthew T. Lazure's multi-level foggy set and Franklin Meissner Jr.'s lighting intensify every scene's dreariness, whether it's in Mrs. Corney's (Gamalia Pharms) and Mr. Bumble's poorly-kept orphanage, a thief's den, raucous pub, funeral parlor, London's streets, London Bridge or underneath it.

A few final notes - last Saturday afternoon, Gary Ng nicely replaced star Dan Dowling Jr. as Bumble. Also, Wheelock Family Theatre and staff thoughtfully cater to theatergoers who are physically, visually, and audio-impaired, so nobody feels left out.

At Wheelock Family Theatre, a Fagin with a secret

By Joel Brown

BOSTON GLOBE | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

JANUARY 25, 2013



PHOTO: GARY NG

Jane Staab, one of the founders of Wheelock Family Theatre in 1981, plays Fagin in its production of the musical “Oliver!”

Jane Staab is stepping into a male role — sort of — as Fagin, adult ringleader of the boy thieves in the musical “Oliver!” at Wheelock Family Theatre.

“It popped into my head almost as a joke. We were talking about doing ‘Oliver!’ and I said, oh, and I’ll play Fagin,” recalls Staab, the Wheelock’s general manager.

It was the only meaty role that seemed right for her, she says. “There are so many wonderful plays, classics especially, that have fabulous roles for men, and the women’s roles are secondary and often not as exciting,”

says Staab. “I think a lot of actresses sit around and think, oh boy, I’d love to play that role.”

Nontraditional casting is nothing new at the Wheelock, where “Oliver!” runs through Feb. 24. Staab says the plan began to take shape when costume designer Charles Baldwin asked if she was going to play Fagin as a man or a woman. She said as a woman, then decided that she should be in men’s clothing.

But this wasn’t just going to be a “pants role,” with an actress playing a male character, or even a gender change to a character written as male, like her earlier performances as Prospera in “The Tempest.” She would play Fagin as a woman passing as a man.

“This is what historically happened so frequently, and it’s only really now coming to light how many women dressed as men to survive in a society that really rejected women in earning roles,” Staab says. “You either became a prostitute or a maid or you starved to death. And there were many intelligent women who thought, hey, if I can pass as a man, I can survive.”

The musical isn't quite as dark as its source, Charles Dickens's novel "Oliver Twist," but it's dark enough. Oliver is an orphan who escapes a cruel workhouse only to fall in among the band of thieves led by Fagin and finds his own life at risk from the brutal criminal Bill Sikes.

"The more you look at the script, the more you see how nurturing Fagin is with his kids and also how much he hates violence," Staab says. "It just fit in so many ways that it became more and more exciting to do it this way."

She's put a lot of thought into the part. She notes it's been revealed in recent years that there were many women who passed as men to fight in the Civil War. And there have been a few well-known instances, like jazz musician Billy Tipton, whose true gender wasn't discovered until his death. The woman-passing-as-man story was also at the center of Glenn Close's 2011 film "Albert Nobbs."

Audiences, however, will see the Wheelock's Fagin as a man, as do the characters.

"It isn't until the final moment of the play that it will be revealed — and some people may not even get it — that in fact," Staab says, slipping into the shoes of her character, "I have been playing a man for my whole life, probably since I was a kid and began stealing on the streets. I probably decided to do it as a boy and save myself from rape."

So there's no obvious wink to the audience and no huge unveiling, unless you keep your eyes on her at the end. But Staab hopes it will start some conversation.

To director Susan Kosoff, the idea enriches the musical.

"I think of Fagin as the most complex character in the piece, and I think this helps explain some of the complexity of it," she says.

Kosoff and Staab first met almost 50 years ago at Harwich Junior Theatre on Cape Cod, and founded Wheelock together with two others back in 1981. "We've collaborated on writing shows together, we've lived together, we've cried together, we've laughed together. I've directed her many, many times," Kosoff says.

Kosoff retired from her role as the theater's producer last year, and also retired from teaching theater and education at Wheelock College. She helped plan this season last spring, including picking "Oliver!" — but was reluctant to get in the way of her successor, Wendy Lement, beyond that.

"I generally direct dramas. I'm not as keen usually to direct musicals, although I certainly have directed musicals," Kosoff says. "And Jane said, 'What if I play Fagin?' And I said, 'OK, I'll do it.'"

And how is it for Kosoff, seeing her friend of nearly half a century done up as the scruffy old Fagin?

"It's a little weird, actually," she says, laughing.

New England Theatre Geek 02/05/2013

Oliver! presented by Wheelock Family Theatre



Review by Craig Idlebrook

Because Charles Dickens has become such a part of our cultural tapestry, the edges of his work have been smoothed with time; but make no mistake, Dickens is a social commentator first and a storyteller second. Often his stories are a series of unfortunate events, where good people must navigate the evils of society while trying to keep their souls intact.

Dickens' second-most popular piece of fiction *Oliver Twist*, adapted for the musical *Oliver!*, now playing at the Wheelock Family Theatre, is remembered fondly by theatergoers as being a show that allows well-fed children to pretend to be orphans begging for gruel, but it is one of Dickens' many attempts to show that the game is rigged against the poor. Essentially, an innocent boy, Oliver Twist (Charlie Clinton), keeps getting mixed up with the wrong sort when all he wants is a roof over his head, enough to eat and someone to love. Things start bad and get worse for him throughout much of the play. Start off wrong, Dickens warns, and only the cosmic coincidences that come from a writer's pen can save you.

It takes theatrical mastery to keep this story from being more than a cautionary tale for children to avoid the orphan life, but playwright Lionel Bart is up to the task, creating engaging songs that look deep inside the story's villains to find fatal flaws familiar to us all. Bart and Wheelock director Susan Kosoff work in concert to give three-dimensional depth to some of Dickens' shallowest characters in this energetic production.

Here, everyone must play the bad hand they are dealt by life. The keepers of his orphanage, Mr. Bumble (Dan Dowling Jr.) and Widow Corney (Gamalia Pharms) are blinded by their false sense of virtue, which blocks them from seeing their own mistreatment of their charges. A master thief who takes in Oliver, Fagin (Jane Staab) desperately seeks a way out of crime, but realizes he's too old to change professions. A prostitute, Nancy (Brittany Rolfs), who first betrays and then tries to save Oliver, believes she can't help her actions because she is ensnared in an abusive relationship. And nowhere is this theme more readily apparent than in the pin-dropping entrance of the most evil of the bunch, Bill Sikes (Timothy John Smith). Sikes wears his perchance for violence and treachery like a soaked woolen overcoat that weighs his soul down to hell; even he, the most powerful person on stage, can do little but be who he is prescribed to be.

The cast list for this production reads like an all-star team of past Wheelock family productions. Staab, last seen here as the Wicked Witch of the West, is gender-bendingly brilliant as Fagin, using just a few wisps of facial hair to transform herself into a nuanced king of thieves. Rolfs, the dogged teacher in a recent production of *The Miracle Worker*, maintains the same whirling dervish motif to show a drunk and abused woman's off-kilter thinking. And Smith, once the likable Cowardly Lion, physically captures the stage by creating a villain powerful enough to know he doesn't have to be in a hurry to be menacing.

Through these courageous and sometimes violently energetic performances, we connect with each villain, which is good because Dickens draws his heroes so shallowly. The young actor Charlie Clinton deserves kudos for infusing a mischievous glint and energy into our hero to show that he is something special, and not just virtue incarnate.

This show is ably backed by set designers Matthew T. Lazure and Anthony Hancock, who combine to create a tired, cobblestone London, with enough nooks and crannies for the marginalized to hide. Lighting designer also deserves credit for creating an overcast London sky that lets in some light, but not enough to illuminate a way out for the trapped populace below.

A word of caution: this play does have three deaths, two of which are violent. If the child you take to this play is young enough and astute enough, you might find yourself doing some explaining afterwards.

OLIVER! Boston Arts Review

01/30/2013

Beverly Creasey

Deborah Samson worked as a seamstress in 1776 making uniforms for the Continental Army when what she really wanted was to participate in the Revolution first hand. She sewed herself a nifty uniform, disguised herself as a man and enlisted in the Fourth Massachusetts Regiment under the name of her deceased brother. "Robert" joined General Washington's troops in Worcester and set out for New York where she was wounded (but survived) at the Battle of Tarrytown. Now wouldn't you think that the history books would sing the praises of the first woman to fight in the revolution? Hah!

Jane Staab has portrayed many roles at the Wheelock Family Theatre which are usually played by male actors but her Fagan is the first time she's played a woman masquerading as a (leading) man. Certainly in Dickens' time, a woman would never have been able to head a gang of thieves (or hold her own against a master criminal like Bill Sykes). Just as it was across the pond a half century earlier for Debra Samson, women in England had two basic options: marriage or the street.

Wheelock's OLIVER (playing through Feb. 24th) has Staab's clever twist at the end to give Fagan, as well as Oliver, a second chance but director Susan Kosoff's lively production has even more to make it a must see. First rate performances make every scene compelling: from Dan Dowling, Jr's commanding Beadle (his "Boy for Sale" will give you chills) to Jeffrey Sewell's charismatic Artful Dodger (a snappy "Consider Yourself at Home") to Charlie Clinton's spunky Oliver (the sweetest "Where is Love" ever) to Brittany Rolfs' take charge Nancy (a wild "It's a Fine Life") to Timothy John Smith's ferocious Bill Sykes (a harrowing "My Name").

OLIVER is brimming with talented character actors like M. Lynda Robinson, Gamalia Pharms, Deb Poppel, Neil Gustafson and Cliff Odle ---and a fine ensemble who make Lionel Bart's musical gleam. (I had forgotten how good it is!) From Charles G. Baldwin's smart costumes to Laurel Conrad's sparkling choreography to Matthew Lazure's foreboding London set, this OLIVER will delight and it will make you think!

Jewish Advocate February 6, 2013

Wheelock Theatre tones down stereotypical Fagin in 'Oliver!'



Fagin “reviews his situation” in the musical version of “Oliver Twist,” and so did Charles Dickens in later editions of the novel. Dickens actually somewhat toned down the stereotypical portrait of the Jewish pickpocket leader in response to criticism.

Director follows in Dickens’ footsteps with Jewish character

By Jules Becker

Susan Kosoff has taken her cue from that toning down for the Wheelock Family Theatre’s year opening revival of the musical adaptation “Oliver!”

“There’s a kind of negative stereotype of Jews [in the portrait of Fagin] we wanted to avoid,” said Kosoff, the theater’s co-founder and director, who was confirmed at a Reform temple in her native Syracuse, N.Y. “I think Fagin is really the most complex character in the musical. I see him as a survivor, as someone who’s learned how to survive.”

She pointed to a sympathetic side of the character.

“He has an affinity for Oliver,” she observed. “He worries about Oliver.”

As for Fagin’s big, late second act solo “Reviewing the Situation,” Kosoff said, “I think people have often played that [number] comic. I don’t think it’s comic. It sums up where his life has been and where it’s going.”

Reinforcing the sympathetic approach is the casting of fellow cofounder Jane Staab as Fagin.

“I think of Fagin as the other [someone marginalized],” Kosoff noted. “I think women are often the other.” In the Wheelock edition, she added, “Jane is not playing [the role] as a man. She’s playing Fagin as a woman who is playing a man in order to survive.”

Kosoff was wary of turning Fagin into a caricature.

“I know he can be played to the hilt as a villain, but we didn’t want to go there,” she said. The Wheelock revival, she noted, tries not to make too much of Fagin’s Jewishness: “Fagin has a hat, but it’s not a yarmulke. He looks like a guy with a beard. She’s turning over her leaf [the man-playing female pickpocket leader here] at the end.”

While Kosoff described the revival as “a fun experience for the artistic team,” the Wheelock edition has studiously avoided making “Oliver!” a humorous work.

“We have approached this as drama, not as musical comedy,” she noted. “It’s pretty edgy.”

Like Dickens’ novel, the musical “Oliver!” takes a hard and always timely look at the vulnerable state of children in mid-19th century England, but the title orphan’s fortunes equally resonate today throughout the world. Many modern day children continue to lack sufficient food and shelter, as do Oliver and both his fellow workhouse peers and pickpocket comrades. Young cast members sing and dance with as much gusto in the opening “Food Glorious Food” – credit choreographer Laurel Conrad – as do child actors playing the orphans in “Annie,” but director Sue Kosoff keeps Oliver’s odyssey from workhouse to work as a coffin follower and later novice pickpocket properly grim and intimidating. Matthew T. Lazure’s set design – based on Anthony Hancock’s stone façade-dominated one for Wheelock Family Theatre’s 1987 edition of the show – smartly complements the tough early life of Oliver and his counterparts.

If Wheelock’s revival captures the troubles of Oliver’s childhood, it also possesses the pleasures of Lionel Bart’s book and score. Kosoff, who has directed children’s fare for Harwich Winter Theater (1971-1975), as well as for over four decades at Wheelock, keeps the young performers as sharp as those playing the townspeople- respectively in such strong numbers as “Pick a Pocket or Two” and “Who Will Buy?” Charlie Clinton has all of Oliver’s innocence and

vulnerability. Jeffrey Sewell, from his first confident entrance as the Artful Dodger, is totally convincing as pickpocket leader Fagin's precocious protégé.

Jane Staab combines Fagin's resourcefulness and vulnerability. Purists may question the idea of turning Fagin into a kind of Dickensian Yentl, but Staab's subtlety in demeanor and attentiveness to Oliver and his fellow students in crime make the dramatic license of finally revealing Fagin to be a woman a compelling choice. Her moves and phrasing on Fagin's anthem like "Reviewing the Situation" are as vivid as the number's klezmer-like clarinet stretches, smoothly directed by conductor Jon Goldberg. Brittany Rolfs brings great heart to Nancy Sikes's impassioned solo "As Long As He Needs Me," while Timothy John Smith makes abusive Bill Sikes unforgettably scary. M. Lynda Robinson is a standout as Mrs. Sowerberry, the shrewish wife of the funeral home director.

Oliver asks for more food at the workhouse. Theatergoers will wish the glorious fare at Wheelock did not have to end.

By contrast, Kosoff's passion for theater is unending. A professor emerita of theater and education at Wheelock, she continues to teach summers in Singapore for the Center for International Programs and Partnerships. Wheelock, she noted, continues an education program involving neighboring Temple Israel. Kosoff expects to be directing next year at Harwich- possibly "Of Mice and Men"- and at Cotuit Arts Center- perhaps the David Mamet play "Boston Marriage."

"Oliver!", Wheelock Family Theatre, at Wheelock College, through Feb. 24. 617-879-2300 or wheelockfamilytheatre.org.

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WickedLocal, The TABS, Theater Review: Wheelock stages a terrific 'Oliver!'

By David Brooks Andrews/Correspondent

Posted Feb 07, 2013 @ 10:25 AM



BOSTON —

It's hard to imagine children going to see Wheelock Family Theatre's spectacular production of "Oliver!" without becoming completely caught up in the story, characters, music and strong emotions.

This is exactly what theater, with its largely gray-haired audiences, needs today - shows that set children on fire about what can happen on the stage. "Oliver!" is so professionally done that it's a pleasure for adults to see, too. It runs at WFT through Feb. 24. The book, lyrics and music of "Oliver!" were all written by Lionel Bart.

The opening number of the show "Food, Glorious Food" is so strikingly performed by Charlie Clinton as Oliver and the 13 other young actors playing the orphans that you won't want it to end. Their soprano voices blend beautifully. They have every move down perfectly as they slam their metal plates to the floor in support of Oliver's asking for more food from Mr. Bumble (Dan Dowling, Jr.). These are the youngest kids in the show, and you'll be thinking, "How does it get better than this?"

But the story continues. Oliver is sold from the workhouse for 5 pounds and starts off on a journey that ultimately lands him in Fagin's lair with his young pickpockets.

There are many high points before Oliver finds himself ensconced with Fagin and his gang. Gamalia Pharms is delightful as Widow Corney pretending to resist Mr. Bumble's advances - remember this when Act II comes - and coyly shaking her delightfully fulsome figure back into place. Mr. Bumble's "Boy for Sale" sung to an empty square is haunting.

When Oliver is told to sleep under a coffin at Mr. Sowerberry's funeral parlor, he sings the heartbreaking song "Where is Love?" Clinton makes the most out of every note and emotion with his gorgeous, pure, boy-soprano voice.

For much of the show, Clinton plays Oliver as a boy who eagerly approaches the next experience expecting that it will be better than the last dreadful one. This makes sense for a child who hasn't yet connected the dots of human darkness. But in contrast, Clinton's feistiness adds bite to the play as he defends his mother's reputation to Noah Claypole (Matt Phillipps) at the funeral parlor, jumps on Noah's back, and pummels the much bigger boy.

Director Susan Kosoff has made some interesting choices. She cast her co-founder of WFT, Jane Staab, as Fagin. Staab largely brings her woman's humanity to the role while dressing and appearing to be a man, until the very end of the show. Staab's Fagin creates a warm community with his pickpockets, and he's especially fond of Oliver, though fearing him in a beautifully acted moment when he thinks Oliver may have seen where he stashes his treasures.

Jeffrey Sewell as the Artful Dodger, the lead pickpocket, mirrors Fagin's gentler, kinder self. Kosoff has left most of the play's darkness to Bill Sikes, who's played with great strength by Timothy John Smith as a terrifying thug. But one wishes he could have found a small thread of something human in Bill to justify Nancy's love for him, in spite of his abuse.

Brittany Rolfs as Nancy belts out a beautiful "As Long as He Needs Me." She tends to lose some of Nancy's complexity by playing her a little too large at first and emphasizing her bawdiness. The care she finally shows Oliver is touching, as is her relationship with her young sister **Bet (Cambridge's Caroline Workman)**.

The second act gives the play a cascading denouement, with joy and tragedy. And it has some terrific songs, too. The ensemble, with Oliver joining in at the end, makes "Who Will Buy?" a stunning, heart-wrenching number. And Staab poignantly plumbs the depths of "Reviewing the Situation," as Fagin reconsiders his life.

Matthew T. Lazure's gorgeous set, based on original designs by Anthony Hancock, plunges us right into the heart of Dickens' London. And Charles G. Baldwin's costumes beautifully evoke the period, too.

This is a show that should make kids fall in love with theater and remind adults of what it was like to see shows as a child.

On Boston Stages 02/05/2013

Rich Fahey

Many will buy 'wonderful feeling' of 'Oliver'



Jane Staab as Fagin and her crew of juvenile pickpockets in "Oliver." Photo: Gary Ng.

BOSTON — In the second act of the musical "Oliver," the title character, sent on a mission to return some books, comes upon a myriad of vendors selling their wares in a city square in London and asking "Who will buy?" Oliver Twist, played by Charlie Clinton, breaks into song and asks "Who will buy this wonderful feeling?"

The answer appears to be just about everyone, including many families in the Greater Boston area. A recent matinee performance of the musical "Oliver" at the Wheelock Family Theatre, in residence at Wheelock College, appeared to be a complete sellout, and why not?

Director Susan Kosoff seamlessly melds some of the best professional talent in the area with promising young amateur talent, many of whom are veterans of Wheelock programs. Clinton, in particular, sings like an angel as he plaintively asks "Where is Love?" and has the requisite spunkiness to portray an orphan who survives a slew of troubles on his way to finding a real home.



“Oliver” is based on the Dickens novel “Oliver Twist” and it is a pretty darn bleak work about hard times in the 19th Century. The book and the musical portray starving orphans, a den of juvenile crooks, a villain battering a woman who works as a prostitute and murder, just to name a few of the seamier parts.

But Lionel Bart’s book for the musical is more upbeat than the source material and the score is replete with upbeat, optimistic tunes, even when starving orphans are

longing for the square meal they never get (“Food, Glorious Food”) or Nancy the prostitute (Brittany Rolfs) is proclaiming her love for the man who abuses her (“As Long as He Needs Me.”) Kosoff has assembled a fine cast. Timothy John Smith is one nasty act as the villainous Bill Sykes, a monster who even gives villains a bad name.

Dan Dowling Jr as Mr. Bumble and Gamalia Pharms as the Widow Corney provide some much-needed comic relief. Bumble, who oversees the orphans’ workhouse as he courts the widow, sells off Oliver to an undertaker, only to find out later he may be the son of a wealthy man and command a healthy reward. They combine for a hilarious “tribute” to marriage in the second act.

For the longest time, nothing goes well for Oliver and that includes his short-lived stint working for Cliff Odle as the odious undertaker, Mr. Sowerberry, and M. Lynda Robinson, who has a hilarious turn as his equally odious wife in the funny musical number “That’s Your Funeral.”

“That’s what happens when you feed them meat,” Bumble scolds when he finds out Oliver has run away. “You should have stuck with gruel.”

Oliver then takes up with The Artful Dodger (Jeffrey Sewell) and joins the troupe of youthful pickpockets overseen by the scheming Fagin. It’s very likely you will forget Jane Staab is a woman in her portrayal as Fagin, who oversees the den of young thieves and provides a “home” of sorts for them. Staab is a very capable and cunning Fagin and there is a little twist at the end in a nod to her gender in what Staab calls in her bio “the underreported history in the role of Fagin, of women surviving in a troubling society by dressing as a man.”

Choreographer Laurel Conrad has moving smartly around the stage in the numerous production numbers.

It was heartening to see the excellent behavior on the part of the younger members of the audience, who knew when to express appreciation, and when to be quiet, and the amount of bonding going on between grandparents and grandchildren.

The good news is that “Oliver” will be around rest of the month and is a faithful, fun take on a musical theater classic and yes, despite the murder and the mayhem, it is suitable for all ages. The Wheelock also makes it a point to make their productions accessible to both the visually-impaired and hearing-impaired. Further information on that is available at the theater’s website: wheelockfamilytheatre.org.

OLIVER! By Alison Barnet Fenway News 2/7/13

I've been writing reviews of Wheelock Family Theatre productions on and off since 1983- two years after the theatre began- with only the most minor of criticisms. I feel bad about that since I'm a naturally critical person and don't want anyone to think I'm just being "nice". The truth is: WFT productions are consistently excellent.

Charles Dickens' *Oliver!* begins with a dozen or so workhouse orphans proceeding to the table singing "Food, Glorious Food." They're all quite small and all hold metal pans. Oliver (Charlie Clinton) separates himself from the pack when he holds out his pan and asks for more, causing his sale to an undertaker for five pounds. (Was it any coincidence that the recent book, *Poorhouses of Massachusetts*, was waiting for me the day at the library after I saw the play?) Clinton is the perfect waif, and we can easily believe he's hungry. In real life, he is a sixth grader, lives in Hull, and, amazingly, has a black belt in karate. He also has a number of theatre productions under his belt, so to speak. And when he plaintively sings, "Where is Love?" it turns out he has a very sweet voice.

It was a full house or near it, and like all WFT productions I've attended, the audience, no matter how young, is quiet, most likely rapt. A Billerica mother told us her two young children had prepared for the show by listening to the music and reading the book.

Bette Keve, a former *Fenway News* editor, accompanied me. I'm glad she did because she asked good questions. "Where are all the city kids?" she wanted to know. Shouldn't there be an effort to recruit Boston school students? "All that untapped talent!"

A woman from Randolph who had never come to a performance before asked me during intermission, "Where do they get that caliber of actors?" She meant the adults. As marketing director Charles Baldwin says, people often expect a community theatre production; they don't realize how big a show WFT puts on. Bette asked him whether the actors get paid. The adults, yes, he said. Some are members of Actors Equity, and Wheelock tries to match those rates.

Baldwin was also costume designer for this show, outdoing himself with Fagin's coat, a filthy plaid number full of holes. Fagin, miser and corrupter of youth, was played by Jane Staab--but who would know it?--WFT's co-founder, business manager, and casting director. Her final song, "Reviewing the Situation," was all about whether or not s/he could change. In a way, Fagin turns out to be the hero of *Oliver!* because he is able to change. Interesting that Staab "dedicates this performance to all those brave souls who take creative risks in order to make the most of life."

And then there was gin-swilling Nancy, an excellent actor with an excellent voice, but—here comes a criticism—she looked too wholesome for the role. Nancy needs some vulgar make-up and rips in her dress.

Timothy John Smith (Bill Sikes) looked familiar; he's been in several other productions around town and was the Cowardly Lion in Wheelock's *Wizard of Oz* last winter. Funny how you can recognize someone last seen in a lion's suit. One of his lyrics remains with me: "A toff with a valet bumped into me in the alley." Smith was suitably bad-mannered.

WTF never shies away from tough issues. *Oliver!* involves an abusive relationship and a murder. In its study guide for children, it poses the questions: "Is it sometimes hard for some people to accept love? Why?" And "Is it ever right to treat anyone—let alone someone you love—abusively? Why?" There are also many to-the-point questions about homelessness.