

BROS Theatre Company

OLIVER! • JANUARY 1993 • RICHMOND THEATRE

REVIEW • RICHMOND & TWICKENHAM TIMES

BROS is back!

Four long years of making-do in unsuitable halls have elapsed since Barnes & Richmond Operatic Society last trod Richmond Theatre's hallowed boards. It was worth the waiting for.

Monday's first night of *Oliver!*, directed by a triumvirate of Bob Salter, Alison Titchmarsh and Suzanne Yeates, with musical direction by Mike Carver, saw senior BROS committee members in the Richmond foyer wringing their hands and nervously grinning.

But from the opening moments of the show, as twenty workhouse boys (count 'em) moved downstage for their *Food, Glorious Food* number, the audience knew it was in for a treat. Their response was a huge, heartfelt round of applause: part relief, part sheer delight.

Cast, designed, directed, conducted and choreographed from strength, there were as many BROS stars front of house, backstage or hidden among the chorus as there were in the line-up of principals.

But let's hear it first for the phenomenal Maggie Dawson, herself an enchanting danseuse and Swan winner, whose tireless marketing and publicity has proven so successful that the entire run quickly sold out.

And a special round for designer Malcolm Chilton whose ingenious settings, an articulated version of the Sean Kenny originals, plus smoothly flown in backdrops and gauzes with lighting by Andy Hayles, give the show a professional polish; ensuring that scenes roll seamlessly forward to the sound of Lionel Bart's lively score – thanks also to Wesley Henderson and his backstage team.

Star billing is shared equally between Steve Alais's Fagin, a charming villain whose light fingers seem to have a life all their own; the diminutive but delightfully spirited young William Ullstein as Oliver in fine unbroken voice, blending pathos with cool cheek; and the tall, warm-hearted Nancy of Claire Godwin, dominating each of her scenes, an urgent racing tempo for her big number framed in a downstage spotlight.

John Tustin unrecognisably padded-out is a splendidly oversize Bumble who together with Heather Hodgson's Widow Corney collected the evening's second big round of applause for their Scream duet; an achievement quickly matched by Terry Saunders and Barbara Thomas as the funereal Sowerberrys in the hilarious coffin scene.

And there are strong performances by Andy Yeates as the yahoo Claypole, Peter Campbell as a terrifying Bill Sykes, Marion Alais as a young Bet, Richard Matthiae as the old gentleman, Marion McLaren as his housekeeper and Ashley Hodgson as the bumbling doctor.

But as expected the show really lifts off with the arrival of Billy Worth's cock-a-hoop Artful Dodger whose cheeky Consider Yourself takes us into the most memorable chorus number of the show, choreographed by Alison Titchmarsh, the joyful enthusiasm of the company reaching out to embrace the whole audience.

And there are many more choral delights including the Be Back Soon, Oom-pah-pah and Who Will Buy? sequences, capped by final triumphant curtain calls and many tuneful reprises that carry us out happily humming into the cool January night.

John Thaxter
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