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Oliver!

DATE	6th April 2024
SOCIETY	Uckfield Theatre Guild
VENUE	Uckfield Civic Centre, Uckfield
TYPE OF PRODUCTION	Musical
DIRECTOR	Emma Creffield
MUSICAL DIRECTOR	Kate Weekes, Daniel Card
CHOREOGRAPHER	Melody Warnett
WRITTEN BY	Lionel Bart

Report

Author: Susanne Crosby

Oliver! is an ambitious show for any company to perform as it is so well known and audience expectations are high. Each of us knows exactly who the characters are before they even appear, which is both a blessing and a curse to any company producing this show. The success of the show depends on a few crucial characters, not least of which is Oliver Twist himself: this time beautifully played by Imogen Staveley, with vulnerability and innocence. "Where is Love?" was absolutely perfect, with such fragility and longing, she has the exact voice for this song. There were many sniffs and sobs in the audience.

What stands out about Uckfield Theatre Guild is how inclusive they are. There were many differently abled children and young people on stage and the Saturday performances were fully BSL signed and this was a joy to see and experience. Everyone on the stage was drilled, they all knew exactly where they were going and what they were doing, in time, and the joy they were experiencing in performing exuded to the audience as well.

The stage is wide not deep yet the space was so well used. The raised platform walkway with stairs either side at the back of the stage really helps with all the staging, particularly in this show with walking over bridges the different levels people need to be on. This time they also had Victorian style working streetlamps as well which was a lovely touch. Set was moved on and off as part of the action and this mostly worked, there were a couple of moments in the second act which detracted from Nancy's reprised song which was a shame. All the furniture worked well as the props. Costumes were absolutely right for the many and varied scenes throughout, exactly as you'd expect them all to look, although it was jarring to see Fagin be so obviously played as Jewish by wearing a yarmulke, especially in the current climate. Fagin was written based on a Jewish trope and stereotype, but in enlightened times of avoiding prejudice, if adhering to this version is to be done, it would be expected to see a note in the programme.

This show is packed, and it's impossible to single everyone out. Jack Taplin played a wonderful Mr Bumble with great presence and fearsome bluster. Robin Creffield with some blacked out teeth made a wonderful Fagin, miserly, caring about the boys – at least a little, with lovely mannerisms of wheedling and persuasion. Both had lovely voices very suited to the songs that they each sang. The music was backing tracks which worked really well, although “Reviewing the Situation” is an insanely difficult song to sing to a backing track as it stops and starts and has no music to help in some points, and the beats are all over the place. Robin did really well with this, which must have been so tricky. Katy Weekes was such an amazing Nancy, full of heart and desperation and you could feel the love she had for Oliver and why she wanted to help him: there was a lovely connection there. “As Long As He Needs Me” was absolutely beautiful: tragic, heart-breaking, powerfully emotional and yet vulnerable. Katy was a truly sympathetic and lovely warm presence on the stage, so believable.

The songs were wonderful and the choreography especially in “Consider Yourself” was brilliant. The energy of everyone on stage was super and the audience could feel how much they believed in the story and were having a great time telling it. There were some amazingly talented dancers in the group as well, there was a little acro display which was lovely to see, and so well done. There were two dancers in particular that shone with skill and technique with beautiful feet and finished lines: they were often in the front for dance numbers but it is hard to find their names in the programme – very well done to them.

This was a production full of energy and warmth and heart, faithfully retelling Oliver's story which we all love. It's clear from the 40+ people on the stage at the end of the show that a place has been found for everyone, which is a joyous thing to see. Congratulations to absolutely every single person involved, including the director Emma Creffield, who has done a really marvellous job.

Susanne Crosby