

Oliver!

Review by Deborah McGee

The stage couldn't have been more perfect at *Oliver!* Saturday night.

Five downtown flagpoles, stage right, became the masts in a seafaring schooner, as audience and players conspired to sail away in it to the London, England, of the mid-1800s.

Stars provided the most exquisite of nighttime canopies, and the Big Dipper zenithed at curtain call. Mainstage Theatre Company's first of two summer-on-the-mall productions at the downtown fountain will make many new converts to the joys of open-air theater.

Oliver! tells the trials and tribulations of one *Oliver Twist*, orphaned amidst the machinations of England's workhouses of the era. As in the original Charles Dickens novel, various entities vie for Oliver's body. First are Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Corney, operators of a quasi-official charity ward, who profit from state subsidies for taking in children. Secondly, the Sowerberry undertaking establishment wants Oliver's

ANYthing, and (You've Got To) Pick a Pocket Or Two? They're from *Oliver!* and hearing these and the rest of the play's fine numbers sets us to whistling and humming and singing snatches from the tunes as we leave, as well as the day after. Through the musical's enjoyable songs, author, musician and lyricist Lionel Bart carried on the spirit of Dickens' delight in our language. Cast renditions of the numbers tempt us to sing along with those on-stage, too, for they obviously are enjoying themselves.

Bill Furtick is thought-provoking as Fagin, professor of pick-pocketery. A master of cynical villainy's melodramatic gestures, he leers sadistically at all within range, curling and curving his wicked hands-become-claws, which are semi-gloved effectively in black. Recently title-rolled in *Very Little Theater's Fiorello*, lawyer Furtick is one of some 1500-2000 locals who, in the past decade, have participated in the Mainstage branch of Eugene's ongoing summer musical theater



Photograph by Cliff Coles

Fagin, Oliver and the Artful Dodger are three unforgettable characters in Mainstage Theater Company's production on the downtown Mall.

"... hearing these and the rest of the play's fine numbers sets us to whistling and humming and singing snatches from the tunes as we leave, as well as the day after...."

extra-mournful face for their funereal parades. Then, Bill Sikes and Fagin, two seedy Londoners, wish to keep Oliver in their ring of boy pickpockets. Lastly, the Brownlows, a respectable bourgeois family still bereaving the recent loss of a runaway daughter, note Oliver's resemblance to her and wish to provide him a home.

If it all sounds like dreary stuff for a musical, don't you believe it. Remember songs like *As Long As He Needs Me*, *Consider Yourself* (*One of the Family*), *I'd ... Do ...*

stock. Furtick transcends any stereotype of his character, adding to it a tired, dry, yet wily world-weariness.

Josh Daugherty as The Artful Dodger, one of Fagin's prize pickpockets who befriends Oliver, vigorously carries on theater's tradition of the beloved bad boy. 'e's sportin' a fine Cockney accent — just needs to slow down, project and enunciate a little more.

Eric Millegan as Oliver has the winsome sweetness needed for his role, but his character could use

wider projection through lighting or make-up to the farthest rows of the bleachers. Hamlin Middle School student Millegan showed tremendous professionalism when he forgot part of a line in *Where Is Love?* Audience members collectively held their breath. Barely batting an eyelash, Millegan quickly rejoined his voice to the music, regaining lyric control.

Jim Roberts is in charge of the production's music and directs its 16-piece orchestra, which gives us the triple treat of live acting, live singing and live instruments. The musicians' shining moment Saturday seemed to be with *Oom-Pah-Pah*, just after intermission. Lydia Lord's piano led string and other instruments into the perfect imitation of a rollicking accordion, rolling out a German drinking song.

Saturday's performance had its share of glitches — muffled amplification at a few points, a little awkwardness in the lighting, timing off here and there. These things no doubt will disappear as each performance polishes any rough edges. Joe Zingo has done a fine job directing youthful energy into an exuberantly choreographed (by Sherie Blankenship) and lively-chorused production.

Peg Major portrays Nancy, Thieves' Kitchen hanger-on with a heart of gold, who steals Oliver back from the Brownlows, under the orders of her mate Sikes, who fears Oliver may blow the whistle on their operation. In *As Long As He Needs Me* and its later reprise, her healthy vibrato delivers the sadness of a woman who eventually betrays her man and risks her life for Oliver. The tension between her character and that of Will Martin, a truly loathsome Sikes, explodes in a rather-too-quickly done climax, which could have used a little more gradual build-up and longer denouement. The climax's fireworks, however, were most effective and startling.

Seeing *Oliver!* was a very pleasant way to spend an evening. Pre-show book browsing and ice cream were added treats due to open downtown stores. Espresso Express (coffee, hot chocolate, muffins) and a Hawaiian ice/pop-corn stand were doing a brisk business and vendors at both said they'd be there at all performances.

With a cast of so many young people and its vigorous music, *Oliver!* is something the whole family can enjoy. Now in their fourth season on-the-mall, Main-

stage Theatre Company promises that the show will go on no matter the weather, so dress accordingly. Front rows are of folding chairs; back rows are bleachers. Friday and Saturday saw full houses, so come early.

Performances continue of *Oliver!* this weekend and next, the first of this summer's five musical theater offerings to be staged locally. The Eugene Festival of Musical Theater, Inc.'s *Guys and Dolls* and *Baby* both open this weekend at the Hult Center. Also premiering this weekend is *Taking My Turn* at Seymour's Restaurant (Mainstage Cabaret/Jim Roberts presentation). Summer-theater-on-the-mall will end the season with an August 1 premiere of Mainstage Theatre Company's *The Fantasticks*.

Downtown Eugene really will be pulsing Saturday night, as four musical theater productions carry on simultaneously in four different locales. A free community block party, "A Celebration of Musical Theater," will take place that evening from 10 pm to 2 am in the Hult Center Plaza. Live entertainment will continue the job of moonlight serenading, and refreshments will be available for purchase.

TICKETS ON SALE NOW!

MAINSTAGE THEATRE COMPANY

presents

SUMMER-THEATRE-ON-THE-MALL
EUGENE'S BEST MUSICAL THEATER BARGAIN

OLIVER!

Book, Music and Lyrics by Lionel Bart

July 11, 12, 17, 18, 19, 24, 25, & 26, 1986

The Fantasticks

Book & Lyrics by Tim Jones
Music by Harvey Schmidt

August 1, 2, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, & 16, 1986

All Performances at 8:30 p.m.

TICKETS AVAILABLE AT BACKSTAGE
DANCEWEAR, THE BOB FLETCHERS FOR
CHILDREN & THE LITERARY LION

CALL 683-4368

Tickets: \$5.00, Regular and \$4.00, Discount
Discount prices for Seniors and
Children 12 yrs old and under

PARTY! Sat., July 19 • 10 pm-2 am
Eugene's Biggest Celebration of Musical Theater
Between the Hult and the Hilton
Free! Music! Dancing! Cash Food & Beverage Bars!

Have you seen our
**ethnic and
contemporary
jewelry?**

- 762 E. 13th Ave.
next to the Excelsior
343-8667
- Fifth St. Public Market
downstairs
683-2204

FOLKWAYS IMPORTS
CLOTHING, JEWELRY & FOLK ART FROM AROUND THE WORLD