

Director's Vision

BY ROB RUGGIERO

"Please, sir. I want some more."

Those iconic words decidedly reflect the central theme in Charles Dickens' famous story of a young boy's difficult journey home. Although we all know *Oliver!* to be a musical interpretation of the great novel *Oliver Twist*, upon close examination, it becomes clear that a key source of inspiration for the play is the 1948 David Lean film. The raw truth, expressed so vividly in the film, made its way into the famed musical and is also at the core of our Goodspeed production.

The raw truth of Dickens' colorful and extreme characters can pose a challenge when directing a production of *Oliver!*—a challenge that both excites and inspires me. In order to experience the joy and love of the story, we need to pass through darkness. We can't ignore the dismal nature of Oliver's pre-London escapades, but we can celebrate his journey. Oliver's odyssey through life's perils and joy is what we find so appealing.

Of course, it all starts with "What is *Oliver!* about?." It's about many things: a desire for family, community, class, oppression, facing adversity, change—but at the center of all these things is one little boy, whose innocence and pure soul alters the lives of the many people he encounters. In most cases, the change Oliver provokes comes from him simply being; his special connection to the people he meets stimulates change and action. What a transformative idea. That by simply being, his grueling and sometimes terrifying journey leads him to the love and family he is seeking.

Fundamentally, *Oliver!* is about finding community and home. On his quest for belonging, Oliver discovers a community in Fagin's gang, as well as his fateful connections to Fagin and Nancy. Misguided as it might appear, it was certainly far better than his oppressive life in the workhouse. It is the Artful Dodger who initially offers Oliver a gateway to community and ultimately a sense of family and acceptance. I love the essential conflict between the criminal actions of this odd band of "characters" and the acceptance and sense of family they offer.

Oliver's connection with Nancy has a powerful effect on her complicated relationship with Bill. The bond between Nancy and Bill is dangerous and difficult to understand—especially through the eyes of today's audience. But it is also fascinating and inspiring to see Nancy feel empowered by her love and affection for Oliver. Sadly, she is unable to free herself from an abused relationship soon enough.



Oliver meeting Fagin is key to the central action, and Fagin's "intimate acquaintance" with Oliver exposes an emotional core in the story. Fagin, in particular, is a fascinating character to explore. The psychology of the character is complicated and complex. It seems clear that Fagin understands immediately that there is something special about Oliver, though he has no idea how much one little boy will change his world. There is a benevolence that is unexpectedly exposed. His encounter with Oliver transforms him, or at least challenges his journey forward. Maybe underneath the crafty thief is a decent man waiting to be revealed, whose situation and status just don't allow it—or maybe it's merely not in his nature.

I love the music-hall dimensions in *Oliver!* we experience in "Oom-Pah-Pah," Nancy's opening number of the second act. It's "celebratory Englishness" helps define a particular musical style associated with the score. That liberating nature of "music-hall morality" is conveyed by Nancy throughout. This specific musical style is deeply connected to why this show had great critic and audience appeal when it premiered in the West End in 1960.

Perhaps because of its unique challenges (including a large number of children to be cast!), *Oliver!* is not often produced and hasn't seen a Broadway revival in over 30 years. Experiencing this complex and marvelous musical through the intimate lens of Goodspeed Musicals is an extraordinary opportunity to encounter the show close up and personal. As a director, the opportunity to share this story in this very special space is a responsibility I don't take lightly.

We have compiled an exceptional cast of wonderful character actors and children from New York, along with some talented local children, to collaborate on this unique production. This will also be my first partnership with the wonderfully talented James Gray, our NYC-based British choreographer. James' passion for the material and his authentic connection to that world elevates our production and inspires me to think outside the box. James joins my amazingly talented team of long-time creative partners (our music director, and the set, costume, lighting and sound designers) who have worked hard to create the world in which we can share this inspiring story of perseverance.

Welcome to the world of *Oliver!*.

Lionel Bart's
Oliver!