

# OLIVER!

LOUISE STICKLAND REPORTS ON A CLASSIC'S RETURN TO THE WEST END STAGE

**W**hatever your conclusions might be about the semantic messages of Lionel Bart's *Oliver Twist*, it would be churlish to suggest that it's anything but superb musical theatre. Although it bears only a loose resemblance to Dickens' original storyline, lacks his astute social commentary, presents simple moral equations and presents poverty as a bit of a gas, that hardly seems the point. The fact is that thousands who will go and see this show want to be entertained and not challenged. And that's the *raison d'être* for the production.

From the moment the virtuous and plucky Oliver emerges from 13 years in the workhouse with a perfect middle-class accent, impeccable manners and audacious confidence you know this is a fantasy, and though not everyone's cup of tea, it won't detract from the enjoyment of the majority.

*Oliver* is packed with catchy and uplifting songs that have you foot tapping and humming for days, and more than anything else these are what makes it a memorable piece. Interplay between songs seems only to exist as a means of getting to the next one. With the songs and the charismatic and powerful Cameron Mackintosh technical production, *Oliver* looks like it could be ensconced for a protracted West End run.

The sets, designed by Anthony Ward, are colourful, eye-catching and varied. They range from the dank and dreary squalor of the thieves' kitchen and Fagin/Bill Sykes-land to the elegant, opulent stuffiness of the Bloomsbury set to the raucous bawdy of the Three Cripples East End pub. The frequent scene changes take place amidst a flurry of slick movement. Set pieces fold up and down, bridges fly in and out, towers slide and grind on and offstage, roots appear from out of the floor, London cityscapes shrink

and grow from the mist, and ships sail down the Thames. The show gallops along at such a pace that even the most Nintendo-addled youngsters should be able to enjoy it.

After seeing the show, I was struck by the minuscule amount of working stage depth at the Palladium. Lack of space has been one of the main headaches facing the production team, headed by production manager Kevin Eld. But it hasn't stopped them from fitting in an incredibly ambitious set, 24 children, 35 adults, a 22-piece band, a SM and a DSM, two ASMs a side, six stage hands per wing, a three-strong LX crew, and two microphone techs, plus the automation, wigs and wardrobes crew, and a dog.

The scenery of *Oliver* is a complex operation involving hundreds of moving flats and trucks from above, below and on-stage, often with millimetres of clearance between them. These are moved by electric winches, hydraulics or traditional stage crew muscle. The scenery movement is controlled from a perch way up in the stage left side of the roof by Mike Sharp from an

Acrobat console made by Stage Technologies. With over 250 movement cues in the show, the Acrobat allows him to plot different pieces of scenery into groups that can then be moved by one master.

The console runs from Windows-based software and is part of a network of computers that control various axes of the different scenery pieces. Based on encoder feedback, the computer knows where any piece is at any time and can calculate the speed differences required to get the pieces arriving at their destinations simultaneously and accurately. On-stage scenery can be tweaked locally by plugging a laptop into the system.

Kevin chips in: "A lot of people say that automation has taken the place of the stage hand, but there's no way we could achieve what

we're doing here with stage hands." He adds that it's essential to have people on-stage keeping eyes peeled during the show and pushing pieces for some moves, while automation adds a technical dimension that expands the creative horizons of the show.

Sound is designed by Mike Walker and Paul Groothuis, who collaborated on sound design for *Carousel*. For *Oliver* they are continuing a philosophy of a natural sound that goes largely unnoticed by the public. "The show has become slightly louder than we anticipated," says Mike. This was due to a larger line-up than originally intended – a lot of brass and percussion for that bawdy music hall feel and fewer strings. Or as Mike describes it, "an up-front sound."

There are 32 Sennheiser radio mics used, all on UHF bands – three specific frequency licences were granted for the show – with receivers placed in a prop-surrounded back corridor because of space restrictions. Throughout the show 54 people wear radio mics, meaning about 40 changes and two very energetic mic techs backstage. This is to get as many of the children on to radios as possible as well as to achieve a full chorus sound. The orchestra too are individually miked. Mike explains: "The pit is very open here and there's a lot of resonance so you get an immediate acoustic sound."

The sound desk is a Cadac J type with 92 inputs. The day I arrived, Mike and Paul were transferring the sound effects from two Akai S3200 samplers to CD on the grounds that "CD is a lot easier and more reliable."

The Palladium's auditorium is broad and on three levels. Tannoy 3836 drivers out of their boxes are used for vocals, while Tannoy Super Duals plus Tannoy sub bass cabs are used as the main band speakers. The idea is that there are two dedicated systems, one for vocals and one for the band. Delays at each level fill the balconies, with a surround system of Canon V100s for a touch of orchestral perspective enhancement and effects. Mike also points out



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