

SEEING "OLIVER"

by K. R. Ackerman

If the editor expected intelligent and analytical criticism of the production when he invited me to contribute, then I am afraid he is going to be disappointed, for so involved was I in the theatrical performance that when the heroine, Nancy, came to take her bow at the conclusion of the last act after having been cruelly done to death, I involuntarily gave a deep sigh of relief at her remarkable resurrection.

This production was visually the most satisfying I have seen in a good many years of regular theatre-going. Most impressive of all was the ingenuity of the set which, by the re-arrangement of a small number of basic structures, most aptly portrayed a bewildering number of different settings with a remarkable rendering, not of the actuality of the scenes, but of their atmosphere. What was most refreshing too was the structural solidity and apparent permanence of these settings. The action was able to take place freely on different planes and linking stairs without the audience having to undergo the usual trauma of concern for the safety of the cast. It is, therefore, not surprising to learn that Mr. Kenny is an architect.

Although *Oliver* is a musical, it is the atmosphere of Dickensian London and not the music which remains in the memory. Some scenes, particularly that of the junketings in the tavern with its russets, reds and golds, and almost tangible fog, could have come straight off the canvas of Hogarth, despite the fact that he painted a century earlier. It is interesting to quote from Hogarth's own writings, "I wished to compose pictures on canvas similar to representations on the stage." For one member of the audience at least, Messrs. Coe, Kenny and Wyckham have created compositions similar to those on canvas. The lighting made a considerable contribution to the excellent pictorial effect. The lighting changes were innumerable but always subtle, and I marvel at the dexterity of the operator who controlled the lighting console without faltering on a two preset control desk without piston ("memory") action. The patterns of light were always most effective and these were certainly not easy sets to light.

I would question the wisdom of the decision to make no attempt to mask the light sources for, although the spaciousness achieved by the elimination of borders was indeed effective, the light from the lanterns tended to be a source of distraction to the audience, particularly those who had paid the most, i.e. the front rows of the stalls. Even if borders or some other form of camouflage was impracticable, "hoods" or "barndoors" which prevented the light from the lanterns falling on the audience, would have been advisable. This technique of showing all the machinery appears to be fashionable at the moment and is to be seen also at the Mermaid Theatre.