

## DESIGNING "OLIVER"

by Sean Kenny

Writing about *Oliver* I perhaps had better say what I feel about stage design itself and how I think it relates to the theatre, scripts, authors, directors, and so on. I think the standard of stage design in England and even internationally is very low at the moment and the reason is because there is too much decoration. Stage design seems to be something that is planted on the stage and more often than not it is quite separate from the play and does nothing to push it across nor to help the audience understand anything about it. I think stage design should be something very exciting and could indeed be an important part of the theatre, as important as direction and acting, rather than this separate decorative art—almost an outside thing that is brought in at the end—a boxing up or a fancy paper hanging—in front of which people act, move, play or sing. I think it belongs and it is one of the important things.

When I was first given the script of *Oliver* I was excited about it because I had read the book many times and I had seen the marvellous film full of atmosphere which David Lean made. To try and get some of this atmosphere on the stage was a wonderful challenge and a problem. This was especially so in a musical because obviously one just could not have heavy dramatic sets brought on—left there and then all flown away while the curtain dropped in front. *Oliver* had to run like a film because the choreography and movement had to run easily on the stage. My sets must help the flow of the play, and give the feeling of Dickensian London which needed to surround this musical. Lastly, and I think probably most important of all, they must not get in the way of the production.

I began the designs for *Oliver* by reading again the book *Oliver Twist* and, as I read, trying to sketch out here and there different parts of the scenes which Dickens himself described. Some of these scenes in the book were obviously not included in the musical, but I just did it anyway as an exercise and to try and steep myself in some way in the old London of Dickens. Eventually, after about probably 150 sketches or so, I had the feeling in my hand of how Dickensian London felt and smelt and almost could walk there. The people too—I thought I could understand a bit more. Then I went back to the script and looked at the scenes required for Lionel Bart's musical.

Obviously he could not put all Dickens' scenes into the musical, but what was there had to hold and suggest the whole of this marvellous world of London at that time. I began with the thieves kitchen. It had not to be just a thieves kitchen it had also to be the poor, underfed, poverty-stricken, dilapidated, wooden, musty, smoky, cobwebby place or places that surrounded and were in London at that time. It had to be more than just the one thing because it had to give the feeling of the play, of the music, of the