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# The Epiphany of Oliver!

Contra Costa's production is created with love, as all community shows should be.

By [Lisa Drostova](#)

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Somebody in El Cerrito makes a mean egg salad sandwich. Though the homemade snack, served in tidily sliced strips on a paper plate, doesn't have anything to do with Contra Costa Civic Theatre's production of Oliver!, it did help lead me to a -- some might say long-overdue -- revelation about community theater.



Please, sir, may I have some more?

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I had all my prejudices neatly lined up when I walked into the theater, but somewhere between watching the kids bravely sing and dance their way through "Consider Yourself" and "Pick a Pocket or Two" to the adoring applause of their parents, siblings, and grannies, and biting into that tasty morsel at the after-show party, I got it: community theater is a gift. It's a gift a community gives itself; a way for people who live and work together to enjoy each other's company and strengthen community bonds. But I didn't have this epiphany because I was bored silly; quite the opposite. The Civic Theatre's production is adept and very entertaining, even if you're not

related to any of the little people on stage.

Oliver! is Lionel Bart's musical adaptation of Charles Dickens' literary classic. The characters are familiar, even if you've never seen the musical or read the book: spunky orphan Oliver Twist, the first workhouse boy to ever ask for more gruel; Mr. Bumble, the parsimonious beadle whose policy of keeping the orphans thin helps cut the parish's costs by keeping the coffins small; Fagin, the repulsive yet goodhearted Jew who runs a gang of pickpocket tots through the streets of London; überburglar Bill Sikes and his doomed Nancy; wily young Jack Dawkins, the Artful Dodger.

Until you read the novel or see one of the staged versions, you may not be aware of how many Oliver Twist references permeate our culture. Dickens originally wrote Oliver Twist in serial form for magazine publication. A keen observer of social inequity, Dickens carefully chose his characters from among England's basest to show that virtue could spring forth in the most unlikely places, and, like Jung's archetypes, the characters continue to speak to modern audiences. Poverty, abuse, hypocrisy, greed -- it's all here; where Dickens used satire to get the point across, Bart uses song and dance.

Oliver embodies innocence, even if he falls in with some dodgy sorts

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and does some questionable things to survive. He's played here by a twelve-year-old girl, Kelsey Wunderle, who has a high, bright voice and lively features. Wunderle has to spend much of this show looking hangdog; it's a relief when she finally gets to show a little spark, especially when she meets the Artful Dodger on the road and beats up the much larger Noah Claypole. Oliver's new friends Dodger (the fast-talking, slippery Charles Miller) and Fagin (the delightfully sleazy Jay Krohnengold) come off as basically good sorts as well, even if they're thieves. I particularly appreciated Krohnengold's take on "Reviewing the Situation," where Fagin, facing the prospect of growing old without anyone to take care of him, starts thinking through his options (getting married is too much trouble; going straight too difficult -- might as well keep stealing).

Another of Dickens' examples of virtue is Nancy, the "fancy woman" with a heart of gold who attempts to reunite Oliver with his family and is killed by her abusive lover Bill Sikes as reward. Dickens caught a lot of heat for his creation of Nancy. As he writes in the preface to the third edition, "It

has been observed of this girl that her devotion to the brutal housebreaker does not seem natural ... it is useless to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable, right or wrong. It is true."

It seems almost quaint in our outspoken, media-saturated time when we can see real live domestic disturbances on Cops and fictionalized accounts of battered women everywhere else (remember Farrah Fawcett shedding her Angel-hood in *The Burning Bed*?). But Dickens was addressing an issue that at the time nobody else would touch. Bart didn't duck the question when he wrote the musical. When Nancy sings "As Long as He Needs Me" right after Sikes hits her in the tavern, you can almost hear the audience screaming "Run away! Get thee to a women's shelter!" Nancy -- especially played as she is here by Laura Catherine Buckley as an otherwise self-reliant woman -- makes people uncomfortable. But that's the point. Dickens was spot-on when he envisioned a woman so willing to bear her boyfriend's abuse. The shame is that not much has changed between his time and ours. Buckley's Nancy is brassy and no-nonsense one minute, deferential and unsure the next. For his part, Ray Christensen's Bill Sikes is 110 percent menace all the time; from the moment he boasts of the terror he inspires in "My Name," to the climax where he topples into the river, felled by a bobby's bullet.

The singing is a little uneven -- actually more so among the adults than the kids -- and some of the lyrics are difficult to make out, especially in the scenes that take place in the Three Cripples Tavern. But some of the solo performances are clear and clean: Wunderle singing "Where Is Love?," Buckley singing "As Long as He Needs Me," and Michelle Barrow as the rose seller in "Who Will Buy?" are standouts.

Matt Flynn's sets are well-conceived and executed. Large flats

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painted with an abstracted brick pattern, two rolling metal staircases, and a sepia-toned painting are the main pieces moved in and out to establish the workhouse, Fagin's lair, and the busy streets of London. Jan Koprowski's costumes are more naturalistic, although they still allow characters such as Dodger to "show a little flair."

It's a welcome pleasure to hear live music accompanying a show, even if it sometimes means we can't hear the singers. There are four musicians just off stage left using keyboards, drums, and bass to good effect. Choreographer Maryse Young manages a lot with such a large cast of small people. Particularly impressive is the first number "Food, Glorious Food!" where she has the actors moving up and down the stairs and around the two trestle tables in interweaving lines. Another inspired moment is in "I'd Do Anything for You," when the children form a carriage to convey Nancy, Dodger, Bet, and Oliver.

An amateur, according to the Latin, is someone who does something for love. Community theater at its best reflects this sense of an undertaking begun in love -- even if that means there are Girl Scout troops listed as assistant prop managers and the audience members have to juggle their wallets with Saran-Wrapped plates of brownies as they pay for their tickets. With Oliver! Contra Costa Civic Theatre manages to have its egg salad sandwich and eat it too.

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