

NORTHWEST HERALD

Review: Woodstock's 'Oliver!' deserves exclamation point

Published: Wednesday, April 15, 2015 4:10 p.m. CDT

Note to readers: This is an occasional theater column. Reviews of productions throughout McHenry County will be written by various members of area theater companies, as well as educators.

Full disclosure here, folks. I love the musical “Oliver!” It is the beloved musical of my youth — I so wanted to BE a London urchin. It was the first theatrical production I saw overseas – in London with the masterful Ron Moody as Fagin. And it is the musical that I know and can sing all the songs from.

Charles Dickens wrote “Oliver Twist” (or “The Parish Boy’s Progress”) in 1837; it wasn’t adapted into popular West End musical by Lionel Bart until 1960. (And thank you to producer David Merrick for bringing it to the U.S. in 1963.) Woodstock Musical Theatre Company once again has brought “Oliver!” to the Woodstock Opera House stage. The group’s first production in 1982 featured current stage manager Kathie Comella in the cast, and the second production in 1984 had Comella as the director.

The current production’s director, Barry Norton, has done a commendable job of casting 32 energetic and dedicated performers – a challenge of Olympic proportions to say the least on the intimate Opera House stage.

He also designed the simple and functional set, which is enhanced by roll-on and flown-down pieces. Norton’s “Oliver!” is a more light-hearted version than traditional productions, making it even more family friendly. And it’s good.

But musicals are staff collaborations, and this “Oliver!” showcases a strong one. Kudos to music director Barb Neely, costumer Kathy Brunhke of Kats Closet and choreographer Jocelyn France, who all add the precise depth of entertainment and joy to the script and score performed by a melodiously talented live orchestra, which even sounds good warming up.

Production coordinator Deb Spitzbart should be deservedly proud.

As for the actors, young and old, they can sing and dance as proven repeatedly from the very first ensemble scene featuring the visually dazzling song “Consider Yourself” to Act Two’s uplifting “Who Will Buy.”

Naturally, there are the stand outs:

Casey Lyons, perfectly cast as Oliver, was born to play this part – the voice of an angel, a spot-on accent and acting chops of a much older child.

Jane Charlotte as Nancy commands the stage every single time she appears. Whether smiling, loving or tormented, she is always in the moment, and her voice is powerful and interpretive, best evidenced in “As Long as He Needs Me.”

Barry Blodgett is a magical Fagin who works chemistry with both his urchins, the audience and in “Reviewing the Situation.” You just fall in love with him. Jim Auld as Bill Sykes is unrelentingly scary and evil in his looming physicality and vocal prowess. And Ewan Parker-Eaton is a charming Artful Dodger.

But there are also the scene stealers: Trent Halpin as Mr. Bumble and Mary Barrett as Mrs. Corney delight in the scene featuring the song “I Shall Scream”; David Frieze as Dr. Grimwig provokes much laughter from dialogue while examining the rescued Oliver; and Randy Peterknot is a very creepy Mr. Sourberry. (No wonder Oliver ran away from him.)

As for those adorable, lovable, dirty urchins? “Where is Love?” On the Opera House stage.

I attended the opening night production of “Oliver!” with a very appreciative and supportive audience. There were the usual minor glitches with lights, mics and a wayward Act Two fog that enveloped the orchestra and main floor, but truly, what opening night doesn't have a glitch or two?

- Regina Belt-Daniels is a working actress and director who began her career onstage at the Woodstock Opera House in 1985. Currently serving on the Raue Center for the Arts Board, she also is a lifetime member of TownSquare Players and a retired District 47 teacher.

Copyright © 2015 Northwest Herald. All rights reserved.
