

# OLIVER!

*Cheltenham Operatic & Dramatic Society*

The Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham

19<sup>th</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2012

It has taken until Charles Dickens' bicentenary year, but thanks to Cheltenham Operatic and Dramatic Society's exuberant summer 2012 production of this Lionel Bart evergreen, the Everyman Theatre can finally add *Oliver!* to its list of distinguished shows.

From the workhouse and busy streets of Paddington to Bloomsbury and the seedy dives along the Thames, Daphne Herbert's upbeat presentation bristles with cheery Londoners, rousing chorus songs and expansive set pieces, including the raunchy *Oom Pah Pah*, the haunting vendors' calls of *Who Will Buy?* and the immortal *Consider Yourself*. From the opening, doom-laden chords of *Food, Glorious Food*, the excitement factor never diminished, maintained principally by a cohort of well-drilled children who sang sweetly and danced gleefully around the strikingly adaptable set, commendably filling every last square inch of the stage.

The remainder of the animated cast acquitted themselves impressively, imbuing each character with considerable depth. Like Little Lord Fauntleroy fallen on hard times, George Seeley was articulate and confident in the title role, and clearly savoured his plaintive solo *Where Is Love?* Destiny intervenes through his unlikely union with the streetwise and chirpy Artful Dodger, entertainingly played by talented debutant Jordan Smith.

But like a good James Bond film, it was the bad guys who ruled the roost in this spirited romp. Tim Jones invested Bill Sykes with all the seething villainy of this brutal thug, even if his death was a tad anti-climactic. Nicky Bisset's impassioned portrayal of his wretched wife Nancy unpacked all the conflicting emotions of the tragic heroine, whose harrowing murder never ceases to garner immense pity for the tart with a heart. Her thrilling rendition of the stirring torch song *As Long As He Needs Me* gave me gooseflesh.

One role, however, does it for me every time in this musical: the devious, but endearingly indestructible Fagin. If there is one individual for whom the part was tailor-made, other than Ron Moody, it is Peter Hughes, who stole the entire show as the unscrupulous Jew. In a studied performance of tremendous conviction, he was Albus Dumbledore gone to the dark side, his penetrating gaze sweeping imperiously over his sprawling gang of juvenile pickpockets camped about his squalid den. Ruefully contemplating his wasted life, his bitterly reflective lament *Reviewing the Situation* ranked among the evening's finest moments, although the interminable violin cadenzas between verses needed some refinement.

A grand spectacle that's worth a return visit, so I may indeed be back soon. Please, CODS, I want some more.

Simon Lewis