

Oliver!

Oliver! is undoubtedly Lionel Bart's greatest theatrical achievement. "Based on Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist" was his original (and accurate – for it is certainly no mere retelling of the story) tag-line for the show. Other than by name, it is doubtful whether Dickens would have recognised any of his characters from this musical version of his story. Whereas the imprint of Bernard-Shaw is stamped on every page of Lerner and Loewe's My Fair Lady, Oliver! is much more Bart's creation than it is Dickens'.

With Bart we have villains (Sykes, Mr Bumble) and heroes (Oliver, Nancy)...and a number of characters who, if we really thought about it, should be villains but simply don't come across that way (Fagin, the Artful Dodger...and any number of Fagin's boys). Fagin is not really a corrupter of young boys. Nancy has somehow managed to sustain a heart of gold despite the cards that life has dealt her. Dodger is no more than a rogue... and a likeable one at that. We have three bullies of course, but Bart leaves us in no doubt: one is shot, another will lose his parochial office once the curtain is down and the third (Noah Claypole) proves so ineffectual that even Oliver can take him on.

Dickens' world is the more real. His bullies are more likely to get away with it and there are plenty more waiting in the wings. Dickens' Oliver Twist is a tale of villains and victims and the society that keeps them there. Bart's creation is perhaps less "worthy", making no such social comment. It is no less a masterpiece for all that.

Terry Foster

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