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## 'Oliver!' Packs A Dramatic Punch

**By David Steinberg**

*Journal Staff Writer*

The veteran musical "Oliver!" is packed with memorable songs and the national tour that's at Popejoy Hall today has top-level performers from top to bottom who sing them.

And the production presents with dramatic punch the dominant stories of the sympathetic orphan boy Oliver Twist, who's in search of love, and the villainous Fagin, who is in search of wealth through his pickpocket gang. Oliver is under the thumb of a series of odious Dickensian characters, from the workhouse manager who sells Oliver (yes, that reprehensible practice of human trafficking) to the funeral director who buys him, and ending with Fagin and the murderous thief Bill Sykes.

Quentin Araujo brings a tender, cup-half-full approach to the title character, which is reflected in the softness of his voice. He's sometimes upstaged by the tough, fast-talking Artful Dodger (Colin Nims), Fagin's main sidekick.

Zachary Mordechai's Fagin, a rubbery Jewish caricature, hardly suffers for his miserliness. Mordechai's bouncy, klezmer-like song of self-reflection "Reviewing the Situation" leaves him unrepentant. Noteworthy was Efrat Shapira's accompanying mournful violin; she's in a quartet awkwardly placed on stage though largely out of view.

Most of the cast had admirably played their multiple roles. For instance, Chazmond Peacock was Mr. Bumble, the well-fed, harsh beadle overseeing the scrawny workhouse orphans, and a benign knife grinder; and Will Harrell is the nasty funeral director Mr. Sowerberry, as well as the indecisive Dr. Grimwig.

The downside of the production is that none of the singing or dancing was presented in front of the curtain. So the cast was either in the middle of the stage or too far to the rear for the audience to feel strongly connected to the action. That seriously diminished the power of the story and the music. Apparently the blocking is related to electrical cables strung lengthwise across the stage for technical reasons.

The cast, which multitasked as stage crew, effectively injected the emotions of their characters in their songs. Particularly outstanding were Rhiannon West as Nancy ("As Long As He Needs Me"), Michelle Seipel as Mrs. Bedwin ("Where is Love?"), and the ensemble in its many numbers.

Most of the Act II scenes were by necessity gloomy — Fagin's lair and outdoor night scenes. The daytime scene at Mr. Brownlow's home should have more brightly lit and the cast should have been downstage for the finale.

### **If you go**

WHAT: The musical "Oliver!"

WHEN and WHERE: 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. today at Popejoy Hall, Center for the Arts, UNM campus and 8 p.m. Monday, Oct. 6 at Spencer Theater, Alto, N.M.

HOW MUCH: \$35-\$55 for the Popejoy performance online at [www.unmtickets.com](http://www.unmtickets.com), at select Albertson supermarkets or at the door. \$56 and \$59 for the Spencer Theater performance online at [www.spencertheater.com](http://www.spencertheater.com), by call (575) 336-4800 or at the door.

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