

Tara Theatre



James Hyland gave the first of his peripatetic series of one- and two-night stands presenting Fagin's Last Hour at the Tara Theatre opposite Earlsfield Railway Station in SW18. Over the next four months he will play it at 19 further venues across England and Wales. I urge readers to consult his website to decide whether they can reach one of them.

Hyland's compelling recreation of the story of Oliver Twist, in the form of Fagin's account of what happened and explains his take on it all, lasts an hour and is compelling throughout.

Hyland's presentation exploits his vocal range (shouts, giggles of various sorts, sudden shouts of rage) and his extreme athleticism. (He changes from Fagin into a barking dog bounding across the floor, and back again, all in a matter of seconds.) To borrow and amend T.S. Eliot's working title for *The Waste Land*, 'he do all the parts in different voices'. And each character is given a different physical stance and shape.

He has an uncanny ability to convince every member of an audience seated on two adjacent sides of a square auditorium that he is addressing them personally, eyeballing them as he does so.

Hyland remains true to Dickens' tale and characters throughout, but in his script, which he wrote himself, by using Fagin's oft reiterated form of address, 'My dears,' he allows him, more directly than does Dickens' third person narration, to appeal for sympathy.

He quotes some pious words from the judge at his trial, allows them to sink in, then erupts. 'Bollocks! We are all of us thieves!' The only difference is that, because of our class, our guilt goes unrecognized.

Fagin is shown as unapologetically classist, racist and sexist. He is, most important of all, unrepentant. He particularly resents being called a coward. As, in our day a judge has got himself into trouble for saying, it takes courage to be a thief.

At one point, stretching credulity somewhat, Hyland has him stepping outside of himself to remind us, apropos what we are going to see in the next several minutes, that in dramatic tradition, tragic and comic scenes may be presented side by side.

One moment from his performance illustrates this perfectly, although it is not two adjacent scenes but one short exchange. The judge at his trial, tells him to 'have the decency to be a man'. Fagin replies, 'I'll try, Sir. But I won't be one for much longer.'

It is generally accepted that Dickens hastened his early death by driving himself to do public readings from his work, which he enacted as he read, with the same concentrated, furious fervor that James Hyland exhibits now. We can only hope that Mr Hyland is a fitter man than Dickens was. He looks to be.

But at whatever risk to his or your health, do try to see his performance. You won't forget it quickly.