

Fagin's Last Hour

REVIEWS SEP 24, 2012 SHEPPEY LITTLE THEATRE, KENT

Fagin, one of the most loathsome characters in literature, filthy and snivelling, is to be hanged in an hour in this powerful and highly accomplished piece of Berkoffian physical theatre. We are a very long way from Lionel Bart's cheerful *Oliver!*, with its happy-ish ending, as the immensely talented James Hyland unfolds Fagin's unappealing story and memories.

Hyland howls, panics, chuckles, hisses, coughs, pleads, shouts and despairs, continually switching roles with a readjusted facial tic, a twitch of the shoulders or a voice shift. At one point he even hurls himself onto all fours and becomes Sykes' fearsome dog, barking and slavering. He also treats us to a burly, sinister Sykes, a straight-talking Nancy and a chirpy but troubled Dodger among other characters. The death of Nancy, and the reaction of Sykes and Fagin to it, is as chilling as anything I've seen onstage this year.

But there's more to this than technique. Yes, we can all see through the self-pitying Fagin, who has ruthlessly exploited children, was accessory to a cold-blooded murder and shows no remorse. The real strength of the piece lies in the way Hyland, despite everything his character has told us, manages to evoke human sympathy for a man about to face the horror of hanging. Fagin, a pathetic old man, is terrified – and we are terrified with, and for, him. The ending, after Hyland has left the stage, will stay with me for a long time.



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