

FLICKERS FROM THE FOOTLIGHTS

FAGIN'S LAST HOUR

based on **Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist**;

adapted and performed by **James Hyland**

Brother Wolf Theatre Company.

August 27th, Camden Fringe Fest,

Upstairs at the Gatehouse

A stage adaptation of *Oliver Twist* might not appear, at first, to be the most relevant topic of interest for enthusiasts of supernatural Gothic film or literature. But this is a Brother Wolf production, and an hour in the riveting presence of actor James Hyland, who delivers the darkest and most chilling adaptation of Dickens' tale that you can hope to see. Forget the sentimentality of so many screen adaptations of this tale of an orphan's progress from workhouse to thieves' den to final safety and prosperity. *Oliver Twist* himself seems virtually side-lined in this adaptation of the tale, as the villainous miser, Fagin, recounts to us his own take – from a prison cell one hour before his execution.

We take our seats in a dimly lit auditorium, a minimal squared off set with just four pillars, scattered straw on the floor to indicate the walls, and a ragged, recumbent figure lying still in a corner. This is Fagin, who, for the next 60 minutes, enacts the events of the story – in alternating bouts of impotent rage, guilt, despair, and finally fear of the fate which awaits him. I didn't expect to feel any empathy with the character, but such is the power and complexity of James Hyland's performance, that it is impossible not to: when he rails against the social injustice of being born a poor man in a rich, capitalist city, who somehow has to survive, and especially at his mounting terror as the hangman's noose approaches.

The sheer energy and physicality of Hyland on stage (as anyone who has seen *Dracula's Guest* will testify) is extraordinary. At times pacing the stage like a caged animal, the actor assumes the identity of each of the characters in turn – Oliver, the Artful Dodger, the Magistrate, Bill Sykes, Nancy, and even Bullseye, Sykes' faithful dog. He does this seamlessly, with merely a shift in voice, mannerism, and body language – Nancy's cocked head and arched eyebrow is sublime! – to convince us totally of who is speaking. (The moment when he drops onto all fours and suddenly bounds towards us with a few short barks is startling – and over in seconds!) This is spell-binding theatre. We know what is coming: the staging of Nancy's death is horrific and shocking, and the final action – indicated with clever lighting offstage – leaves the audience feeling emotionally raw.

Fagin's Last Hour is one of Brother Wolf's most highly-acclaimed touring productions. If you haven't yet seen it, then check the website for future dates, and try to catch it at a theatre near you. The show will linger on in your mind long after you leave – especially if you choose to sit in the front row....

Julia Kruk



FAGIN'S LAST HOUR

