

Theatre Review



***Fagin's Last Hour*, adapted and performed by James Hyland, directed by Phil Lowe: A Brother Wolf production, Leicester Square Theatre, London. 24 September 2011.**

After appearing as Jacob Marley in his previous one-man show (see *Dickensian* No. 480 pp. 67-8) James Hyland turns his attention to another Dickensian sinner, but one for whom earthly redemption is not forthcoming. Again Mr Hyland plays many parts in addition to that of the eponymous villain – including Bill Sikes, Nancy, the Artful Dodger, and even Bull's-eye.

Mr Hyland's Fagin spends his last hour attempting to compensate for the inadequacies of his own counsel by reliving the events that brought him to the condemned cell and justifying his claim to be an innocent man. He pleads that he was the only one who took pity on Oliver; gave him lodgings, fed him, and taught him a trade – when the rest of London – now baying for his blood – was completely indifferent to the boy's fate. He also claims that, apart from some trivial incidents of corporal punishment inflicted on the ungrateful boy, he is innocent of committing any serious acts of violence. This Fagin proves an effective advocate in his own defence, his crimes, he asserts, being no worse than those committed by many of those sitting in judgement upon him (and in the audience sitting before him).

For Fagin, Oliver is his nemesis: all his misfortunes can be traced to the day that this middle-class orphan was introduced into his den. It was Oliver's innocence that corrupted Nancy and ultimately led to the popular clamour against him and his long-established business enterprises. In the text it is Bolter's throat that Fagin wants cut – in this production it is Oliver's head that Fagin urges Sikes to 'saw off'. Bolter does not feature. To enable Fagin to describe the murder of Nancy, and to play out the part of Sikes committing it, Fagin has to witness it. The story is therefore changed so that Nancy returns Oliver to Mr Brownlow, is followed by the Artful Dodger, and meets her

grisly end in the presence of Fagin in his thieves' kitchen. There is no overheard conversation on London Bridge – no crib at Chertsey – no domestic violence chez Sikes. The murder scene, effectively lit by a single red spotlight, is both re-enacted and narrated by Fagin – blow by terrible blow.

It is not only the plot that is altered. Mr Hyland does not labour under the constraints that Dickens did in respect of the language deemed acceptable to use before an adult audience. As the characters portrayed are a mixture of thieves, fences and prostitutes, this recourse to a more vernacular and realistic language is justified – mixed as it is with the thieves' cant of the original text.

Mr Hyland does not allow a good line to go to waste, even if it was not originally assigned to a particular character. In the text Dickens famously discourses on the melodramatic tradition of alternating comic with tragic scenes, and likens the effect produced to a slice of streaky bacon. In this production Fagin appropriates the metaphor – with a sly nod to the irony of a Jew doing so – to describe his own volatile mood swings between being able to recall, with evident relish, darkly comic events from his sinful past and being prostrated with despair at his current predicament.

Dickens described Fagin in the condemned cell as hurrying to and fro in 'a paroxysm of fear and wrath'. As the hour expires, this mixture of impotent rage against those who have brought him to this sorry pass, and abject dread of the fate inexorably approaching, is powerfully portrayed. At one moment Fagin is defiantly demanding to know 'what right have they to butcher me?' – whilst at another he is scurrying around the confines of his cell like a caged and terrified animal. Mr Hyland succeeds in presenting Fagin as a complex human being rather than as a stock stage villain. Sharing his last hour was an intense, if not a particularly comfortable, experience.

This one-off performance in London followed a run at the Harrogate Theatre. It is intended that the performance will be staged more widely throughout 2012.

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