

Review of *Fagin's Last Hour*, adapted, produced and performed by James Hyland and directed by Phil Lowe

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***Fagin's Last Hour* took inspiration from the final chapter of *Oliver Twist*, 'Fagin's Last Night Alive', which describes the child-exploiting criminal's final moments before he is hanged. A brilliantly executed (excuse the pun) one-actor piece of theatre dedicated to exploring the depths of one of Western literature's most infamous villains, *Fagin's Last Hour* dramatized what happens when a condemned antagonist is given centre stage.**

'I confess I have yet to learn that a lesson of the purest good may not be drawn from the vilest evil', wrote Dickens of *Oliver Twist*. Dickens describes his novel as a morality tale in which the 'purest good' of little, innocent Oliver triumphs over the evil Fagin, by turns a 'loathsome reptile' and devilish 'merry old gentleman'. The Fagin of *Fagin's Last Hour* was no different to that of the novel: a scheming, manipulative criminal and an accessory to murder. Hyland's brilliantly realised Fagin was, however, so isolated, so full of regret and fear in his final hour alive as a condemned man, that one could not help but feel deeply sorry for him.

The sparsely dressed stage was cleverly inspired by Dickens' original illustrator, George Cruikshank's drawing of Fagin sitting on his narrow prison cell bed, the epitome of loneliness. Occupying just a sliver of the minimally lit stage space, Hyland's Fagin was trapped like an animal, pacing, shuffling, grimacing and descending into a despairing madness before our eyes.

The play set up a thought-provoking dialogue with the jolly magic of *Oliver!* the musical, inviting us to appreciate the complexities and darkness of Dickens' original work alongside the multi-faceted possibilities of deceptively simple one-actor theatre. The audience was silent, tense, completely immersed in Hyland's visceral, intensely physically demanding performance and his incredible vocal range. Shifting roles with frightening ease, Hyland encapsulated Bill Sikes, Nancy, Dodger and the Judge; even Sikes' dog, Bullseye, made a cameo!

The meaning I took from the play, which stayed with me a long while after, was provocative and complex: that the rules and inequities of societies create criminals, and that the limitations placed on Fagin by a hostile society had indeed 'created' him as a kind of monster. The final moment of the play when Fagin slunk off stage to meet his fate was one of the most haunting moments of theatre I have experienced for a long time.