An army of performers makes ‘Oliver!’ a classic

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Consider yourself in good fortune if you catch the infectious production of “Oliver!” now completing the summer season of Cabrillo Stage’s musical-theater trio. Just about anyone who hasn’t been lost in space for the past 50 years knows the storyline of “Oliver!” based on Charles Dickens’ timeless classic “Oliver Twist.” British playwright Lionel Bart is the composer, lyricist and writer of “Oliver!” which premiered in London’s West End in 1960 for a good, long run. It first opened on Broadway in 1963 and has had many international tours and revivals (and was made into a British film musical in 1968).

Fast forward to 2014, where a first-rate cast headed by chameleon-in-chief Andrew Ceglio and an angelic-voiced Tenaya Carr as the put-upon orphan Oliver take the audience on a well-traveled journey at Cabrillo’s Crocker Theater.

Ceglio is simply mesmeric as he seamlessly alternates between a somewhat fatherly figure to the boys in his pickpocket gang and, a moment later, a menacing overlord. The highlight of the evening is Ceglio’s laugh-out-loud rendition of “Reviewing the Situation” (and the violin solo in this number is superb).

At times, 10-year-old Carr is a shade tentative in a role that calls for him to muster up a lot of spunk. Yet his big voice (and eyes to match) easily enables the audience to root for Oliver to overcome whatever series of unfortunate events he encounters (and he encounters quite a few).

Director Dustin Leonard juggles multiple story lines — and ensembles of actors (67 in all, about three fourths of whom are young people) with a light touch. Make no mistake: “Oliver!” has some dark moments which, if not handled with finesse, mars the theatrical experience, especially for the very young in the audience.

But this time most of the right elements come together to create enchantment with a close-to-flawless cast:

- Lithe dancing sprite Bella Anderson as Nancy’s sidekick Bet;
- Solid Steven Guire Knight as the trustworthy, earnest Mr. Brownlow; and
- As Brownlow’s secretary Mrs. Bedwin, Eleanor Hunter has a small role, but when she sings the reprise of “Where is Love?” it’s superb.

Two key roles, however, don’t quite measure up to their Dickensian characters. As Bill Sykes, Nickelas Ceglio could use a bit more heft to seem more intimidating and sinister, although he redeems himself somewhat with his dramatic death scene. Devon DeLeon is endearing but seems to lack the sass and vinegar needed for the Artful Dodger role.

Of course it’s the music of “Oliver!” that can make or break this production. Musical director Jon Nordgren and his lively orchestra of 22 deserve recognition for making such numbers as “Pick a Pocket or Two,” “It’s a Fine Life,” “Consider Yourself,” “Food, Glorious Food” “Oliver” and “As Long As He Needs Me” even more unforgettable.

There’s another “star” in “Oliver!” Scenic designer Charles Murdock Lucas creates a fluid set which transitions smoothly from the workhouse in the first scene, to the Paddington Green Marketplace, to the undertaker’s home, then to Fagin’s underground hangout, the metal walls and stairway of which are flown down from high above the stage and from the wings. As for the dancing, choreographer Brance Souza knocks it out of the ballpark with several intricate numbers — some with colossal numbers of young people. While the workhouse orphans are a shade too smiley and clean in their “Food, Glorious Food” opening number (and the dance too stagy), Souza comes through majestically with the lively terpsichore in “Consider Yourself,” “I’d Do Anything” and “Be Back Soon.” Then Souza cleverly turns her actors into a tableau in “Who Will Buy.”

Costume designer Maria Crush must have found a mighty mob of seamstresses to whip up the dozens of costumes needed for “Oliver!” Mr. Bumble’s military-style black and gold outfit is a standout, but every costume seems appropriate for the era and the stature of each performer. Kyle Grant’s lighting and Michael Meek’s sound works well, although at times it is difficult to understand Buxton’s sometimes-rushed words and DeLeon’s too-faint mutterings.

There are plenty of reasons for the whole family (except, perhaps, children under about five) to see “Oliver!” Besides being enjoyable entertainment, it’s a marvelous way to learn a healthy slice of English history without cracking a book!