

# Calendar

# WEEKEND

Los Angeles Times  
THURSDAY, MAY 18, 2000  
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## Theater

### Dickens With a Twist

Deaf West Theatre troupe mounts a rousing 'sign language musical' version of 'Oliver!'

#### Theater Review

By F. KATHLEEN FOLEY  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

**B**ravery, thy name is Deaf West Theatre. The group's intrepid reinterpretation of "Oliver!" as a "sign language musical" may not always succeed. However, director-adaptor Jeff Calhoun and his talented cast—which consists of both hearing and deaf performers—have created a rousing entertainment suitable for all ages.

Confronted by the sheer scope of Lionel Bart's musical, Calhoun trun-

cates the proceedings to be more in keeping with his small stage capacities, adding a narrator—none other than Dickens himself, who sets up the various scenes by "reading" from the prop book, "Oliver Twist." Dickens is played by stage veteran George McDaniel, who doubles as a satisfyingly creepy Fagin (superbly signed by Koli Cutler).

Inspired by public readings, Calhoun uses the Dickens character as a handy device to tame the urban sprawl of Dickens' London. This story theater approach cleverly streamlines a vehicle that could have overwhelmed the space.

Still, the result is a massive undertaking, underpinned by superb technicians, on stage and off. Robert Steinberg's dank-looking set, brick archways and rough wooden scaffolding provide ample playing areas. Michael Gilliam's lighting design and Douglas Green's sound—augmented by a new sub-woofer sound system that allows deaf audience patrons to feel the music—are critical to the Dickensian ambience. David Zyla's contemporary costumes successfully suggest the era.

Music director Carol Weiss conducts the crack ensemble that accompanies the cast. Her efforts, along with Brian-Paul Mendoza's



ED KREIGER

George McDaniel, left, as the Narrator, Harris Doran as the Artful Dodger and Joshua Ari Soudakoff as the title character in "Oliver!"

musical staging, lend a steamroller momentum to the action. It is only when the music stops that the pace occasionally falters.

Calhoun largely avoids stage clutter—no mean feat, since the production requires two performers—one speaking, one signing—for most roles. While some actors are on the sidelines, in other cases both performers—signing and speaking—are central and equal, especially Antoinette Abbamonte and Susan Hoffman, whose combined performance as Nancy is eerily effective. Mirroring one another like doppelgangers of Germanic lore, these two herald an unenviable fate.

Troy Kotsur provides comic re-

lief as Bumble, who is led down the poison ivy path to matrimony by the hilariously lubricious Widow Corney (Carol Kline). Harris Doran is an athletic but emotionally limited Artful Dodger. Joshua Ari Soudakoff makes an adorable Oliver, while Vac plays Sowerberry to pinched perfection. Cast against type, blond and youthful Ryan Schlect invests Bill Sykes with savage intensity.

#### BE THERE

"Oliver!" Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2 p.m.; Sundays, 3 p.m. Ends June 25. \$22. (\$12 children under 12.) (818) 762-2773 (818) 762-2782 (TDD). Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes.



George McDaniel, left, plays narrator Charles Dickens to Harris Doran's Artful Dodger and Joshua Soudakoff's Oliver in an American Sign language adaptation of the musical "Oliver."

## L.A. HAPPENINGS Signing on

**E**d Waterstreet, whose theater company is producing an adaptation of the musical "Oliver," can't sleep because he wakes up with melodies from the show in his head.

That's pretty remarkable considering that Waterstreet is deaf.

After 10 years of plays, the Deaf West Theatre is attempting its first musical. And Waterstreet wears he can hear the music.

"The show melds the visual with the rhythm and melody," said Waterstreet, sitting in the Deaf West Theatre lobby while a mix of rehearsal and set construction rumbles on the other side of the wall. Waterstreet signs to an



**Jeff** interpreter, but his expression and movement clearly explain his emotions about the production. "The music and the poetry of the songs seen in sign language are on an equal basis. And we have sub-woofers under the seats so you can feel the vibrations," he said through the interpreter. "I had always wanted to experience a musical." Waterstreet hadn't experienced any theater — and

Please see L.A. on Page 29

was unaware that there were any deaf actors — until he attended college. Soon after, he joined the National Deaf Theater's touring company.

After moving from the East Coast to the Los Angeles area, Waterstreet was surprised to find that there was no deaf theater there, so he founded Deaf West with three partners. The troupe is in its second permanent home and, if it is successful in buying the property next door, the theater will soon expand.

Although the group's plays incorporate sign language, only 25 percent of its audience is deaf. Waterstreet attributes this to the fact that most deaf people are still unaware that there is theater designed for them.

To increase the troupe's visibility and to reach out to the community, Deaf West is starting a summer conservatory, with four weeks of performance classes.

The pool of deaf actors is small compared to those available for mainstream plays, but that didn't stop Tony-award winning choreographer Jeff Calhoun from taking a break from multi-million dollar musicals to direct "Oliver" at Deaf West.

"I was discontented with the direction of my career in New York doing revivals," Calhoun said. "There was nothing for my soul and no challenge to my creative instincts. When you're dealing with big budgets, all you worry about is the bottom line."

Calhoun got a call from "Oliver" producer Bill O'Brien, who worked with the director on "The Will Rogers Follies," asking if he'd like to give deaf theater a try.

"I said I'd love to even though I had never seen a deaf production before," Calhoun said. "I came out and saw their 'A Streetcar Named Desire,' and it was the best I'd ever seen. I was thrilled, but I thought, how do we follow this?"

Because Calhoun often found the book for the musical "Oliver" problematic, he returned to the Charles Dickens novel about the orphan who falls in with a gang of young thieves led by the scoundrel Fagin. This recreation keeps the musical score of Lionel Bart but has added a Dickens character as narrator.

Working with deaf and hearing actors has been difficult Calhoun said, because the visual aspects of the play have to be centered around the area where the sign language occurs. Hearing people don't have to see who is speaking, but deaf people need to see who is signing. And hearing actors, who translate, must be able to reflect the same tone and emotion of the deaf performers.

"But it's made me such a better director, and it's made me realize how lazy some hearing actors can be because they just have to speak to communicate. Deaf actors don't have that luxury," Calhoun said.

The world premiere of the American Sign Language adaptation of "Oliver" is on stage through June 18 at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankersh Blvd., North Hollywood. Performances are at 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturday with weekend matinees at 2 p.m. Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays. Tickets are \$22 for adults, \$17 for seniors and students, and \$12 for children 11 and younger. For more information on the show or summer conservatory, call (818) 762-2773.

Friday, May 19, 2000

# The Toluca Times

and Canyon Crier

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Wednesday, May 24, 2000

## 'Oliver'...Deaf West's Latest Miracle!

By PAT TAYLOR

Deaf West's "Oliver" is a spectacular accomplishment! It is an adaptation by Lionel Bart of Charles Dickens' "Oliver Twist." A longtime fan and supporter of Deaf West productions, I am ever in awe of their vision and ability to create theatre that equally entertains deaf and hearing audiences. When I learned that their next play would be a musical, it was beyond my imagination. How could they pull this one off? Well, pull it off they have, and it is a brilliant, awe-inspiring effort! I loved every breathtaking moment, as did the entire audience. Using deaf actors, hearing actors and translators, and fabulous singers from Broadway shows, this large cast blended like magic, and presented a totally unforgettable theatrical experience. Under the creative and flawless direction of Jeff



Photo by Ed Kreiger

From left, George McDaniel is the show's narrator (Charles Dickens), Harris Doran is the pick-pocketing 'Artful Dodger' and Joshua Ari Soudakoff is the orphan Oliver, in Deaf West Theatre's world premiere American Sign Language adaptation of Lionel Bart's classic musical. The Deaf West first-ever musical production runs through June 18 at its new NoHo venue.

Calhoun, this version of "Oliver" moves along as smooth as silk, and the portrayals are wonderful throughout. The functional,

minimalistic set by Robert Steinberg, and costumes by David Zyla, set the mood. The onstage orchestra under the mu-

sical direction of Carol Weiss, accompanied, but never overpowered the voices. I'd forgotten how many great songs came from "Oliver." You'll recognize most of them. Now about the cast—too many to mention all, but the mix of children and adults, both deaf and hearing, was mind-blowing! George McDaniel as Dickens, the narrator, and later as Fagin, brought such professionalism to the stage! His great voice and flair for comedy, set the pace for everyone. Troy Kotsur (deaf actor) was a goofy riot as Bumble. Quite a stretch for him, after recently depicting the moody Stanley in "Streetcar." An adorable deaf Oliver, (Joshua Soudakoff) with the multi-talented young Josh Breslow as his voice. Beautiful portrayal by Antoinette Abbamonte, (deaf) as Nancy, and showstopping vocals by Susan Hoffman as her voice!

As the Artful Dodger, a street thug who befriends young Oliver, Harris Doran gave one of my favorite performances. He was such fun to watch and hear. His Cockney accent was spot on. I could go on forever, but space won't allow.

Other featured actors include Ryan Schlacht as Bill; Faye De Witt, impressive voice of Mrs. Brownlow; Carol Kline, widow Corney; and Vae as Sowerberry. Artistic Director Ed Waterstreet not only strives to present innovative theatre, but also to bring the hearing and deaf communities closer together. We are so lucky to have Deaf West now in our NoHo Arts District! Please, get the family together, and see this wonderful show! You'll leave feeling warm and tingly.

Running Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 pm; matinees at 3 pm through June 25. Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd. in North Hollywood. For seats, call (818) 762-2773 (voice) or (818) 762-2782 (TDD).

# BACK STAGE

## DRAMA LOGUE

May 25 - May 31, 2000  
\$2.75 California / \$3.25 elsewhere

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## REVIEWS

### OLIVER!

at Deaf West Theatre



Reviewed by Terri Roberts

It must seem like a ludicrous idea at first: a deaf theatre company putting on a musical. Not only that, but the good folks at Deaf West Theatre decided not to play it safe by going with some obscure little show no one's ever heard of before. Instead, for its first foray into musical theatre, the company chose to adapt Lionel Bart's enduringly popular *Oliver!* Though slightly unbalanced, the DWT production of *Oliver!* is a thoroughly charming and delightful piece of theatre that integrates deaf actors using American Sign Language (ASL) with hearing actors and singers. The show is simultaneously spoken, signed, and sung, so that hearing, hard-of-hearing, and deaf audiences can enjoy the experience collaboratively, rather than singling out deaf patrons by using a sidelines interpreter and forcing them to split focus.

Far from being a distraction, the expressive art of sign language actually complements the heightened expressionism of musical theatre. A scowling Bill Sykes is one thing; a scowling Bill Sykes who accentuates his violent thoughts with flying fingers, wild gestures, and hands slapping sharply together is quite another.

Broadway director/choreographer Jeff Calhoun both directed the show and

penned the adaptation; musical staging is artfully accomplished by Brian-Paul Mendoza. (The original source material is, of course, Dickens' *Oliver Twist*.) In Calhoun's version, which is heavy on musical numbers and short on story, Dickens himself narrates (and is enthusiastically played George McDaniel) before stepping in to play sprightly pickpocket gang leader, Fagin. Everything moves smoothly and easily until the end, when the climatic confrontation rushes past so fast it's finished before you even know what's happened.

At the performance reviewed, understudy Alex Dolan gave pure, angelic voice to Joshua Ari Soudakoff's sweet-natured Oliver (though the staging made him occasionally hard to hear). Susan Hoffman voices the role of Oliver's guardian angel, Nancy, played by Antoinette Abbamonte. Both make Nancy a vivid character in the show; their poignantly signed/sung rendition of that most co-dependent of songs, "As Long as He Needs Me," is a true spine-tingler.

Troy Kotsur, who showed his gruffer side so well as Stanley in DWT's *Streetcar*, here gets to be more playful. His comic Mr. Bumble lives up to his awkward name, and is especially funny in scenes with the marriage-minded Widow Corny (the hilarious Carol Kline).

In against-type castings, Harris Doran is an older Artful Dodger who still has all the moves and the cocky attitude, and Ryan Schlect is good-looking, blonde, and disturbingly young Bill Sykes, who nonetheless carries off the villainous role with a frightening fury.

Robert Steinberg's rough-hewn set design is simple, functional, and easily adaptive. And Douglas Green's superb sound design is amplified by sub-woofers under the seats to help deaf audiences feel

the live music, led by musical director Carol Weiss. Hearing audiences appreciate it as well. It's part of the unique ambience that makes DWT productions so incredibly satisfying.

*"Oliver!"* presented by and at Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hollywood. May 14-June 25. Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sat. 2 p.m., Sun. 3 p.m. \$12-22. (818) 762-2773 (box office) or (818) 762-2782 (TDD).

September 28, 2000  
**IN THIS ISSUE:**  
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 Playwright Donald Margulies  
 Ken Ruta  
 Timothy Olyphant  
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**BACKSTAGE**  
 THE ACTORS  
 TRADE WEEKLY  
**WEST**



George McDaniel, Harris Doran, and Joshua Ari Soudakoff in Deaf West Theatre's *Oliver*.

# Ovations Name "Oliver!"

Deaf West tops major nominations with sign-language adaptations.

by Rob Kendt

**P**aging sign-language interpreters: You will be in high and uniquely relevant demand at the Ovation Awards ceremony, Oct. 30 at the Ahmanson Theatre, when L.A. theatres give awards to their peers. Whatever number of awards they walk away with, Deaf West Theatre and its colleagues will be out in force, since the deaf-run theatre swept significant categories of the recently announced Ovations award nominations (for a total 17 noms), named by 180-plus Theatre LA voters for the calendar year spanning Sept. 1, 1999, to Aug. 31, 2000.

This heartening recognition for one of the city's often overlooked theatrical treasures goes for two unlikely and daring productions: an adaptation of the musical *Oliver!* which was both sung and signed, and a sign-language version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (which, in a coincidental, uncalculated marketing coup, recently reopened at Deaf West's North Hollywood space).

True, the Mark Taper Forum and the Ahmanson Theatre, as usual, dominated in the actual number of nominations (18) for any single producing company—and did so almost unanimously in the larger theatre categories, with no major shows at the Shubert and just one, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, opening in one of Hollywood's midsized spaces. But only the Taper's *Jitney* and the Ahmanson's *Amadeus* and *Les Miserables*—none of which, incidentally, could really be called entirely indigenous L.A. productions— nabbed nominations in the major best play or musical categories, with the Taper's *Expecting Isabel* and the Ahmanson's *The Dead* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* snagging performance

Other sweeps went to Civic Light Opera of South Bay Cities for its knockout production of *Dreamgirls* (seven nominations), *Forbidden Broadway Y2K/LA* (which gave the Tiffany Theatres five of their nine nominations), and *The Angels of Lemnos*, a long-running hit at the Road Theatre Company. Other noteworthy noms included one for 19-year-old Victor Kaufold, whose submission to the Blank Theatre Company's Young Playwrights Festival, *The Why*, became a full production last month, and the competing nominations for the Matrix Theatre's *Waiting for*

*Godot* and for director Beth Milles' production of *The Servant of Two Masters*, which had been booted from the Matrix before its scheduled opening earlier this year. The two go head to head in the best play, intimate theatre category. (The Ovations' previous designation of "small" vs. "large" theatre categories has been changed to the more flattering, if faintly suggestive, "intimate" vs. "large" theatre.)

Gone missing, it must be noted, were such acclaimed and likely contenders as East West Players' *Golden Child*, the Cast Theatre's *Bitter Women*, Cornerstone Theatre Company's *Broken Hearts*, all of A Noise Within's season at the Luckman Theatre, the Complex's *Down South*, the Hudson Guild's *Last Lists of My Mad Mother*, the Falcon Theatre's *Puddin'head Wilson*, the Ivy Substation's *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, the Celebration Theatre's *Marry Me a Little* and *Shopping and Fucking*, the Odyssey's *The Memorandum*, Pacific Resident Theatre's *Otherwise Engaged*, the Victory Theatre's *Spike Heels*, and the independent production, *Resa Fantastiskt Mystiskt*, among others.

And some would argue that one of the year's most essential productions, *The Berlin Circle* at the Evidence Room, was robbed, with nominations only for actress Megan Mullally, sound designer John Zaleswski, and costumer Holly Po-Durbin—but none for the production itself, for director David Schweizer, for the ensemble, for actor John Fleck, for choreographer Ken Roht. But hey, that's where there are the *L.A. Weekly* awards and *Backstage West's* Garlands. The more the merrier.

Also announced were recipients of two annual special awards: one a lifetime achievement award for the 45-year veteran of the L.A. stage, Ray Stricklyn, and the other the James A. Doolittle award for leadership in the theatre, bestowed this year on Michael Eisner and the Walt Disney Company for "vision and leadership" that has "changed the face of theatre worldwide, according to the Theatre LA president and CEO Lars Hansen, speaking at the recent nomination announcement ceremony.

by Travis Michael Holder

I am never anything but amazed by the ingenuity of the folks at Deaf West. From *Equus* to *St. Joan* to *Of Mice and Men* to the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I was already convinced they could do just about anything. All Deaf West productions, of course, utilize both hearing and non-hearing actors using American Sign Language and are created to be appreciated by any audience member with startling results. I have seen many techniques used over the years by this company to impart their unique artistry, from headsets for hearing patrons and the lines read by actors from the booth in *Orphans* to *Streetcar*'s unique technique of featuring the non-signing actors speaking Williams' prose as they hung languidly over wrought iron balconies above the signing performers emoting on the small stage below.

But a musical? Deaf West offering us a musical? "Is this," asks Artistic Director Ed Waterstreet in his program notes for the company's current mounting of Lionel Bart's classic *Oliver!*, "an oxymoron designed to confound an indifferent audience?" Hardly. Seeing Deaf West's *Oliver!* is truly a humbling experience, guaranteed to lift your faith in mankind — and the unstoppable communicative powers of art — a few degrees.

Of course the first thing this *Oliver!* has going for it is Charles Dickens, who first brought *Oliver Twist* to the world long before even I was born. His classic novel was made even more memorable when Bart first set it to music 40 years ago, which is a time, sadly, I do remember (what kid actor hasn't played The Artful Dodger at least once?).

Next, the piece is directed by Broadway giant Jeff Calhoun, the noted choreographer who won a Tony for the musical in which we first worked together, *Will Rogers Follies*, and went on from there to collaborate on *Tommy Tune Tonite!*, the long-running revival of *Grease* and the current hit *Annie Get Your Gun*. Calhoun and choreographer Brian-Paul Mendoza have brilliantly brought the hugeness of *Oliver!* to a small stage, with the already large ensemble often sharing space with extra performers — namely speaking/singing actors and signing actors here cast in the same role. For instance, as Nancy, Susan Hoffman sings "As Long As He Needs Me" as Antoinette Abbamonte signs the song nearby. And when the scene turns to dialogue, both actresses share the stage, with the other players equally

cept to watch, a technique repeated by Koli Culter signing Fagin as George McDaniel overacts... er, acts, sorry... and Tosos Pappas speaks for Ryan Schlecht as the signing Bill Sukes. The chorus of orphans is played by a lovable group of both signing and singing children and the ensemble features some dynamically accom-



McDaniel, Doran and Soudakoff (l to r) in *Oliver!*

plished talent, including the marvelous Faye De Witt of *Nite Club Confidential* fame and a delightful turn by Carol Kline as the Widow Corney, gleefully seduced in "I Shall Scream" by Deaf West veteran Troy Katsur as Mr. Bumble.

But there are three performances in this *Oliver!* That deserve special praise. As The Artful Dodger, recent New York transplant Harris Doran proves the West Coast's gain; he is a gifted musical comedian with a real knack for Fosse-like slithering, as his Dodge often does around the outskirts of the stage. As Oliver himself, deaf performer Joshua Ari Soudakoff, a seasoned performer at age 9, could easily melt the stoniest of hearts; his powers of communication go way beyond the verbal. He is joined onstage by a young performer named Josh Breslow, who to me evokes the real spirit — and enormous heart — of this presentation. Doubling as one of the orphans while he simultaneously voices Oliver's lines, this kid instantly transforms himself from surly street urchin to sweet Master Twist without so much as missing a breath, signaling the advent of a major young talent. And when Breslow plaintively sings "Where Is Love?" seated on the steps in the middle of the audience as Soudakoff watches his lips from the stage, signing the most graceful and poignant responses to indicate Oliver's loneliness, it is truly a magical moment in the theater and the stuff that future goosebumps are made for.

Deaf West's *Oliver!* is a shining moment in the history of musical theater, the first incorporation ever of American Sign Language and

Broadway into one unique presentation. It is an experience sure to lift your spirits and make you reevaluate all those petty annoyances you've been complaining about in your daily life. For tickets, call (818) 762-2773 [voice] or (818) 762-2782 [TDD].

# ENTERTAINMENT TODAY

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# LA WEEKLY

MAY 26-JUNE 1, 2000 • WWW.LAWJOURNAL.COM • VOL. 22 NO. 27

## PICKS OF THE WEEK

### OLIVER!

**OLIVER!** The idea of a musical put on for a mostly deaf audience might seem so outlandish as to be an absurd gimmick. Yet, director Jeff Calhoun's imaginative sign-language adaptation of Lionel Bart's musical (based on Dicken's novel about a young orphan's adventures) is downright tuneful and beguiling by any standard. Eschewing traditional deaf-theater techniques, Calhoun integrates American Sign Language (ASL) into the staging itself, creating (with Brian Paul Mendoza's lively choreography) a vivid tableau of beautiful balletlike movements. Some of the actors only use ASL, and are shadowed by "ghost actors" who voice the dialogue and songs for hearing audiences. Other performers sing and talk, but use ASL simultaneously. In both cases, the result is a heightened theatricality, evoking the surreal feel of parallel universes of sound and distilled emotional essence. Musical director Carol Weiss executes the show's production numbers and ballads with crackling wit, energy and harmony: The showstopping "Food, Glorious Food," with its mix of singing and signing orphans, is captivating — while singing actor George McDaniel's hilarious Fagin (aided by Koli Cutler, as Fagin's ever-present, vaguely Harpo Marx-like interpreter) offers a gleeful "Pick a Pocket or Two." Also intensely poignant are Antoinette Abbamonte's arrestingly passionate Nancy (vocally performed with equal emotional lushness by Susan Hoffman), and Troy Kotsur's deftly clownlike Beadle Bumble. Deaf West Theater 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. (no perfs May 25-28); thru June 25. (818) 762-2773 or 762-2782 (TDD). (Paul Birchall)

# Signing for deaf gives old favorite new depth



George McDaniel, left, is the narrator, Harris Doran is the Artful Dodger, and Joshua Ari Soudakoff plays the title role in the Deaf West Theatre's American Sign Language adaptation of the musical "Oliver."

By Julio Martinez  
Correspondent

A musical by a deaf stage company? While the idea may boggle the mind and confound conception, the Deaf West Theatre production of "Oliver" is an inspired success in its own right.

Under the deft, imaginative adaptation and staging of Tony Award winner Jeff Calhoun

## Review

(Broadway revival of "Grease"), the audience is introduced to not only a unique interpretation of the popular Lionel Bart musical but one that reaffirms the potential power of live theater to transcend any limits placed on the imagination. Calhoun's creative interplay of speaking and signing actors is nearly seamless, bonded by the director's clever incorporation of Dickens' original text to

facilitate the continuity of the story line.

Utilizing the great 19th-century British author's words even more faithfully than Bart's original book, the chronicle of waifish young Oliver Twist (Joshua Ari Soudakoff) bounces forward under the adroit musical direction/keyboards work of Carol Weiss and a facile four-piece instrumental ensemble. And given the limited space he had to work with, Brian-Paul Mindozza's musical staging is remarkable.

This tune-filled adventure follows Oliver's nutritionally deprived orphanage days under the rule of inept Mr. Bumble (Troy Kotsur) and the rapacious Widow Corney (Carol Kline), to his brief but volatile experience as a mortician's assistant to the cadaverous Ms. Sowerberry (Vae), to his adventurous days as an apprentice thief under the tutelage of a nefarious trio: the gleefully larcenous Fagin (George McDaniel), congenial, light-fingered pickpocket the Artful Dodger (Darris Dorran) and the

murderous master crook Bill Sykes (Ryan Schlect/Tasos Pappos). Oliver's only oasis of true friendship is his relationship with Sykes' streetwise but tenderhearted girlfriend Nancy (Antoinette Abbamonte/Susan Hoffman).

The central driving force of the action is McDaniel, who skillfully segues back and forth from being the sophisticated ongoing narrator to inhabiting the low-down persona of Fagin. McDaniel's dual role antics add to the hilarity as his stiff-necked narrator facade often has to dissolve in an instant into the comical villain who delights in instructing his thieving charges ("Pick a Pocket or Two," "Be Back Soon"), yet is single-mindedly looking out for himself ("I'm Reviewing the Situation").

For the most part, the ensemble is superb. The shifting focus between players is dancelike, seemingly effortless, but clearly a careful blending of choreographed action. The attention is never divided as the singing Nancy (Hoffman) and the signing Nancy (Abbamonte) meld their talents in the ironic "It's a Fine Life," the raucous "Oom Pah, Pah, Pah" and the emotion-packed "As Long as He Needs Me."

This synergistic relationship turns into a quartet as Soudakoff's Oliver and Abbamonte's Nancy offer a playful, signed rendition of "I'd Do Anything" that is voiced in perfect unison by young Josh Breslow (the voice of Oliver) and Hoffman. Breslow also turns in a fragile but haunting a cappella rendition of "Where Is Love." Doran is quite effective as the swaggering, scampish Dodger who first invites Oliver into Fagin's den of thieves ("Consider Yourself").

## The facts

- **The show:** "Oliver."
- **Where:** Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.
- **When:** 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; through June 25.
- **Tickets:** \$22. For information, call (818) 762-2773.
- **Our rating:** ★★★

DAILY NEWS  
SUNDAY, MAY 28, 2006

\$2.50

**MONDAY**  
JUNE 5, 2000

PERIODICALS POSTAGE PAID

L O S A N G E L E S ■ N E W Y O R K ■ N E W S P A P E R

# ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

EMMY PREVIEW  
BEGINS AFTER PAGE 36

Cahners

## Oliver!

(Deaf West Theatre; 99 seats; \$22 top)

Deaf West Theatre presents a musical drama in two acts, book, music and lyrics by Lionel Bart, adapted and directed by Jeff Calhoun. Producer, Bill O'Brien. Musical direction/keyboard, Carol Weiss; associate director, Mel Johnson Jr.; musical staging, Brian-Paul Mendoza; sets, Robert Steinberg; lighting, Michael Gilliam; costumes, David Zyla; sound, Douglas Green. Opened May 14, 2000, reviewed June 1; closes June 25. Running time: 2 HOURS, 20 MIN.

Dickens/Fagin ..... George McDaniel  
Nancy ..... Antoinette Abbamonte/  
Susan Hoffman  
Oliver ..... Joshua Ari Soudakoff/  
Josh Breslaw  
The Artful Dodger ..... Harris Doran  
Bill Sykes ..... Ryan Schlect/Tasos Pappas  
Widow Corney ..... Carol Kline  
Mr. Bumble ..... Troy Kotsur  
Mrs. Brownlow ..... Wanda LaCoure/  
Faye DeWitt  
Charlotte ..... Jennifer Madden  
Sowerberry ..... Vae  
With: Bryan Buckley, William C. Martinez  
II, Koli Kutler, Alex Dozin, Shady Elaham,  
Zachary Lotane, Stephen Thomas Morse

By JULIO MARTINEZ

Under the deft, imaginative adaptation and staging of Tony Award-winner Jeff Calhoun (Broadway revival of "Grease"), Deaf West's thoroughly original interpretation of the popular Lionel Bart musical reaffirms the power and transcendence of live theater.

Calhoun's creative interplay of speaking and signing actors is near seamless, bonded by the director's clever incorporation of Dickens' original text to facilitate the continuity of the storyline. Complementing Calhoun's efforts are the adroit musical direction and keyboard work of Carol Weiss and a facile four-piece instrumental ensemble.

And given the limited space he had to work with, Brian-Paul Mendoza's musical staging is remarkable.

Utilizing the great 19th century British author's words even more faithfully than Bart's original book, this tune-filled yarn follows Oliver's (Joshua Ari Soudakoff) nutrition-deprived orphanage days under the rule of inept Mr. Bumble (Troy Kotsur) and the rapacious Widow Corney (Carol Kline), to his brief but volatile experience as a mortician's assistant to the cadaverous Ms.

Sowerberry (Vae), and his adventurous days as an apprentice thief under the tutelage of the gleefully larcenous Fagin (George McDaniel).

Enlivening the lad's adventures are congenial, light-fingered pick-pocket the Artful Dodger (Harris Doran), murderous master crook Bill Sykes (Ryan Schlect/Tasos Pappos) and Sykes' streetwise but tender-hearted girlfriend Nancy (Antoinette Abbamonte/Susan Hoffman).

The driving force of the action is McDaniel, who skillfully segues from his sophisticated duties as narrator to wallow in the persona of Fagin. The dual role often provides hilarity, as McDaniel's stiff-necked narrator often has to dissolve in an instant into the comical villain who delights in instructing his thieving charges, yet is single-mindedly looking out for himself.

For the most part, the ensemble is superb. The shifting focus between players is dance-like, but it's clearly a careful blending of choreographed action.

This singing-signing synergy segues into a quartet, as Soudakoff's Oliver and Abbamonte's Nancy offer a playful, signed rendition of "I'd Do Anything for You" voiced in perfect unison by young Josh Breslow (the voice of Oliver) and Hoffman. Breslow also turns in a fragile but haunting a cappella rendition of "Where Is Love."

Doran is effective as the swaggering, scampish Dodger, who first invites Oliver into Fagin's den of thieves ("Consider Yourself"). The bawdy courtship ("I Shall Scream") of Kotsur's Mr. Bumble and Kline's Widow Corney is a comical delight, as is the Vae (acting and signing)/Faye DeWitt (singing) collaboration on Sowerberry's parsimonious rendition of "That's Your Funeral." Later, DeWitt offers an exquisite vocal rendition of "Who Will Buy." Also memorable is the soaring tenor voice of William C. Martinez, who captures the sadness inherent in "Boy for Sale."

# NOHO NEWS

NOHO ► HOLLYWOOD ► DOWNTOWN SPEAKS

## OLIVER by Marjorie Joyce Hall

Deaf West Theatre in NoHo presents the world premiere of the American Sign Language adaptation of Lionel Bart's *Oliver*, marking the first ever musical staging for this magnificent company. It was an emotional and moving experience to see the full company take the stage for the opening bars of "Food, Glorious Food." Deaf West, you have won my heart forever! Broadway director and choreographer Jeff Calhoun (Tony Award winning *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Grease*, *The Will Rogers Follies*) directs the perfect ensemble. Many actors play numerous roles, and six young actors enchant and captivate the audience. Musical accompaniment is without fault - strong, supportive, and at no time overwhelming. Never is there a beat missed or a sound to distract from the picture painted.

The cast is large and all so good that it is impossible to choose favorites. A certain magic happens while merging hearing, non-hearing, speaking, signing, singing, dancing, so that it appears as if everyone hears, signs, sings and dances. Each role has two performers, but it seems as if there is only one, accomplished with concentration, timing, energy, and the dedication. The ability of the young actors to adhere, never slipping away from their destination as

performers was breathtaking. Brilliant voices utter the entire score from *Oliver*, charming the audience with familiar tunes such as "Where Is Love" and "Long As He Needs Me." Warmth, joy, and tears abound.

*Oliver* opened in London in 1960 and

became one of the longest running production in history. Adapted from Charles Dickens classic by Lionel Bart, it is the story of an orphan boy who befriends pickpockets and thieves, poorly treated by a villain and finding refuge with a bar maid until finally reunited with his grandmother. Heading the cast of 21 are George McDaniel as Fagin, Antoinette Abbamonte and Susan Hoffman in the dually-cast role of Nancy, Ryan Schlecht as Bill Sykes, and young Joshua Ari Soudakoff as Oliver.

The show is produced by Bill O'Brien, with choreography by Brian Paul Mendoza, musical direction by Carol Weiss, set design by Bob Steinberg, lighting design by Michael Gilliam, and costumes design by David Zyla. Associate director is Mel Johnson, Jr.

Please see this production! To miss *Oliver* is to cheat oneself of the most charming, touching and delightful experience of the season!

(See Theatre Guide for listing.)



L-R: Susan Hoffman, George McDaniel, Joshua Ari Soudakoff, and Antoinette Abbamonte in ASL adaptation of Lionel Bart's *Oliver* at Deaf West.

# L.A. ■ ■ ■

*When you live in a city like Los Angeles, there is no reason to ever be bored. There is so much going on here; so many things to do; so many things to see; so many things to experience; so much live entertainment; so many enchanting vistas, great restaurants, fun clubs, museums, beaches, and did we mention the weather?*



**O**n our cover this issue, we are proud to once again tell you about the absolutely wonderful musical production of the Deaf West Theatre's offering of the Lionel Bart musical version ("Oliver," fully reviewed in last issue of After Dark #9) of Dickens' classic "Oliver Twist." If you have been put-off by attending their productions thinking it is only for the deaf, don't! They produce very fine theatre for ALL audiences as proved by a multitude of awards over their 25 year history. And, a reminder, ... after you see "Oliver" ... their acclaimed, sold out production of "A Streetcar Named Desire" will be brought back by popular demand for a

From "Oliver" — Above: **George McDaniel, Harris Doran and Joshua Ari Soudakoff.** Right: **Susan Hoffman, George McDaniel** (in background), **Joshua Ari Soudakoff and Antoinette Abbamonte.** Photos by Ed Krieger.

second run opening Sept. 6th and running through Oct. 8th. The Deaf West Theatre is located at 5112 Lankershim Blvd. (just south of Magnolia) in North Hollywood. Call NOW for tickets to "Oliver" at 818/762-2773, 818/762-2782 (TDD).

Here's a birthday gift for 38 year olds. If you were born in 1962, you share a birthday with the Santa Monica Playhouse. From now through April 2001—as a 38-year-old audi-

ence member—if you wish the theatre a "Happy Birthday" you will receive a special discount price of two tickets for \$19.62. Their 2000 season is a real potpourri including "Can'teen: Letters to the Front," "Dorothy's Adventures in Oz," "Cinderella," "Barnyard Madness with The Three Little Pigs," "When Irish Eyes Dot Com," "Summer Stock 2000," "Heterosexuals in Crisis," and two exciting American Premiere shows from the Playbox Theatre: "The Strange and Bizarre World of Mr. Miacca" and "Brokenville" both by acclaimed new UK playwright Philip Ridley. Besides their regular theatre fare of comedies, dramas and musicals, the Playhouse has also long been active in offering Family Theatre Musical Matinees, dramedies for teens, educational field trips, twilight shows and late night events, daytime and evening productions, classic and contemporary one man and ensemble shows, international tours and cultural exchanges. The Santa Monica Playhouse is located at 1211 4th Street (between Wilshire & Arizona) in Santa Monica. For info on up and



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## L.A.'s Best

Deaf West Theatre's "Oliver!" leads nominations for Ovation Awards. F4



ED KRIEGER

George McDaniel, left, Harris Doran and Joshua Ari Soudakoff in "Oliver!" McDaniel and Doran were nominated.

## Ovation

Continued from F4

Jim Circle"; Maripal Donovan, "Late Nite Catchism."

Leading actor/musical: Douglas Sills, "The Scarlet Pimpernel"; Kingsley Leggs, "Dreamgirls"; George McDaniel, "Oliver!"; Jeremiah Schaberg, "Crazy for You"; Michael Cervino, "Hedwig and the Angry Inch."

Leading actress/musical: Lea Delaria, "The Boys From Syracuse"; B.J. Ward, "Stand-Up Opera"; Faith Prince, James Joyce's "The Dead"; Keela Lewis, "Dreamgirls"; Amanda McBroom, "Sweeney Todd."

Featured actor/play: Neil Vipond, "Hamlet"; Michael Kasloff, "Immortally"; Fred Applegate, "Expecting Isabel"; Joe Hart, "The Angel of Lemnos"; Olga Zuberka, "Cockroach Nation."

Featured actress/plays: Jo Nell Kennedy, "Monkey Grass"; Paula Pizzi, "Wit"; Brenda Ballard, "The Forfeigner"; Kathryn Joosten, "The Ladies of the Corridor"; Bridget Cleary, "Expecting Isabel."

Featured actor/musical: Michael Arnold, "Martin Guerre"; Harris Doran, "Oliver!"; Stephen Spinella, James Joyce's "The Dead"; Troy Kotsur, "Oliver!"; Billy Porter, "Dreamgirls."

Featured actress/musical: Tonya L. Dixon, "Dreamgirls"; Sally Ann Howes, "James Joyce's 'The Dead'"; Antioinette Adamonte, "Oliver!"; Carol Kline, "Oliver!"; Mami Nixon, James Joyce's "The Dead."

Ensemble performance: casts of "Forbidden Broadway Y2K/LA." "The servant of Two Masters," "Jinney," "The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby," "A Fairy Tale."

Set design/larger: David Jenkins, "The Poison Tree"; David Gallo, "Jinney"; William Dudley, "Amadeus"; John Napier, "Les Misérables"; Daniel Ostling,

"Metamorphoses";  
Set design/smaller: Robert A. Prior, "A Fairy Tale"; Desma Murphy, "Ballad Hunter"; Bob Steinberg, "A Streetcar Named Desire"; Desma Murphy, "The Angels of Lemnos"; Thomas Buderwitz, "Against the Glass."

Costume design/larger: Andrae Neofitou, "Les Misérables"; Mara Bhumelid, "Metamorphoses"; Susan Hillery, "Jinney"; William Dudley, "Amadeus"; Jane Greenwood, "The Scarlet Pimpernel."

Costume design/smaller: Maggie Morgan, "Waiting for Godot"; Audrey Eisner, "Tonight at 8:30"; Audrey Eisner, "The Swan"; Alvin Colt, "Forbidden Broadway Y2K/LA"; Holly Poe Durbin, "Berlin Circle."

Lighting design/larger: T.J. Gerkens, "Metamorphoses"; Kevin Adams, "Hedwig and the Angry Inch"; David Hensy, "Les Misérables"; Scott Zielinski, "Space"; Paule Constable, "Amadeus."

Lighting design/smaller: Geoff Korf, "An Antigone Story"; Michael Gilliam, "Oliver!"; J. Kent Inasy, "Waiting for Godot"; David Flad, "The Angels of Lemnos"; Ken Booth, "A Streetcar Named Desire."

Sound design/larger: Rob Millburn, "Jinney"; Rob Millburn and Michael Boden, "Space"; Andre Pless and Ben Sussman, "Metamorphoses"; Andrew Bruce/Autograph, "Les Misérables"; Matt McKenzie, "Amadeus."

Sound design/smaller: Way Magic, Edent's Journal and Ken Sawyer, "The Angels of Lemnos"; Nathan Wang, "The Square"; Jef Bek and Eric Snodgrass, "Nostalgia"; Bill O'Brien, "A Streetcar Named Desire"; John Zaluski, "Berlin Circle."

Choreography: Fred Tallaksen, "Miss Desmond Behind Bars"; Robert Clater, "Dreamgirls"; Phillip George, "Forbidden Broadway Y2K/LA"; Sha Newman, "The King and I"; Brian Paul Mendoza, "Oliver!"