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# UFO&MT'S MARVELOUS OLIVER! IS A THEATRICAL TRIUMPH

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LOGAN — The Utah Festival of Opera and Musical Theatre puts on a strong production of **Oliver!** that is full of laughter, liveliness, and love.

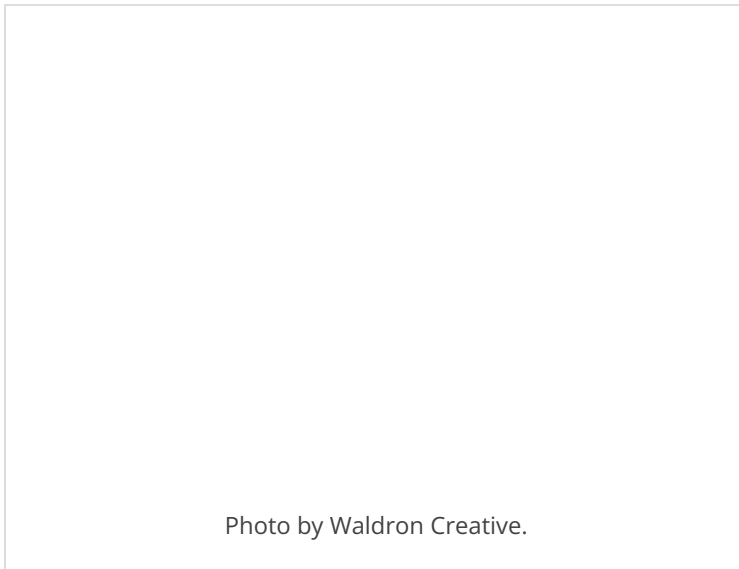


The musical *Oliver!*, written and composed by [Lionel Bart](#) and first produced on the West End in 1960, is a musical adaptation of [Charles Dickens](#)'s classic novel *Oliver Twist*. The musical focuses on 11-year-old orphan Oliver and his search to find someone who will provide him love and food. The orphanage where he is staying at with a dozen other boys is run by ruthless Mr. Bumble and Ms. Corney, who only feed the boys gruel. When Oliver asks for more food, he is kicked out of the orphanage and sold to local undertakers, who treat him just as poorly. Eventually, Oliver runs away to London and comes upon The Artful Dodger, a young man who introduces Oliver to the rest of his ragtag, pick pocketing gang. This group of young boys is led by Fagin, a conniving man who encourages Oliver to steal from others and bring him back the goods in order to have a place to stay. The rest of the musical is a race for the adults in Oliver's life to get him on their side as they learn that he

is actually from a wealthy family.

Ross Clemens delivers an adorable performance as the title character. His singing voice proves why he was cast, as he keeps up with the soaring melodies of the score. Benjamin Krutsch as Mr. Bumble commands the stage with natural prowess and uses his deep operatic voice to fill the theatre. His romantic partner, the Widow Corney (played by **Adrien Swensen**), keeps up with Krutsch' scomedic and vocal ability, forming a duo that delights onstage.

Mr. and Mrs. Sowerberry are not on stage for long but they sure leave their mark. **Hayden Höglund** as Mr. Sowerberry finds the right balance between greedy and sympathetic when faced with taking in Oliver, and Tanya Roberts as Mrs. Sowerberry bursts with energy that benefits all of the actors who perform with her. They both spring the show forward with their physical comedy and lively singing.



Speaking of energizing the show, **Levi Hopkins** is a standout actor as the Artful Dodger in this production. Hopkins possesses a comfortable *gravitas* in every moment, charismatically portraying the sly, yet kind, pickpocket. His voice was so smooth to listen to that I wanted him to sing much more than he had a chance to. Hopkins possesses playful chemistry with everyone else he performs with, especially **Michael Ballam** as Fagin. Ballam displays a stooped over, decrepit Fagin who expertly exploits the young pickpockets to bring him money and goods. Although his accent was difficult to decipher at certain

points, his consistent portrayal made me quickly forgive that.

Finally, **Vanessa Ballam** as Nancy provides a strong and sensitive portrayal of the conflicted lover. Her operatic voice lends her to blending her notes in the songs she sings, creating a pleasant sound to the ears. Christopher Job plays her menacing partner Bill Sykes, effortlessly intimidating everyone else onstage. Together, the pair grounds their performance with love in their complicated relationship.

The ensemble is truly the cherry on top of the casting. The children ensemble bring great fervor and urgency to everything that they do. The dance ensemble members sparkle onstage with their gravity-defying ballet moves and resounding voices. Specifically, Victoria Okafor as the Strawberry Seller steals the spotlight in the quartet song, "Who Will Buy," with her angelic voice that effortlessly hits the high notes. The ensemble number "Consider Yourself" (notably led by Hopkins) is a showstopping masterpiece of dance, music, and liveliness.



Photo by Waldron Creative.

The director and choreographer [George Pinney](#) (assisted in both by Alyssa Weatherby), focuses largely on the dancing in this production which is just superb. From the orphans' first entrances to the final number of the show, the dancing is lively, creative, and inspiring to watch.

Additionally, scenic designer [Dennis Hassan](#) sets the show apart from other festivals with his detailed sets that reach high into the sky and create dynamic levels for the performers to work with. The London Bridge and chimney set pieces are especially impressive to see the characters interact with. Stephanie Nguyen's costume design placed me into Victorian England, with smart details and designs. The Artful Dodger's costume evoked a playful Mad Hatter image, perfect for the childlike wonder embedded in the theme of the show. Complementing Nguyen's designs is John Mitchell's lighting, as he transitions the action from

one place to another with smooth overhead lighting and backdrop tone shifts.

The orchestra, aptly led by [Karen Keltner](#), often thunders to the forefront of the show with the powerful music and moving ballads that makes the show soar. The Ellen Eccles theatre uses subtitles during the songs at the top of the proscenium arch, which is helpful to combat the challenge of understanding the actor's polished Cockney accents.



Photo by Waldron Creative.

This script is beloved by many as a childhood classic, and for good reason. The child performers are charming, the music is catchy, and the story is triumphant. However, there are moments that reflect the musical's own old age. For example, spunky grifter Nancy who hangs out with the pickpocketing crew sings multiple songs about how she will stay loyal to her abusive lover, the infamous Bill Sykes, no matter what, because she feels like "he needs her." While Nancy shows some growth by choosing to help Oliver in spite of the danger from her partner, the message is not quite self-aware enough to feel that it is effectively disapproving of abusive relationships as much as it promotes remaining in one.

With that being said, the Utah Festival Opera & Musical Theatre production of *Oliver!* remains a triumph and a pleasure for the whole family to see. I recommend journeying to the Ellen Eccles theatre to be transported to Oliver's world for an unforgettable evening.

*The Utah Festival Opera & Musical Theatre production of **Oliver!** plays at the Ellen Eccles Theatre in Logan on July 5, 15, 21, 28, and August 3 at 1 PM or 7:30 PM. Ticket are \$23-\$89. For more information, visit [utahfestival.org](http://utahfestival.org).*



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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Belle Frahm



Belle Frahm is a current dramaturgy student at Brigham Young University where she has worked on multiple productions. She is a life-long theatre lover and enjoys seeing shows of any scale.