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'Please, sir, I want some more': The not-so-sweet tale of Oliver Twist

By [Jim Lowe](#)

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Oliver Twist," Charles Dickens' tale of an innocent boy surviving the evils of impoverished and criminal London, was so popular a magazine serial that it was being adapted for theater even before it was completed in 1838. Vermont Stage Company is producing a recent stage adaptation by British playwright Neil Bartlett that reflects that early melodramatic treatment.

"It is an incredibly melodramatic story," explained Jason Jacobs, who is directing the Vermont Stage production. "This adaptation is very much looking at it as theater as spectacle, theater as melodrama. This is an adaptation that really embraces 19th century theatrical storytelling."

The Burlington professional ensemble is presenting "Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist" Jan. 26-Feb. 13 at the Flynn Center's FlynnSpace. Twenty-plus different characters are played by a cast of 12. Although this production includes music, it is not the saccharine-filled 1968 musical "Oliver!" More faithful to the gritty original, it is not appropriate for young children.

"Oliver Twist" is Dickens' tale of a young orphan who never knew his father. After his mother dies, he is raised in a harsh juvenile home, then at a workhouse, where makes the grave error of asking for more food.

As punishment Oliver is apprenticed to an undertaker, but escapes and makes his way to London, where he meets the Artful Dodger, a young pickpocket. Dodger introduces Oliver to a band of criminals led by Fagin and the murderous Bill Sikes, who train him in the art of picking pockets. Oliver's new life of crime leads him through a series of adventures, culminating in a terrifying chase across the rooftops of London — and a chance encounter with a man who holds the secret of the boy's true identity.

"In this version, Dickens' language is used word-for-word," Jacobs said. "Every word of dialogue is taken from Dickens. It even uses Dickens in the stage direction. The songs are all taken straight from the text."

Dickens — and Bartlett in this adaptation — focused on the brutality toward the poor by 19th society.

"It's really Dickens talking about a society and government that treats its poor like problems you have to put away, file away," Jacobs said. "You've got the workhouse world and you've got the criminal world and one actually feeds the other."

Bartlett looked to those scripts from the adaptations of the time.

"So he wanted something very theatrical himself," Jacobs said. "He uses tableaux; he uses songs. He refers to Punch and Judy shows — we're using some puppets. It's all about using

theatrical ways to tell stories.”

Dickens' book is long and rambling, so it had to be condensed substantially. Bartlett's version, as did many film and theater adaptations, dispensed with much of the middle section, instead focusing on the essential story.

“The storytelling is swift,” Jacobs said. “There are whole sections of plot (in the book) that get very convoluted.”

Although it is not a traditional musical, the Vermont Stage production has added original music by Burlington musician David Symons.

“It uses songs as commentary – there's no dancing orphans,” Jacobs said. “The songs are not, as in a musical, to move the story forward. These are songs very much in the Brecht-Weill tradition where the action stops and the singers turn out and comment on what's happening here — often in an ironic way.”

For example, there's a scene where Oliver is getting beat up pretty badly by Bill Sikes.

“We stop and have this ‘glorious’ song about how to treat children,” Jacobs said, with a laugh.

One major obstacle was that Bartlett's play was designed for a traditional proscenium-stage theater, and FlynnSpace, Vermont Stage's longtime home, has audience on three sides. In seeking a solution, Jacobs and Jenny Fulton, the production's stage and costume designer, researched the workhouses at the time and found them to be big open spaces.

“We came up with this idea that the play is set in the workhouse,” Jacobs said. “We're actually seeing a group of workhouse inmates putting on the show.”

“Borrowing from Marat-Sade, we're actually watching the workhouse theater company putting on their production of ‘Oliver Twist.’”
