

After phenomenally entertaining productions of Disney's Alice in Wonderland, The Little Mermaid, Aladdin, and Beauty and the Beast, I was intrigued to see how Kalamunda Performing Arts would tackle the lesser-known Disney production of Oliver and Company. Let's face it, all-animal shows are difficult, and The Lion King is much more well-known, but a musical about dogs is definitely overdue...

Wait. Oliver? As in Oliver Twist? NOT Disney's Oliver and Company??? (Are schools allowed to do non-Disney shows? Maybe once every five years...)

But Oliver? Doesn't that require a strong male cast in a high school course that is usually dominated by female students?

Thankfully, a rule I've learned in life is never to doubt the amazing Anna Head.

Yes, Oliver requires strong male leads, and by goodness, Anna had them. I was honoured to have the opportunity to attend the final dress rehearsal before this weekend's short season.

Harry Secombe himself would have been proud to hand the baton to Rheidsyn (sic) Lowry's Mr Bumble. A strong show requires a strong opening, and we could not have hoped for "MORE"! He was strongly supported by Elvie Taylor - who impressed in multiple roles - but particularly in some in-character ad-libbing after a scene change.

Oliver was perfectly cast and played by Georgia Stidwell as a naive youngster, lost and overwhelmed by the unfamiliar circumstances. Georgia brought a tear to the eye, and rapturous applause, with her heartfelt solo "Where is Love?"

Set change: and Kalamunda Performing Arts demonstrated a curiously concerning coffin collection. Toby Trent was clearly enjoying himself far too much as undertaker Mr Sowerberry ("Mwuh-ha-ha!") and indeed with his later fiddling (an audience favourite). I remember Felicity Smith from last year's Beauty and the Beast! She, Monique Beesley, and Ella Binns completed the bullying Axis of coworkers who picked on Oliver.

Set change, and I tell you what: some professional productions could learn a thing or two about efficiency from the KPA crew! And remember what I said about strong males? Tomas Powell charmed as the Dodger and Sean Paxman commanded as Fagin. As well as stage presence and characterisation, both had powerful singing voices to accompany difficult songs.

Approaching the middle of the play, Bill Sykes had been mentioned so many times that - by the time Ryan Finnerty stalked across the scene - the entire theatre, stage and auditorium alike, fell into terrified silence. He was a physically imposing presence but also effortlessly sang his tricky solo.

And speaking of solo songs, "As Long As He Needs Me," was belted out by Abigail Letts' Nancy. Whereas Oliver was scared and unsure, Nancy was confident and commanding. Abigail owned the stage whenever she was on - ably accompanied by Ariel Armenti as Bet.

The primary cast was completed by Ryan Death (sic) as Mr Brownlow - a bit of an enigma when we first meet him, but who turns out to be Oliver's saviour (in a nicely subdued performance) through a series of not-contrived-in-the-slightest circumstances that one almost never encounters in the plots of musical theatre.

There were 85 kids in the big chorus numbers! Eighty-five! Too many to list but ALL of them were engaged and invested in the moment.

So many personal and clever little moments. Maya Hurley-Green was hilarious as Dr Gwimwig, changing her opinion at the slightest provocation. Ruby Dunne, Charlotte Hulcup, Liliella Eketone, and Alice Clark comprised a touching quartet. Maali Sampey-Mackenzie brought poignancy to her role as a convenient plot device. Sinead Hennigan brought some lovely humanity to Oliver's experiences.

I'm not ashamed to say that I shed tears. Manly tears, to be sure, but tears nonetheless. Thank you - yet again, year after year - to director Anna Head, musical director Michelle Vivian, and the entire KPA team for a show that stands alongside (and sometimes surpasses) any number of musical theatre productions.

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