



OLIVER!

2023
SEASON

MUSICAL

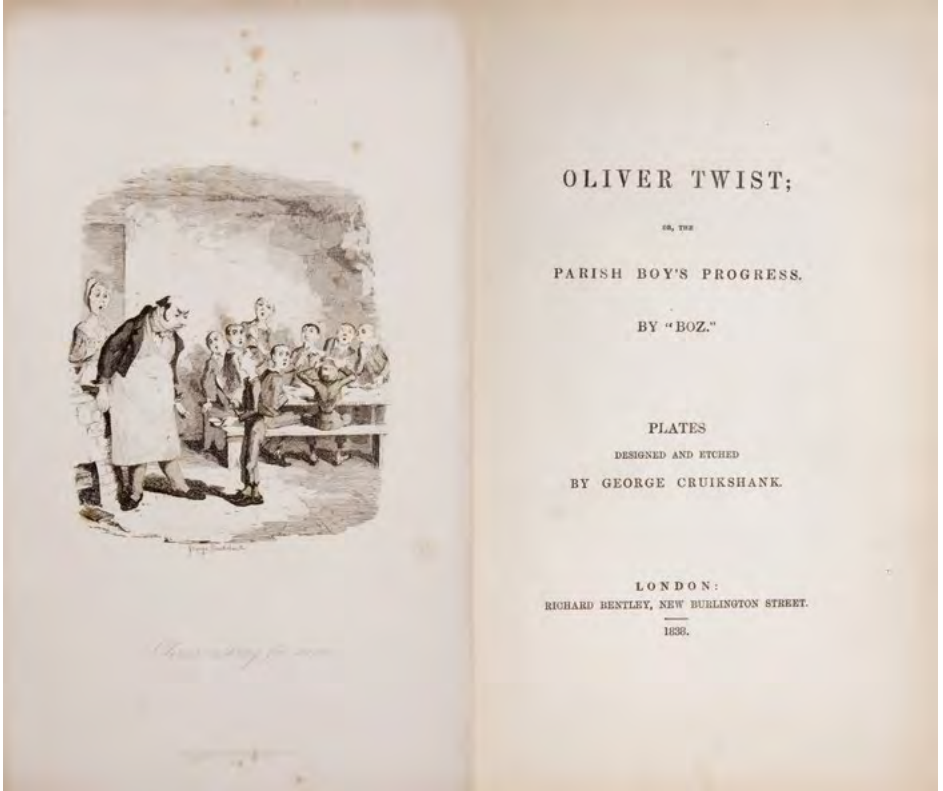
PRODUCTION NUMBER 247

Jun. 16 —THROUGH— Aug. 05

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The first collected edition of Oliver Twist in 1838

Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress*, published between 1837 and 1839 in serial form, is considered one of the first "social novels": novels which focus on social problems of the day though a fictional story. When Dickens turned his writer's eye to the issues of his day, particularly child labor, he was writing from more than an abstract concern about the children of London. He was writing from personal experience.

Born on February 7, 1812, he was the second of eight children born to John and Elizabeth

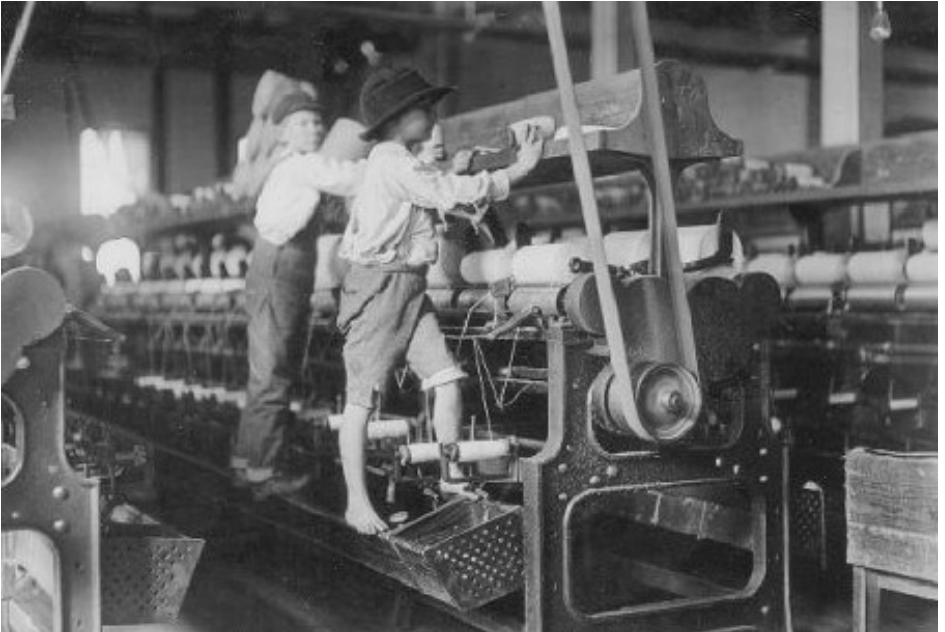
Dickens. John Dickens was often in debt, and the family was forced to move several times. In 1824, when Dickens was twelve years old, his father was imprisoned in Marshalsea debtors' prison. Dickens was forced to leave school, move away from his family, and go to work at Warren's Blacking Warehouse where he worked ten hours days six days a week pasting labels onto bottles of shoe polish. The six shillings a week he earned paid for not only his own lodging but that of his family and went towards paying off his father's debt.



"Dickens at the Blacking Warehouse" by Fred Bernard

When his father was released from prison and the family reunited, Dickens' mother initially insisted he continue working to support the family. He was eventually released from the blacking factory and returned to school, but the experience was a traumatic one for Dickens, and it left a lasting impression on him which would manifest in many of his novels, particularly *Oliver Twist*.

Charles Dickens was a strong advocate for child labor laws, believing that children should be allowed to enjoy their childhood and to receive an education, not forced to work in dangerous and unhealthy conditions. With the advent of the Industrial Age and an increasing division between rich and poor, children represented a cheap, compliant, and plentiful workforce. Children as young as three worked as chimney sweeps, coal miners, and factory workers from six in the morning until eight at night Monday through Saturday. There were no protections, and many died while using their small frames to go inside chimneys or their small hands to repair machinery which it was still running.



Children working at a textile factory



Child Coal Miners

In the midst of the misery he shows, Dickens also offers glimpses of hope and redemption. Oliver's unwavering resilience, purity of heart, and eventual salvation serve as a testament to the possibility of overcoming adversity. During a time when poverty was often considered a moral failing, Dickens showed the poor as virtuous and the ones in power as the ones corrupted by the needs of industry.

Dickens' harsh, realistic depiction of the lives of these poor child laborers helped to raise awareness of the plight of child laborers and led to calls for reforms. In 1847, the British Parliament passed the Factory Act, which limited the number of hours that children could work in factories. This was a major victory for Dickens and for the child labor movement and led to worldwide reforms.

Dickens' concerns remain timely today as multiple states have introduced bills to weaken the laws surrounding child labor in the wake of employee shortages due to COVID 19.

—HCTO Guest Dramaturg Mark Fossen, MFA