Lionel Bart’s *Oliver!* is a musical sensation that has delighted audiences worldwide since its 1960 premiere. This British musical has garnered attention from music lovers and academics alike, leading to many publications outlining and critiquing the production. *Oliver! A Dickensian Musical* is a 287-page book written by Marc Napolitano and published by Oxford University Press. It is neatly organized into an introduction, seven chapters, and epilogue, as well as notes, a bibliography and index. Throughout the main body of the text, the author reviews every aspect of the famous adaptation of Charles Dickens’s novel *Oliver Twist*. Overall, he emphasizes the cultural influence of *Oliver!* in the decades following its release. By incorporating such a wide breadth of information and analyzing the musical's lasting influence, Napolitano creates a comprehensive “biography”\(^1\) of the work that stands apart from other literature on the topic.

The text begins with an introduction that highlights important concepts reappearing throughout the book. Napolitano stresses the importance of the “Englishness” of the musical and introduces the idea that *Oliver!* might be considered a Dickensian work. At this point, the author gives little explanation for his choice of this label, nor does he explain how this classification contrasts with other English musicals. The subsequent chapter discusses the decades leading up to the conception of *Oliver!* In particular, it focuses on the cultural context that shaped certain elements of the musical,

\(^1\) “Biography” is a term introduced by the author but never clearly defined.
such as Bart's integration of inherently English components in an effort to unite and restore English culture to its pre-war glory. It also touches on previous adaptations of *Oliver Twist*, their weaknesses, and how Bart attempted to rectify previous issues in his own adaptation. Finally, this chapter introduces the reader to Lionel Bart, detailing his upbringing and musical background.

The following two chapters summarize the conception and development of *Oliver!*. Napolitano painstakingly details every step of the creative process, from Bart's inspiration for the play, to character development and casting, to Sean Kenny's set design. While writing *Oliver!*, Bart was plagued with many limitations; various theatre managers did not believe in Bart's vision and would not support him in any way. Beyond external restrictions, Bart visualized a specific final product that required him to labour over and repeatedly alter every element until the musical's evolution was complete.

It is not until Chapter Four that Napolitano begins to talk about *Oliver!*'s release. After thoroughly detailing the musical's production, one is quite excited for this section of the book. Napolitano focuses on the 1960 West End premiere, which was incredibly well received compared to the Wimbledon previews. The June 30 opening night at the New Theatre in London was overwhelmingly successful, finishing with twenty-six curtain calls. As the show continued to gain popularity, it attracted the attention of many critics who held polarized views. Although most reacted with palpable nationalistic pride, others criticized the lack of fidelity to the musical's literary origins. The international reaction was also enthusiastic, although somewhat tainted by certain critics who thought Fagin's character was overly anti-Semitic. Interestingly enough, this view was not shared by the majority of Israeli viewers. In fact, one Israeli correspondent criticized Bart's portrayal of Fagin, reiterating what critics representative of the general Israeli population were saying. The correspondent asserted that, “enlightened European societies with guilt [sic] feelings about Christian cruelties to Jews might balk at portraying Fagin as fiendishly as Dickens had created him. But if the crook could not be portrayed faithfully, [the critics] wrote, perhaps he should not be portrayed at all.”

Chapter five takes a slightly different turn, exploring *Oliver!*'s plot threads in detail. The musical has four main themes, the most important being Oliver's search for love. While this narrative dominates, Nancy and Sykes's relationship, Fagin's paternal role for the gang, and Mr. Bumble's comic affair with Widow Corney are also woven together to form a more complex plot than commonly seen in earlier English musicals. Although chapter five is informative and useful for understanding the rest of the text, Napolitano haphazardly inserts it between *Oliver!*'s release in London (Chapter Four) and its journey around the world (Chapter Six). For the most part, the author organizes his text in a logical manner, but this chapter seems slightly out of place, interrupting the

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musical’s migration from London to the global stage. In my opinion, the book would flow more naturally if the plot themes were placed before the chapter on Oliver!’s release.

Napolitano finishes the body of his text with two chapters documenting Oliver!’s success in the late twentieth century. In the sixth chapter, the author focuses on stage adaptations around the world, including those mounted in Sweden, Israel, Tokyo, and finally America. He does an excellent job of comparing and contrasting the musical’s reception in different countries, noting various cultural differences factored into the wide array of responses. Napolitano’s account of Oliver!’s transition to the Broadway stage was especially effective; he describes not only its premiere, but also pre-production details that highlight how difficult it was for the British musical to successfully transition to the American stage. The final chapter in this text is titled “Oliver! From Screen To Stage.” Here, Napolitano focuses mainly on Carol Reed’s 1968 movie adaptation, although he does touch upon other modern versions of what has since become a classic piece of musical theatre.

Marc Napolitano states in the preface, “I doubt many academics are given the chance to work on projects that involve their studying two subjects that they love most – in my case, Dickens and musical theatre” (ix). His passion for the subject is evident in the careful crafting of this book. One of the strengths of Napolitano’s work is his inclusion of cultural context and his analysis of the musical’s influence. This provides the reader with insights that could not be realized by merely describing the musical’s evolution. He successfully integrates information from countless sources regarding every facet of the famous British musical. Despite drawing from such a large pool of materials, the book has a unified voice and is written in an engaging manner that can be understood by academics and lay music lovers alike.

Simultaneously, Napolitano attempts to create a wide scale “biography” of Oliver! which allows readers to understand the context of the musical and the impact it has had on musical theatre traditions. The author conveys Oliver!’s influence on two main cultural trends: our modern perception of the classic Dickens novel and the strengthening of post-war English culture. Napolitano shows how many allusions to Oliver Twist in the media are not true to the original source, coloured by Bart’s more hopeful and idyllic adaptation. In the text, Dickens Dramatized, Bolton argues that often adaptations draw from their predecessors as opposed to returning to the original source, becoming alterations of previous adaptations.³ Bart’s Oliver! is no exception, having influenced virtually every adaptation of the text that followed it, and therefore defining popular perceptions of Oliver Twist for many. Secondly, Oliver! played a key role in re-establishing English musical theatre traditions in post-war England. In the years following the war, the country suffered from cultural stagnation. And yet, as Peter

Mandler states, “the outcome of the Second World War seemed to vindicate the English national character.”4 Napolitano acknowledges Oliver!’s role in reigniting England’s cultural fire, accomplished through Bart's combination of British traditions such as music hall and cockney street singing with ideals like working-class empowerment.

Oliver! A Dickensian Musical is unique when compared to other literature on the topic. In contrast to the wide scope of Napolitano’s text, many other authors approach both Bart’s production and the original Dickens novel from a specific perspective. In his article on Oliver Twist, Robert Garnett focuses almost exclusively on the character of Nancy. His singular focus provides in-depth insight into the inner workings of Nancy’s character and how Dickens’ experiences shaped her construction.5 While Garnett’s work and others like this have their merits, these texts serve a very different purpose than Napolitano’s. By creating a complete overview of Oliver!, the author illustrates the influences that shaped the musical and how the musical has affected the genre of music theatre. If each specific idea within the book were to be examined in isolation, an understanding of the musical and its cultural influence simply could not be fully realized.

Another unique and effective aspect of this book is the insight it provides into the creative process and the people involved in the creation of Oliver!. Napolitano’s sources include books, articles, press releases, and writings from people directly involved with the musical. There are over forty entries in the bibliography with Bart as the author, including transcribed interviews, letters to collaborators, and his personal notes that pertain to Oliver! Similar entries from Ron Moody and Donald Albery, the New Theatre manager in London, are referenced throughout the text. Napolitano uses these sources to provide a personalized account that eclipses any other literature reviewing the musical. The author also decided to reveal personal details regarding Bart’s life, allowing readers to comprehend his compositional choices. The text delves into Bart’s belonging to a family of Jewish refugees from Austria-Hungary who settled in the East End of London and his early exposure to Yiddish theatre. His upbringing had a profound impact on him later in life, especially during the writing and production of Oliver! Fagin's character troubled Bart in particular, as he tried to balance his fidelity to the text with his desire to remove any anti-Semitic connotations. Ron Moody, who played Fagin in both the London Premiere and the 1968 film reflected that both he and Bart “felt an obligation to get Fagin away from a viciously racial stereotype and instead make him what he really

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is—a crazy old Father Christmas gone wrong.” Thus, Oliver! A Dickensian Musical is an unequalled text that not only provides insight into the creation of the musical, but also explores its lasting musical influence.

Although I found this text enjoyable and informative, there are certain nuances in Napolitano’s writing that compromise the text’s clarity. He often makes reference to various concepts that require an extensive background knowledge of English culture to understand. For example, Look Back in Anger and Salad Days are presented as instances of early twentieth-century English drama, but the author fails to provide an outline for these plays. In addition, British musical traditions like the “music hall” are not explicitly defined; the author seems to expect that readers are aware of these traditions. To fully understand what Napolitano was attempting to convey, I sought out sources like Peter Bailey’s Music Hall: the Business of Pleasure. This text explained musical hall in detail and clarified its connection to English culture in the early nineteenth century. Without an understanding of music hall’s prevalence in pre-war English culture, it is impossible to understand how important Bart’s decision to incorporate this music was. Similarly, I consulted Passport to Jewish Music: its History, Traditions, and Culture that contained a chapter devoted to Yiddish music in Eastern Europe. Reading these supplementary sources facilitated my understanding of the first chapter in particular. This is because the majority of Napolitano’s historical references are used to “set the stage” and enhance the reader’s understanding of the social and cultural climate of early twentieth-century England. They also reinforce what Napolitano is attempting to convey by mirroring the connection between these references and English culture in the twentieth century.

Another weakness occurring at the beginning of Napolitano’s text is the overambitious breadth of chapter one. It covers such themes as: Twistian culture text; England’s post war identity crisis; post-war British theatre, records, and youth; the American invasion and its influence on British music; and Lionel Bart’s background and early work. Connecting such diverse topics in a fluid manner is virtually impossible, so this section comes across as disjointed and somewhat hard to follow. For these reasons, I was not drawn into the text initially and struggled through the first forty-five pages. In my opinion, Napolitano’s narrative would be easier to follow if Bart were introduced in the second chapter, because that section begins with a story about Bart’s youth. Additionally, the American invasion content could be placed in the section about Oliver!’s voyage to Broadway. Doing so would aid the flow of the first chapter and allow

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Oliver! to be compared and contrasted to American musicals more closely. This leads to my final and largest issue with Oliver! A Dickensian Musical. Why did the author choose to put “Dickensian” into the title of his book? The working definition of the term is not given overtly, despite being used to describe countless nouns like Dickensian pedigree and Dickensian setpiece. Originally, Napolitano defined Oliver! as an English musical, but he revised it at some point during the writing and publication process. Napolitano states this was done to “purposefully draw attention to the literary roots of Bart's masterpiece,” yet does the sole fact that Bart based his musical on a Dickens novel make it a Dickensian musical (1)? Even after reading this text, I am unable to answer this question. In the fourth chapter, Napolitano responds to a review of Oliver! entitled “This One Could Start an Avalanche,” saying, “he was referring to an avalanche of Dickensian adaptation as opposed to an avalanche of English musicals – a prophetic statement in light of the Dickensian musical fad initiated by Oliver!.” Napolitano does not indicate what differentiates a Dickensian musical from an English musical. Through secondary research, I discovered the abstract adjective can take on different meanings. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as “of or reminiscent of the novels of Charles Dickens, especially in suggesting the poor social conditions or comically repulsive characters that they portray.” In the essay “Opening a Fresh Vein of Humour,” Malcolm Andrews describes Dickensian humour as unique and original, full of wit and tact. Other sources talk about a “Dickensian diet” and “Dickensian economy” for example, explaining what this means in each specific circumstance. Napolitano would have strengthened his text significantly and made later references more meaningful if his definition of the adjective was given early on.

Because of the text's broad nature, there are several themes that could bear fleshing out in the future. One such theme is Oliver!’s effect on the reestablishment of England’s cultural identity after World War Two. The sections on post-war England, including the increasing prominence of working class empowerment, the youth movement, and the dwindling importance of the middle class were comprehensive in the context of this text but could be expanded significantly; this material could then be supplemented with a more in-depth view of England’s late twentieth-century cultural status. A publication with this focus would provide insight into how Oliver! established musical traditions that jolted the English musical forward and promoted nationalistic pride after a period of cultural drought, leading to the dominance of West End Musicals.


in the 1980s.

Overall, in *Oliver! A Dickensian Musical*, Marc Napolitano succeeds in crafting a comprehensive and engaging “biography” of *Oliver!* The author demonstrates his passion for the subject, going to painstaking lengths to ensure every facet of the British phenomenon is realized in detail. Only certain elements are lacking, such as relevant background information and a thorough explanation of the term Dickensian. Unlike similar literature, Napolitano's narrative not only outlines the musical, but provides insight into the impact *Oliver!* had on English culture and future musicals. This book has paved the way for future publications in the field and is an invaluable resource for both scholars and general readers with an interest in Bart's famous musical.

For further reading:


