

Finding new depths in Oliver!

CHELMSFORD Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society's sell-out production of Oliver at the town's Civic Theatre all this week is vastly different from their production back in 1968.

While it would be quite impossible for any production by Ray Jeffery not to contain many exciting moments, he has concentrated on building up the characters so that Lionel Bart's adaption of Dicken's famous tale becomes a drama with music, rather than an out and out musical.

This production moves me more than the previous one — an excellent example of a different approach let me make quite clear — and musical director Robert Ladkin reveals depths in the musical score I have never heard before in any other version.

A basic set with bits added and taken away and with scene changes carried on without the curtain falling makes for an overall smoothness and a building up of the dramatic tension.

But it is unfortunate that the one unconvincing moment in the show is the murder by Bill Sykes (Mike Hawkins, never sinister enough) of Nancy (Margaret Burgess, forceful and convincing).

But for the rest, the Consider Yourself and the Oom-Pah-Pah numbers are superb examples of Ray Jeffery's handling of choruses and effective choreography, the numbers being delivered with all the fervour of a

Gang Show number, but with a lot more expertise.

And there are two absolutely stunning performances by the young teenagers John and Simon Coates as Oliver and the Artful Dodger, neither of whom put a foot wrong the whole evening.

If Simon's is the more showy part, in which he is superb, John, for the first time in my life, made me feel sorry for Oliver and the kids in the chorus all gave them magnificent support, full of vitality.

Peter Smith's Fagin is not the most commanding I have seen, but wound its way sinuously into the show as the evening progresses, and Stan Parson's Mr Bumble is a beautiful study of small town officialdom, completely at sea in the depths marriage.

Of the smaller parts Kevin Duncombe's bullying Noah Claypole, Brian Tollisen's unctuous Mr Sowberry, Ken Cooper's bumbling Dr Grimwig, Robin Sampson's kindly Mr Brownlow and Joy Wallace's motherly Mrs Bedwin are all a joy to watch.

I was left wondering if the lighting had quite settled down on Monday. Certainly some of the twilight effects seemed rather overdone, but I left the theatre aware of new facets to Oliver.