

Oliver!

Will the new Fagin please stand up?

Bruce Dessau reviews the situation with the Dickensian Omid Djalili

Fagin is a daunting part and intriguing, headline-making casting. Omid Djalili is surely the first stand-up comedian of the Baha'i faith to play the role. Given his lack of West End experience, it is no shock that Djalili was initially anxious about taking over from Rowan Atkinson in *Oliver!* this week. "The nearest thing I've done to this was an alternative panto at Southwark Playhouse in 1996. It was *Aladdin* and I was *Wishy Washy*." But intensive rehearsals in a small South London hall where we meet are getting the versatile performer up to speed.

Djalili's father was a Kensington-based Iranian journalist who chose to stay permanently in England after the 1979 revolution. Omid grew up in West London and, after making his name on the comedy circuit and notching up notable cameos in *Gladiator* and *The Mummy*, in 2007 he became the first Anglo-Iranian to land a BBC sketch show.

Fagin is a huge challenge for this accidental cultural standard bearer. Does that make him more nervous? "No. More determined," he says firmly. "In the Baha'i religion you have to do the best you can do, whatever you do." But can he do something new in a part famously embodied by Alec Guinness and Ron Moody? Djalili usually speaks in cheerful, non-stop paragraphs, but there is an unusually long pause here. "That's a good question. I wanted to come as a blank book. The idea is to do it about as differently as possible." Though presumably he won't resort to the belly dancing that always gets a giggle during his stand-up set. "At the moment I'm more London cab driver. I've tried it in the mirror; I was doing Jackie Mason, but that felt wrong. Maybe I should just try to sound like Russell Brand. He's Dickensian."

Try as he might, though, he is clearly haunted by the tough act he is following. Even at bedtime at home in East Sheen, where he lives with his wife Annabel and three children, he cannot shake it off: "I dreamt last night that Rowan was at Mortlake station dressed as Fagin and he said to me: 'Well, it saves time at the theatre...'"

Djalili is hardly the first contemporary TV comedian to

set up shop in London's theatres recently. Mathew Horne, of *Gavin and Stacey*, was in *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, David Walliams in *No Man's Land*, while Matt Lucas is due to star in *Prick up Your Ears*. Djalili rejects any suggestion of stunt casting. Ticket sales, already booking into 2011, hardly need a boost. So how did he land the part?

"My agent said: 'What do you think about *Oliver!*?' I said: 'Are they remaking the film?' It just wasn't on my radar. There are parts you'd like to do; I'd love to do *Shylock*, but

I'd never thought about Fagin." But by a nice piece of synchronicity, Djalili had recently become interested in musicals, having been on a *Sound Of Music* guided tour during a holiday in Salzburg. His BBC One sketch show regularly featured song and dance set-pieces such as a *Mini Cab — The Musical*, complete with its cabbies v taxis homage to *West Side Story*.

But there were misunderstandings during early negotiations. "I thought it was an offer, but Cameron Mackintosh said I had to prove I could do it. I learnt *Reviewing the Situation*, but they had to coach me through it. I went back and still forgot the words. I never really did an audition without cocking it up, but they must have seen something that I could bring to it."

When rehearsals started, Djalili was so nervous that he tweeted that he was officially the most underprepared Fagin of all time. This was mainly because he'd only just finished filming *The Infidel*, written by David Baddiel. Interestingly, the movie plot revolves around Djalili playing a Muslim who discovers he is Jewish. Perhaps Fagin is not such a stretch. He has frequently been assumed to be semitic. He grins while recalling a party where he was mistaken for a Jewish doctor: "Before I could come clean, the single women had cornered me!" Others have thought he is Greek. An early Edinburgh show was entitled *Short, Fat Kebab Shop Owner's Son*, though it did not include a rendition of *You've Got to Pinta Pocket or Two*.

The jump from *The Infidel* to this was stark: "For the film, the idea was to do everything small. Micro-acting. For Fagin everything has to be big. It is all about energy." During breaks his nutritionist-cum-pilates teacher has been knocking him into shape with stretching and a strict diet. Food, glorious food has been replaced by salads,

Oliver!

tedious salads. He certainly seems energised, though it would be pushing it to say he was lean. There is only so much you can achieve when you are 43 and about 5ft 5in. "I'm playing it less thin Jew, more Zero Mostel on crack," he laughs.

Rehearsals are clearly very demanding. Watching a read-through after our interview, one can see the effort involved as he dissects every line. It makes the looseness of stand-up seem like a breeze. "It is technically hard," he agrees. "You have to find a truth then lock it and I'm not used to telling a story the same every night. Someone told me Nicholas Lyndhurst is a real technician; he can say the same thing the same way 50 times. I didn't know it was such a discipline."

There is nothing wishy-washy about preparing for the West End.

Omid Djalili takes over as Fagin in *Oliver!* at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, WC2 (0844 412 4660), from July 20. www.oliverthemusical.com



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