

# Oliver!

## Omid Djalili is Fagin

An Iranian Fagin? Whatever next? Big-screen star and stand-up comic Omid Djalili tells **Tamara Gausi** why he was eager to join the cast of *'Oliver!*', how Mel Smith inspired him and what the Westminster Synagogue's rabbi had to say ...

Cast a cursory glance over *Time Out's* theatre listings and you may notice the invasion of comedians treading the West End boards. Lenny Henry's doing *'Othello'* and Matt Lucas's turn in *'Prick Up Your Ears'* will be reviewed next week. They're colonising our musicals too, with Phill Jupitus following Brian Conley in *'Hairspray'* and Griff Rhys Jones taking over from Omid Djalili, Rowan Atkinson's replacement in *'Oliver!*', this December. Djalili, who releases a new comedy DVD this autumn, tells us about making the transition from stand-up to stage musicals.

**Fagin is often regarded as an anti-Semitic caricature. Did you feel nervous about playing such a controversial character?**

'Of course. Let's face it, if you are going to be true to what Dickens wrote originally, the role is anti-Semitic. But I made a conscious decision to emphasise his Jewishness in a warm way. I know people will be watching it thinking: This guy's an Iranian and now he's playing an anti-Semite? He probably wants to wipe Israel off the

map. But Rabbi Solomon from Westminster Synagogue came to see it and told me it's the most pro-Jewish Fagin he has ever seen.'

**How did you feel about taking over from Rowan Atkinson?**

'It was the main reason I took the job in the first place. I grew up watching "Not the Nine O'Clock News". Rowan Atkinson is one of my heroes. And so is Griff Rhys Jones. In fact, the reason I even got into comedy was because Mel Smith watched me in my school play and came backstage to tell me that I was very funny and should consider a career in comedy. So in my mind Rowan can do no wrong. But I think what I did with Fagin is pretty different. His was a bit darker and probably a truer interpretation of what the character should be. Mine is a little... a little wild [chuckles].'

**Why are some many comedians taking to the stage?**

'I think it's something comedians have always done. I mean, Russ Abbot played Fagin, Peter Kay was in *'The Producers'*. When there are tickets to be sold, people will always try to think of interesting ways to cast the part. But I don't think they would ever give a role to someone if they didn't think

**'It's the same principle as stand-up – make 'em laugh'**

they could act. Especially for roles that require some kind of comic sensibility,

which Fagin does. And of course people forget that a lot of comedians have a background in theatre. Matt Lucas was in the National Youth Theatre, I studied theatre. It's just that my theatricality found a home in film and stand-up. But it's the same principle – make 'em laugh.'

**This is your first excursion into musical theatre. How have you found it?**

'I've become very camp. And it's definitely given me a taste for theatre.

I would love to do more. But I wouldn't do just anything. If someone said to me, "Hey Omid, play Hamlet", I wouldn't be like "Waayhay! Why not?". I would be a bit cautious. But everyone says I should play Teyve in *'Fiddler on the Roof'* or Max Bialystock in *'The Producers'* and if that comes up in a few years' time I wouldn't mind. But let's be honest, Cameron Mackintosh took a huge gamble with me. A lot of eyebrows were raised when I was cast. I was a very leftfield choice. I really hope I don't disappoint.'

**You don't. But are there any cast changes you would like to see? Jordan in *'Wicked'* perhaps? Or John Sargeant in *'Dirty Dancing'*?**

'I'd like to see Jim Bowen from *'Bullseye'* in something.'

**Having gone through your baptism of cast-changing fire, what advice would you give to other actors about to do the same?**

'Lose weight and get fit. [Phill] Jupitus told me that when he did his first rehearsal he was out of breath after ten minutes. Same thing here. I could barely walk and talk at the same time, so just be yourself.'

*'Oliver!' is at Theatre Royal Drury Lane. See West End listings.*

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**Pocket pickin' good** Omid Djalili excels in 'Oliver!'

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