

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## Twist

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Theatre Centre have described *Twist* as “a radical reimagining of a Charles Dickens classic set against the backdrop of the global refugee crisis”. It tells the story of Abdo, a young lad from Aleppo in Syria, and his flight to the West in the hope of reaching his mother’s friend “Auntie” Yasmin in England. It has echoes of *Oliver Twist* but is a long way from being an adaptation of it.

It begins with Nancy (Rebecca Hamilton), a character both stories have in common, here seen as a young street thief specialising in handbags. She’s just snatched a smart one from a woman in a café. She’s on the run from the cops but that doesn’t prevent her from taking her time to tell us how easy it was.

With her motor-mouth delivery and a strong accent she takes some understanding and could be in Sauchiehall Street as likely as London, especially as a policeman in the scene that rapidly follows also has a Scots voice. He and his colleague have missed her but have picked up young Abdo (Jordan Bamford) and are interrogating him. “I can’t go back,” he declares and they suspect that he may be an illegal immigrant.

As he answers their questions in his uncertain English, the action moves back to the birth of Abdo, which his parents are celebrating in their peaceful garden in Aleppo. It doesn’t stay peaceful. Soon Lena, his mother (Dilek Rose), is on the phone to her friend Yasmin saying that her journalist husband has been taken away, that she and Abdo are in danger and they leave first for friends in Egypt than to Turkey where Lena dies in a refugee camp.

He is rescued from that by a man people call The Boss (Alister Hawke), who promises food and football if he comes to work in his factory; but it’s a case of child slavery and when Abdo, like Oliver, asks “for more” he gets kicked out. It is then that Abdo encounters a people trafficker who offers to get him to England.

Abdo’s story is interwoven with his interrogation and scenes with Nancy who has links with the Fabian (Bhav Joshi), the Fagin equivalent, who is part of the London end of the traffickers, and Skinner (*i.e.* Sykes) people traffickers who needs a boy to assist him, though as in Dickens the boy does succeed in escaping his captors.

Natalie Wilson’s production is fast-moving, assisted by the simplicity of Jemima Robinson’s design using blue and white painted wooden pallets, ideal for touring to Theatre Centre’s mixture of venues, and she has drawn lively and moving performances from her hard working cast.

The recounting of Abdo’s experience is sometimes somewhat sketchy, the details not always easy to follow; but this is what he remembers. That could explain the lacunae. *Twist* doesn’t set out to be documentary.

It borrows ideas from Dickens but it isn't a direct modernisation of *Oliver Twist* and the emphasis put on the link between them could raise false expectations. On the other hand, the link emphasises that this is a fiction and offers an opportunity not only to compare this version with Dickens but fiction with contemporary fact.

*Twist* avoids a graphic presentation of the tragedies of forced migration and people trafficking—that would not be appropriate for its young target audience. This is not primarily meant for an informed adult audience, who might find its treatment too simple.

By centring on Abdo and Nancy as characters for a young audience to identify with, it can introduce a whole raft of issues about migration, child slavery and other related matters that make an excellent starting point for discussion. Theatre Centre provides support resources that offer core information on these issues if schools wish to explore them.

*During the autumn, Twist will be touring schools and theatres including Tacchi-Morris Arts Centre, Taunton, 27 September; Sherman Theatre, Cardiff, 29 September; Soho Theatre, London, 2-4 October; Gala Theatre, Durham, 18 October; Ropetackle Arts Centre, Shoreham-by-Sea, 15 November; Stantonbury Theatre, Milton Keynes, 17 November; Mumford Theatre, Cambridge, 21 November.*

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)