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Back to the Barricades: 'Les Miz' Reworked at 25



Deen van Meer

The innkeepers' rousing musical number "Master of the House," in the American premiere of the new "Les Misérables."

By ANITA GATES

Published: December 3, 2010

Susan Boyle has ruined it for all future Fantines. When Betsy Morgan, for instance, a mere wisp of a young woman, opens her mouth to sing the character Fantine's solo, "I Dreamed a Dream," in "Les Misérables," at the [Paper Mill Playhouse](#), at least half the audience has to be thinking about [Ms. Boyle's stunning 2009 performance](#) of that song on "Britain's Got Talent" (78 million YouTube views so far). And wondering why this actress is so vocally demure in comparison.

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Deen van Meer

Lawrence Clayton, left, plays Jean Valjean to Andrew Varela's Javert.

But Ms. Morgan has nothing to worry about. She gives a lovely performance in what is an unquestionably spectacular production from start to finish, complete with a formidable 14-piece orchestra.

"Les Misérables," the musical based on Victor Hugo's 1862 novel, which had its premiere in London back in 1985, arrived on Broadway in 1987, won eight [Tony Awards](#) (including best musical) and ran 16 years. The original run was quickly followed by a Broadway revival (2006-08), which was minor news, compared with what we have now: a splendidly reworked 25th-anniversary production from London, having its American premiere.

The story, of course, remains the same. Jean Valjean, a Frenchman who in desperation stole a loaf of bread, is released from prison. Mistreated in the outside world because of his criminal record, he resorts to theft but, touched by a

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bishop's kindness, vows to become a good man and succeeds to the point of near-sainthood.

Rather than return to prison (he is now wanted for the most recent theft), he changes his name and begins a new life, becoming a wealthy factory owner and a small-town mayor. He rescues Fantine, a prostitute, and when she dies, raises her daughter, Cosette. Meanwhile an obsessive gendarme named Javert becomes determined to find and capture Valjean.

Cosette falls in love with Marius, a young man who has become involved in the doomed June Rebellion of 1832, in which young Parisian students fought against the monarchists and died. Everyone's fate hangs in the balance.

It has been more than half a century since show tunes regularly bounced from Broadway to the Top 40 charts, so it is easy to forget that "I Dreamed a Dream" is not this show's only musical treasure. As Éponine, Chasten Harmon sings "On My Own," a sad ballad of unrequited love, with forceful poignancy. Andrew Varela brings his first-rate voice to "Stars," Javert's pledge to find Valjean. "Master of the House," led by the innkeepers Monsieur and Madame Thénardier (Michael Kostroff and Shawna M. Hamic), is a rousing, cheery number, even if it does celebrate corruption and greed.

Valjean (Lawrence Clayton) has his peak musical moment with "Bring Him Home," a prayer that Marius (played by Jon Fletcher on opening night, filling in for Justin Scott Brown, who was ill) will survive the battle. But the dazzler, more than ever, is "One Day More." It is sung by the company, but much of its chills-producing beauty comes from the electric stage presence of Jeremy Hays, who plays Enjolras, the leader of the student uprising.

The cast is uniformly excellent, directed with both fervor and discipline by Laurence Connor and James Powell, who did the new production in London.

Mr. Clayton is a strong, imposing Valjean who does not seem particularly tortured or vulnerable at first. But that aspect of the performance pays off later; when he seems a broken man, he has fallen from great heights. Another issue arises from the color-blind casting (Mr. Clayton is African-American) that is, happily, a given in contemporary New York theater. There is a moment early in the show (when Valjean is turned away from a hotel because he is an ex-convict) that suggests — inadvertently, one presumes — racial prejudice instead, surrounded as the character is by a predominantly white cast. But as the story unfolds, Mr. Clayton becomes simply Valjean, paragon of honor.

The most notable addition to the new production is the set designer Matt Kinley's lavish use of projection design, including Parisian street scenes based on Hugo's own paintings. Technology serves the drama to thrilling effect when Valjean carries a wounded Marius to safety along the swirling, curving path of the city's sewers (some of the projections move). And Javert's final moments at the bridge, enhanced by special effects, are unforgettable.

"Les Misérables," by Claude-Michel Schönberg, Herbert Kretzmer, Alain Boublil and Jean-Marc Natel, is at the Paper Mill Playhouse, 22 Brookside Drive, Millburn, through Dec. 30. Information: (973) 376-4343 or papermill.org.

A version of this review appeared in print on December 5, 2010, on page NJ12 of the New York edition.

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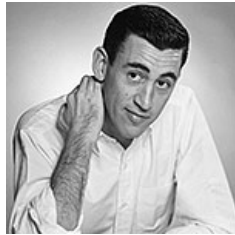


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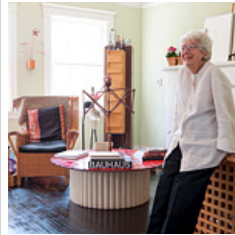
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