

Les Misérables at PPAC: A show you'll want to see 24601 times

Okee dokee folks... Back in the late 80's I took my mother to NYC. As we were walking down Broadway, she saw a wall painted with a *Les Misérables* logo. I had no idea what it was but she certainly did! She loved Broadway musicals and told me that *Les Misérables* was a new one that she really wanted to see. When it came to Providence for the first time, my parents were there. Since then, they have experienced productions of "Les Mis" over thirty times. They were so moved by the musical that they bought me a ticket because they felt I should also see it. I didn't know what to expect, but I enjoyed it immensely and found it to be very powerful. Since that first time, I have attended a couple more Les Mis shows. Last night at The Providence Performing Arts Center, I added Les Mis' opening night as show number four. Mom and dad will be there Sunday adding another notch to their already lengthy Les Mis belt.

I think it's been about ten years or more since I last saw a Les Mis production. All the previous versions I have seen, I believe, had relatively simple stage sets and an area that rotated. That rotation emphasized movement and worked well within the storyline. This time around my girlfriend was the Les Mis newbie, so I was trying to explain the show to her and the spinning stage. There was no need. The stage didn't turn. This production was much different than the last one I had been to.

Les Misérables is based on Victor Hugo's 1862 novel of the same name and takes place in France between 1815 and 1832. Punishment, redemption, poverty, revolution, love, and death are the basic themes of the story. Many folks may be familiar with the 2012 film adaptation, but the movie and the stage production are vastly different experiences.



Photo: Matthew Murphy & Evan Zimmerman for MurphyMade

The view of the pre-show stage at last night's performance was a banner/curtain of a Victor Hugo painting. A dark, wispy, silhouetted cityscape was framed on either side by black, slender building sets. The opening notes of the Prologue were played and the banner lifted, revealing a group of prisoners rowing. "Look down, look down, Don't look 'em in the eye, Look down, look down, You're here until you die," they sang. The ship was a projected image on a screen behind the stage. To me, this was a new addition to the show. This screen is an integral part of the 2022 production. Many of the images used throughout the show were either Victor Hugo's paintings or images created in his artistic style. The first thirteen minutes of the show are sacred. If you aren't in your seat at the start of the show, there is a hold until those thirteen minutes are up. This beginning sets up the story of Jean Valjean at the end of his nineteen years for stealing a loaf of bread. He is not simply released from his punishment, but as officer Javert reminds prisoner 24601, Valjean, it's a "yellow ticket-of-leave, you are a thief." Valjean finds it hard to reenter society with the curse of Javert and the yellow ticket-of-leave. He steals items from a church that gave him refuge, and when he is caught by officers, the priest supports Valjean by claiming that it was a gift and gives him more. He tells Valjean, "You must use this precious silver to become an honest man." Valjean tears up his yellow ticket-of-leave and assumes a new identity. After this, the stage went dark and "Les Misérables" was projected across the back wall.

This new production of Les Mis is visually DARK and the dramatic lighting conjures the image of a Caravaggio or Rembrandt painting. Any colors are muted and nothing is at all brightly lit. Early 19th century France was dismal and this makes you feel it. Smoke/fog is occasionally added and real flame torches are used. The set pieces that slide in and out are all black buildings, bridges, stairways, and barricades. The back wall projection of images is used in an old-school Hollywood fashion where the

background images are slightly animated, giving the impression of movement in the foreground.

Les Misérables progresses in more of an operatic fashion than a musical. In most of today's musicals, dialogue is spoken and then they burst into song to augment the spoken sentiment. However, in Les Mis, almost every word of dialogue is sung. Every note of every piece of music and every lyric in the show evokes some kind of emotion from the audience. The performers must have strong voices to carry the weight of their songs and this cast has that power. "I Dreamed A Dream" by Fantine, "Stars" by Javert, "On My Own" by Eponine, and "Bring Him Home" by Valjean let the performers stretch out on these solos and bring out their best, and that they did. These performances all triggered tremendous applause. Most of the songs tug at your heart but there are some lighter moments in the show. "Lovely Ladies," "Master of the House," and "Beggars at the Feast" add catchy tunes and a little levity to the show. So much so that back when Les Mis was gaining popularity, an early episode of Seinfeld had George Costanza repeatedly singing "Master of the House," infecting folks with that earworm!



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This show is carried by the huge talents of the performers in the lead roles: Nick Cartell as Valjean, Hayden Tee as Javert, Haley Dortch as Fantine, and Christine Hesson Hwang as Eponine - though the supporting roles were filled by wonderful performers as well.

The death of Javert was handled differently than I had previously seen. Again, this had a bit of a Hollywood effect that coupled movement on the screen, with moving scenery and a Javert on a fly-away harness that truly made his leap more dramatic and realistic than any previous version. This is always a breathtaking ending to his "Soliloquy".

My only issue was with that of the little boy. His role has been bolstered from previous productions and I found it annoying. The screechy, fingernails on a chalkboard singing and hammy acting detracted from the scenes he was part of. In the past, that role was more subtle and fit better into the mix. This seemed like an attempt to feature some cheeky kid more prominently. Don't do it! Was I wrong that I quietly cheered when the French soldiers solved that problem? Also, I counted three phallic references in Act I. I think one would have been sufficient, but they kept it going - from a stroked telescope to a loaf of French bread to a dangling bottle. Pick one and stick with it. It's really only funny once.

Overall this was a wonderful show with great performances. It was visually bleak but apropos for the period and transported you back to early 1800s France. The songs and music are powerful from start to finish. Les Misérables is a production that needs to be experienced LIVE. If you like the film you will LOVE the live version. If you didn't like the film, give the live version a chance. The emotion of seeing something like Les Mis in person is what makes live theatre worth seeing - especially this! And as my parents have proven, and I am sure they are not alone, Les Mis is something that can be seen time and time again. All walks of life, young and old, were in attendance at last night's sold-out opening night. If you have seen it, see it again, and if you haven't, you have until this Sunday to correct that. Les Mis never fails to overwhelm you with emotion and astonishment. The enormous amount of applause and hoots at the conclusion of this show was probably the loudest I have witnessed for any Les Mis I have attended. That says a lot right there. See this show.

The performance, with a brief intermission, clocks in at three hours, with the first half being about 90 minutes. Les Misérables is at The Providence Performing Arts Center until Sunday, November 20. Please remember the show starts promptly at 8 PM; there is a 13-minute hold at the start of the show. Please plan to arrive at the theatre earlier so that you will be in your seats prior to the start of the show. For more about Les Misérables and other shows in the Broadway series, don't wait "One Day More," get to PPACRI.org.

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