

To the barricades in Aurora for 'Les Miz'



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Since the musical "Les Miserables" has been in the public consciousness for 30 years, it is hard to imagine that you don't know something about this epic Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg musical. Given the show's shrewd brand expansion — the ballad "I Dreamed a Dream" has now become the ubertext for the stardom-seeking and the 2012 movie was, depending on your point of view, either a grand reincarnation or a travesty — it is highly unlikely that this particular epic has passed you by. Especially if you are reading another review of "Les Miserables," one of a dozen such reviews I've written for this newspaper, albeit the first for a production, of operatic scale, at the [Paramount Theatre](#) in Aurora.

So. You do not need me to tell you this is a great musical, a show that has moved me to tears pretty much all of the 20 or 30 times I've seen it. If you're not already on that train, no need to take the Burlington Northern Santa Fe to Aurora; one can just as easily envy the brilliant original producer, Cameron Mackintosh, and his millions from home. Like "Hamlet" (no, I'm not making the comparison, but this show has competitive name recognition), "Les Miserables" is one of those phenomena wherein the production elements are inseparable from the material — the history of the show, and its parade of formidable past performers, impossible to separate from the essence of the piece in trans-Atlantic pop culture. "Les Miz" now talks to other productions of "Les Miz."

It also talks to a new generation, but more of them in a moment. If you are what they call a heavy user of this show, note that of all the local productions staged in the Chicago-area over the past few years, and there have been several, director Jim Corti's production reinvents the show the most thoroughly and takes the most risks, which is your cue to hop that train. This is mostly due to a truly breathtaking setting from Kevin Depinet — who treats the ever-willing Paramount like it's Peter Gelb's Metropolitan Opera — working alongside Jeffrey D. Kmiec. These two designers have created a massive spiral staircase reaching all the way to the heavens of the Paramount proscenium, while retaining the turntable of the show's original conceit. And thus you almost getting a crick in your neck watching Inspector Javert, confronted with the moral relativism for which he is sorely ill-equipped, plunge to his death.

If you know this show well, you'll be fascinated by how Corti creates spirals where there were once were students marching in place. The angry proletariat are strung out like impoverished beads on motorized platforms moving up, down and around, apt for a show inspired by a France romanticism that requires God to be on high (like the notes), and the Thenardiers scurrying around in the sewers. "Les Miz" needs a heaven and a hell, and Corti keeps

both in full epic view all night long.

But Corti, a maximalist who now does shows bigger than Robert Falls, and whose ideas just keep spinning here, also finds ways to focus on the theatrics of the individual ballad — now a crucial part of the "Les Miz" appeal, in an era where everyone has already heard the songs on "Glee." Corti has two stellar performers in his Fantine, Hannah Corneau, and his Eponine, Lillie Cummings, who just gets scrappier and better in every show out here. (Cummings may well be on the Jessie Mueller track). With the help of Jesse Klug's lights, Corti picks out Corneau and Cummings' faces for their twin show-stopping ballads, and the performers don't disappoint.

Other notions of interest for the fan include a dark take on "Master of the House" (over the years, the Thenardiers, here well played by George Keating and Marya Grandy, have morphed from pantomime comics into nightmarish visions) that hone in on Mrs. T's longings, again by spotlighting the individual. But the things I most enjoyed Sunday afternoon, out of very many pleasures, was the out-of-the-box casting of Rod Thomas, generally a comic actor, as Javert. Thomas has neither the usual thudding baritone nor the typical requisite stentorian stiffness. He plays Javert as an ordinary man, a moralist who cannot yield, but who does not come from some different police-inspector planet from the rest of us. It is the best work I've ever seen from Thomas, who nails every last note and brings a whole new vulnerability to bear on his familiar villain.

Robert Wilde is a young man for Valjean, and his lack of gravitas, replete with a sense that the show has moved quicker than the character's understanding of suffering, is a tad bothersome in Act 2. But it's an honest performance that will strike some of you big fans as a fresh-eyed view. And it's mostly pleasing to the ear.

People take a lot of youngsters to this show now, which is gratifying and educational for all. If you're doing so — and, note, it's far more affordable for a family, and everything bit as spectacularly revisionist, as the recent tour downtown — you might want to provide a synopsis. At some points in Corti's show — which lacks the chronological surtitles of the Trevor Nunn original — a lot of narrative understanding is taken for granted. And while I loved this set, it never clearly situates Valjean and his Cosette in their Paris home.

One can find other things to discuss or dispute — I never like it when Gavroche eats dirt before he's found any ammo for the students, but that's just me. And, just once, I'd like to see a "Les Miz" where everyone does not just stand around as Valjean saves the guy trapped under the cart, flexing his muscles, solo. But those are minor matters. What matters in "Les Miz," matters here.

Devin DeSantis is a tortured Marius, without being annoying, like so many. Ditto, Erica Stephan's Cosette. Travis Taylor looks nothing like the typical Enjolras, and thank God for that. He kills it. So does the ensemble, throughout. Add an orchestra big enough to remind you of the instruments for which this show was originally scored, and, well, you know what, or what not, to do.

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REVIEW: Les Misérables at Paramount Theatre

3.5 STARS

When: Through April 26

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd. Aurora

Running time: 3 hours

Tickets: \$41-\$54 at 630-896-6666 and paramountaurora.com

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