

# A dignified masterwork

 By [Daniel Derksen](#)

17 Jan 2013

The radical vitality of *Les Misérables* is a provocative and commanding visceral experience that offers a refreshing rebirth of musicals on the big screen. Breaking away from the clinical constraints and pure sound of contemporary musicals (and music), which results in a music video rendition of dramatised music and songs, *Les Misérables* is a rare and dignified masterwork that strips the genre of its pretention and deception.

It gives audiences an experience that is raw and real, in which the live singing of the performers is captured in all its vulnerable excellence. What more can one ask for than having Samantha Barks as Éponine singing *On My Own* in the rain, bringing the lyrics "In the rain the pavements shine like silver" vividly to life?





## **Spectacular Wagnerian opening**

From its spectacular Wagnerian opening, with Valjean and other convicts hauling a massive ship in for repair, the extreme spectacle of the drama draws the audience into an authentic experience that allows Hugh Jackman and the cast to bring Alain Boubil and Claude Michel Schönberg's creation to life, and revitalises the poetic lyrics of South African-born Herbert Kretzmer, who co-wrote the screenplay with William Nicholson, Boubil and Schönberg.

Les Misérables is ultimate storytelling in action and at its most compelling; it transcends the lasting impact of its stage history (seen by more than 60 million people in 42 countries and in 21 languages around the globe - and is still breaking box office records everywhere in its 28th year), and signifies a renaissance in cinema that is exciting, invigourating and innovative.

The King's Speech director Tom Hooper understands the mechanics of drama and is an actor's director; he, thankfully, never allows his meticulous direction to impose on the drama or interfere with the sensitive and intimate performances delivered by the ensemble. Hooper gives his audience a close and personal connection between the artist and the artistry of musical drama.

What makes Les Misérables exceptional is that it defies description in its genre; it stands uniquely and firmly on its own as a contemporary opera that marries the conventions of opera perfectly with contemporary musicals, drawing audiences into a musical experience that is unforgettable.

## **An original adaptation**

It's noteworthy that the film is not a duplicate of the stage production, but an original adaptation that fills in the gaps and allows smoother narrative plotting, opening up the story to bring full justice to its lustre.

Les Misérables is an emotional journey that fittingly reflects the tragedy that befalls humans and untainted love that saves us from damnation. Its powerful message: "To love another person is to see the face of God" is an anthem for the human race, fuelled with hope, astute awareness and meaningful intensity that is life changing. There is a serene spiritual meditation in the honesty and anguish of its fragile characters, allowing their helpless vulnerability to surface and resonate with the reality of our own lives; we see ourselves through their journey and in its mirror lay a profound revelation.





## **A story of ultimate sacrifice and redemption**

Although it's a story that's 150 years old - a story of ultimate sacrifice and redemption - it's a story that reverberates with our own lives, illuminating the different and unique faces of society. *Les Misérables* is a modern fairy tale that allows its audience to escape into the alluring fantasy of an optimistic future in which our hopes and aspirations are tried and tested, and we have to find absolution.

The success of *Les Misérables* can be contributed to its ability for audiences to see themselves through the characters: there is the Valjean in all of us, a martyr who redeems himself through compassion; the Javert in us is the dark side of human nature that needs to find relief through torment; Fantine is reminiscent of heartrending innocence; Cosette and Marius resemble the purity of youthful romance and first love; Éponine reminds us of true love, which broke our hearts; the wicked Monsieur and Madame Thénardier reveal perverse and playful intent; and the young rebels are reminiscent of rebellion that shapes our lives.

This wonderful blend of human nature allows an intimate and unique imminence that reveals who we are, how our desperate need for love and understanding can heal wounds and set our rivals free, and how compassion defeats the malevolent evil of humankind. *Les Misérables* not only allows us to experience who we are and reflects the human condition, but also allows its powerful cast to reveal their creativity.

## **Emotionless and statuesque resilience**

Hugh Jackman miraculously transcends his superstar persona and crawls into the heart and soul of Valjean; the freedom that Hooper offers his cast allows Jackman to probe every intricate beat of a tormented soul.

Russell Crowe is marvellous in his depiction of Javert; his emotionless and statuesque resilience is endearing and when he ultimately reveals his humanity, it is heartbreaking.

In her role as the wounded heroine Fantine, Anne Hathaway delivers an astounding performance; there is sincerity in her anguish that is unforgettable.

Eddie Redmayne is a revelation in his sensational rendering of Marius (in fact one of the best Marius' ever); the youthful aspirations and romantic soul of his angelic character are excellent.

Equally brilliant and memorable are Amanda Syfried as the wholesome Cossette, Samantha Parks as the spirited Éponine, Sacha Baron Cohen and Helena Bonham Carter as the villainous Thénardiens, Aaron Tveit, who plays the impassioned student revolutionary Enjolras, Daniel Huttlestone as the feisty Gavroche, Isabelle Allen as the young Cossette, and Colm Wilkinson (the original Jean Valjean in the 1985 London and 1987 Broadway productions of *Les Misérables*) in the pivotal role of the Bishop of Digne.

## **No dubious dubbing or filtering**

What makes the singing of the cast unique and incomparable is that it is real; there is no dubious dubbing or filtering, but an intense dramatisation of the music. It's senseless to squabble about the tonality or pitching of the voices; these are singers who express the drama through passionate performances, not music rendered through mixing desks.

*Les Misérables* is a film you can wholeheartedly surrender to. Allow yourself this unique opportunity to escape into the epic grandeur of its splendour; the journey is enriching and revitalising, and guarantees to leave you with the realisation that sometimes it is better to listen, really to listen and allow our lives and the experiences of others to remind us of who we are and what our purpose in life is.

It's not just a movie; it's an encounter with a spiritual realm that reflects the astounding and wondrous nature of humanity. It projects the desire and compassion of its heroes and heroines, the pain of our nemeses and, ultimately, our unique ability to survive ourselves and those who dare to challenge our individuality.

## Spectacular entertainment

Besides the powerful impact of its narrative, Les Misérables' contextual production and visual design offer spectacular entertainment that showcases the skilful craftsmanship and exquisite artistry of its creative team.

It's definitely not a film you can walk away from and forget without being enthused, but one that connects soulfully with humanity and humanness - the title after all means "misery" and refers to utmost poverty, destitution and the outcasts, the underdogs, the rejected of society and the rebels against society. It's an experience that allows countless revisits that grow stronger and more potent with each viewing (or watching the DVDs of the 10th and 25th stage productions, a stage production, or listening to recordings from the original French concept album to recent cast recordings).

The hopeful refrain and One Day More will become an everyday realisation that life is what we make of it and how we overcome our obstacles and live our lives will impact on our respective destinies. We are all children of Victor Hugo's epos and when we hear the music of Les Misérables, and, in particular, the words "when the beating of your heart echoes the beating of the drum", the echo of its refrain, which celebrates the tragedy that befalls wounded souls, is a song you will want to sing forever.

## Behind the scenes

The story of the musical Les Misérables began in 1978, when French composers Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg started work on a musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's opus. It was inspired during Boublil's visit to London when, while watching producer Cameron Mackintosh's revival of Oliver!-though Mackintosh had no idea of this at the time- Boublil realised that the character of the Artful Dodger reminded him of Gavroche, the young street urchin allied with the revolutionary students in Hugo's story.

Read more at [www.writingstudio.co.za/page1037.html](http://www.writingstudio.co.za/page1037.html)

## ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Derksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and theatre journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwrighting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za)  
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