

THE ROSE BOWL AWARDS

FOR AMATEUR
DRAMA & MUSIC

<u>Name of Society</u>	Bristol Musical Youth Productions
<u>Name of Production</u>	Les Miserables
<u>Date</u>	23 rd October 2009
<u>Venue</u>	Redgrave Theatre
<u>Adjudicator</u>	June Rayner

Victor Hugo's great novel, *Les Miserables* came about because of his increasing involvement with political affairs. During the Second Empire, his active opposition to Louis Napoleon forced him into exile until the Third Republic enabled him to return to Paris and to become a Senator. During his exile, while championing republicanism, he wrote this story which is set amongst students and the poor. The novel's hero, a character named Jean Valjean, a man extremely sympathetic to the oppressed citizens, has become involved in their struggles. Years previously, he was released from prison only to return to thieving. The victim, a bishop, forgave him, an act that Valjean found redemptive. He determined to lead a better life, but his pursuer, the policeman, Javert, cannot believe in remorse and expiation and he relentlessly seeks Valjean's recapture. On the eve of the Paris uprising, like the author, Valjean expects and prepares to go into exile. Instead, he stays to protect those he loves.

Les Miserables is a work of mature musical theatre. It is adventurous, original and creative, telling a serious, complex, moral tale that is intellectually stimulating and emotionally affecting. Songs homogeneously become whole scenes that flow into whole acts. While the score includes memorable solos about love, longing and idealism, in general it is musically intricate. The score, of course, is the story told in music. In a story that concentrates upon conflict, violence and the betrayal of hope, it is no surprise to find sudden changes in rhythm generating force, overlapping vocals that drive momentum and dissonance implying friction and strife. It is a difficult score for both orchestra and cast.

The period dates from around 1815 onwards and the location is often, but not wholly, Parisian slums and areas of conflict. Uniforms and weapons feature largely.

Sailors and prostitutes took us to *Lovely ladies*. A big, blousy effect was achieved by the group – but they couldn't resist yelling. With Valjean's help, Fantine escaped. In an extremely neatly managed and very grim scene that closely resembled a Dickens scene in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Valjean exposed himself by using his strength – and Javert recognised him as Valjean realised.

In a hospital bed, Fantine was dying with her child Cosette present. The scene was picturesquely staged and Fantine's singing was well controlled as she made a pact with Valjean. Javert's threats rang out. Cosette has unhappily been placed with the rough Thenardiers. Their number was delivered with attack as we discovered them to be boorish, coarse and unfeeling as they greasily curry favour with the rich. A brisk tempo and a capable accompaniment together with lots of interesting activity created a fascinating moving picture delivered with plenty of energy. Valjean paid off the Thenardiers as he took charge of Cosette.

The barricades were set up like lightening. To Enjolras and Gavroche fell the task of explaining the barricades and introducing a subtly discreet Eponine and to Marius.

The ensuing scuffle left Javert viewing the crowd with scorn and threatening to run Valjean off his feet. Full of confidence, he prayed to the stars to help him in his pursuit. In the café, the revolutionaries have to decide for, or against, action. This section is not easy to perform and it was delivered very squarely, unexcitingly, as if the cast were saving themselves for *Do You Hear The People*. As the decision to rise up was reached, the number was sung with immense fervour.

Eponine had fallen in love with Marius and here, as she watched them together, she told of the pain she felt about his love for Cosette. The use of the garden gate worked creatively. The act ended with the mutinous rebels reprising *Do You Hear The People* with determination accompanied by rifle shots.

Act II opened with students and revolutionaries working on the barricades. Eponine passed a letter from Marius to Cosette to Valjean. The lyrics of this scene were quietly balanced with the orchestra before Eponine sang her *Only On My Own* with deeply felt yearning. Meanwhile, Javert falsely pretended to discover the enemy's plan of attack. The lighting of the following scenes was interesting: a mixture of red and steel. As the crowd assembled, they adopted hats that signified their readiness for combat. Eponine reappeared with a fatal wound and she, the first of them to fall, died in the arms of her beloved Marius. Exchanges of fire increased, well staged with the addition of gun shots and smoke. Valjean's confrontation with Javert resulted unexpectedly in Javert's release. The crowd sang a weary number where we were always trying to spot the singer – which we shouldn't have to do. Valjean's prayer for the safety of Marius was extremely moving. He began very softly, gradually filling out the phrases creatively.

During the second attack, someone ought to have fallen earlier but the bugle calls sounded the alarm. There was a real slaughter during the final fight, bodies poised in the most awkward positions which were held with great control until the barricades swivelled. During the 'sewer' scene, we saw some good mimes as Valjean tried to move Marius to safety. The contrast between Valjean's selflessness and Thenardier's thieving was starkly dramatised before the final confrontation between Valjean and Javert. Javert's *Who Is This Man?* was a critical number because it exposes the

melodic and fully capable of variety in tone colour and tone quality. Some of the quieter, lyrical passages were delicately tender. Rhythm was strongly maintained. Unfortunately, from my position in the audience, I was unable to observe her at work and so cannot comment on her skill with the stick or the quality of guidance she gave to singers. Balance was very well judged. That the MD had prepared them with care was quite evident. However, examination of the score that I was given reveals plenty of instruction about pace and manner of singing but little indication about volume. There was, from time to time, a tendency to force volume amongst these young voices which, if they are to avoid damage to their vocal chords, *must* be discouraged. Do not allow them to follow the currently fashionable yelling with the tone spread that so badly poisons the music and ruins their voices. Do keep on emphasising that it is the feeling that underlies the song that matters, not loudness.

PRODUCTION

The book and score of your production is labelled 'School Edition' However, unlike some other 'school' editions, very few cuts or alterations from the original have been made, the result being lengthy and demanding. To confront such a challenge was both courageous and risky. The amount of dedication and skill necessary is fully appreciated.

The director had to be sure not only of the society's full support in staging the show but that she had the talent amongst these young players. Casting had to be as accurate as possible and therein lies one aspect of the production that has given me much to reflect upon. The role of Valjean is fairly straightforward in that, after the change in him when he is forgiven by the bishop and decides to live worthily, his path is irrevocably set. Henceforward his life becomes one of goodness and love, faithful to the end – ideal for the hero of a musical. With Janvier, it is different. As a man of the law, he believes it to be his duty to pursue and recapture Valjean so that he faces righteous retribution and punishment. But when their confrontation reaches a critical point, he comes to think his lawful course is immoral. Such is his inner conflict, that he finds it impossible to live with. I am persuaded that, despite most musicals, including this one, being about love in various guises, at the heart of this story is the moral dilemma – which appears to make the casting of Janvert of equal importance with that of Valjean.

The opening, and subsequent scenes immediately established the poverty and deprivation, as well as the misery of imprisonment, of the world we were about to enter. We were introduced to the principal characters of Valjean and Javert and their conflicting views and experiences. Scenes with Valjean's theft and his encounter with the Bishop swiftly followed, the Bishop's surprising magnanimity surprising Valjean into disgust and a resolve to live a better life. Events unrolled fluently and timing was good.

Years pass, and a scene that reveals a different Valjean is introduced by a chorus of the poor. While grouping and postures were expressive, a much more dejected start to the number is possible before it rose to cries of despair later. Fantine appears and we learned about her child before she was sacked. Her big number *I Dreamed a Dream* followed so thoughtfully, beautifully sung and entirely true in note and feeling.

confusion that he finds intolerable. During it he must attract our reluctant sympathy and our understanding that, underneath, he is an honourable man. This important moment was underplayed and the suicide that followed was ineffective. Here, the director experienced a failure of invention when she needed to come up with something sensational.

The café scene is difficult because the audience is still caught up in the drama and it is hard to make the wedding scene other than schmaltzy. One supposes the originators to have been over-anxious to meet audience expectations. However, the epilogue was played comfortably with Valjean seeing visions of his loved ones before his final prayer. The show concluded with an upturn in the shape of a reprise of *Do You Hear The People?*

No-one but a person capable of, and comfortable with, rigorously counting every bar of music could possibly direct this show. One shudders to think what a dog's breakfast it could otherwise have been! This society must have appreciated their immense good fortune in securing the services of Ms. Klein on this occasion. Her concept was in harmony with period and location, her grouping was purposeful, her artistic eye enabled her to create constantly changing, interesting pictures and her management of timing was absolutely excellent.

THE CAST

VALJEAN

Has an attractive light baritone to which he was able to add a harder edge upon occasion. His solo numbers were coloured by affection and hope but, above all, sincerity. We totally believed in him. He had the natural warmth necessary for this heroic leading role and the creativity to convey character. If he played it a little too old, one understands the complexities that arise when a young man has to play a middle-aged person. Excellent.

JAVERT

Although he played with anger, righteousness and an air of danger, his characterisation needed a steely, unrelenting centre. Every step, every move should be deliberate until the moment when he loses confidence and his movements, reflecting his state of mind, can become faltering. Thus he could make the most of contrast. Physically able, he sang with confidence and excellent diction.

FANTINE

We recognised the despair at the heart of this performance. Her singing was thoughtful and lyrical but she mustn't hang around just under the note. Strike it plumb in the centre. Her 'Dreamed' number was best when at its most tender. She played sickness and death convincingly sympathetically.

COSETTE

As a young child she was waif-like and she blossomed from love of Valjean into love of her Marius. Her part in *A Heart Full of Love* was engagingly fervent. Gracefully light-footed.

PRESENTATION

Backed by a drop painted as grey buildings, the primary objects onstage were three huge structures that were ramshackle frameworks composed of broken furniture, ladders and a hundred other objects nailed together, looking like ghostly pyramids of refuse. They certainly suggested the back slums of Paris while, at the same time offering, for the action, a great variety of levels. Eventually, they became the rough barricades thrown together to exclude the opposing military. These constructions could hardly have been bettered because they not only looked the part and served the action, they were so *atmospheric*. They featured as strongly as any character. Mr Thompson and his cohort are very warmly congratulated upon décor that added so much to the success of this production.

In other scenes, we saw a garden, an inn and several other minor locations – all created and removed in a few seconds. (*for stage management, see below*)

LIGHTING

Was equally atmospheric. The general level of light was much reduced but because it was so thoughtfully and judiciously directed, all that should be seen, *was* seen. Colours were subtle while the use of shafts and patterns of light enhanced locations. This kind of radically suppressed, skilful, creative lighting is rarely seen on the amateur stage.

Lights in the building were also noticed.

SOUND AND EFFECTS

Mr Hartland was not to be outclassed by Mr Harrington, either! His impeccable pickup appeared to be faultless while relay was beautifully judged. Gunshots and explosions were perfectly timed.

COSTUME

Probably because of the expense of uniforms and props, the programme informed us that many costumes were made by Miss Black & Co. She managed a very smart trick by keeping them largely subdued, except in the brothel scene. As a result they never distracted. The look was mainly soiled and worn. Excellent.

MAKE UP

Except in the gaudy brothel scene, most faces looked natural. Valjean was slightly overwhelmed in whiskers. He looked too old initially when he could still have been in his thirties. He ought to have aged gradually. It might have been better to keep Javert clean-shaven by way of contrast. Wounds were convincing as was the dirt.

STAGE MANAGEMENT

Deserves special commendation, not because of swiftness and efficiency, splendid though it was. But because of the meticulous planning that lay behind it.

ORCHESTRA

Miss James had assembled a group of skilled musicians to play this demanding score. Timing it must have been difficult but not only were they well together, they were

EPONINE

Gave one of the most affecting performances in the show. Her demeanour was completely controlled, her body still but expressive. The emotion was full of feeling but never over-hyped so that her grip on the audience held. She played a certain rawness yet touched us with her hopeless love. This was a highly intelligent, classy performance.

THENARDIER

Created a rough, bullying rogue, a concept that he could have enlarged and developed much further. We like our baddies to relish their wickedness. The coarsely roughened tone was appropriate as was the piratical hair style. He played with enthusiasm.

Mme, THENARDIER

Was a vicious dyed-in-the-wool, tyrannical villainess with ambitions of grandeur. She was rough, uncouth and most obviously mendacious. Vocally and physically attacking and personally sly.

MARIUS

As a character, he conveyed extreme shyness and humility especially when approaching Cosette and when grateful to Valjean. He could have expressed his ardent love with more passion. A light and musical voice used naturally.

OTHER PARTS

Led by a notable Gavroche who looked compelling and played with authority, in company with Enjolras, an enthusiastic student leader, the students dominated whole scenes of action with immense discipline. Joined by the most disconsolate, dejected poor they conveyed resolute determination. A blousy, noisy contrast was created by sailors and their women. Soloists contributed promptly and in the right style. This ensemble was exemplary in its close teamwork.

EFFORT, ORIGINALITY AND ATTAINMENT

In choosing this most testing show the group showed courage and confidence. Their effort was obvious and their success was of a high order.