

Staging: Having only seen this production performed on a revolving stage, I was intrigued as to how it would be staged by BMYP. The barricade itself was a superb piece of design and engineering which was manoeuvred seemingly effortlessly by a highly accomplished stage crew and used with confidence by the cast. Only once did it have a little hitch, which was quickly sorted and I must give high praise to the hapless revolutionary, who hung suspended upside down, until the problem was sorted! A very clever transformation to the bridge for Javert's suicide. The scene changes flowed quickly and quietly, with the characters setting much themselves and the stage crew in costume, so the illusion wasn't shattered, as happens in many productions. The inset scenery was all of a very high standard, giving us just enough of an idea as to where the action was taking place. I particularly liked the beautiful gates to Valjean's house, the simple but oh, so effective court room with the tricolour 'bench', but all the scenery was superb. There seemed to be a little problem in getting the entire chorus off at times, but I know that the Redgrave theatre has next to nothing in wing space, so this was understandable. Be careful of billowing blacks on entrances and exits as people push them to one side.

Lighting and Sound: This aspect of the show was exceptional. Such a difficult balance between the atmospheric requirements that are demanded by this dark story and enough lighting to allow the audience to see everything as it happens. Beautiful use of colour (particularly the red/white/blue lighting behind the barricade) throughout, and wonderful use of spots and effects especially the gobos, lanterns and flashing lights for the rifle fire etc, greatly enhanced this performance. The only small glitch (and I really am nit picking here!), was that Monsieur and Madame Thenardier weren't particularly well lit in their wonderful 'Master Of The House'. They were quite well back on stage and this may have had something to do with it, but I didn't feel that these marvellous characters were prominent enough in that particular song. Generally though, it was obvious that a huge amount of thought and artistic talent had been employed in the lighting schedule. Sound was very well balanced and cues were spot on time, particularly the gunfire etc. There seemed to be a problem with little Cosette's mike for 'Castle On A Cloud' which was a shame, as we could hardly hear her, but I think this was the only 'gremlin' in the whole show, which is quite an achievement, especially in this theatre!

Music: The wonderful score was played expertly and sympathetically by a very accomplished orchestra, led extremely well by Kerrie. 'Les Mis' has a notoriously difficult score and is, in essence, an opera, so for a youth group, must have been a huge challenge. Absolutely everyone rose to that challenge and I have great admiration for everyone concerned, knowing how much commitment and rehearsal this show must have taken. To pick out highlights would be to list the whole show, so I won't do that. I will say though that all the soloists and ensembles put their hearts and souls into the music, showing immense understanding of their roles and the actual storyline of the piece. For such a young group, this was an outstanding achievement that deserves the highest commendation.

Choreography: From 'Lovely Ladies', through the superb use of the barricades, the delightful 'Wedding Chorale' to the iconic march in 'Do You Hear', every detail of movement and dance had been planned and executed with precision and artistry. The fights were believable and there was excellent business being conducted throughout, behind the main action. Good use of freezes, which were generally well held. I didn't like the movement during Eponine's death scene, it was a shame that we saw Gavroche so clearly jump up after his 'death' and I did wonder why poor Fantine have to be on the floor to sing 'I Dreamed A Dream', a difficult song at the best of times, but to sing it whilst sitting, had to add even more pressure! That said, it was sung beautifully! Imaginative grouping of all the characters and chorus gave ever changing interest and atmosphere. The show moved at a great pace and was never allowed to slacken, which added to the tensions and dramas as they unfolded, and gave the poignant moments much more impact and meaning. Superb!

Costumes: Costumes had been well resourced and were entirely in keeping with the period and the characters. The Thenardiers were wonderful and all the costumes added to the characters and the atmosphere of the show, with the cast appearing confident and comfortable in them. Uniforms and suits etc, were excellent. Some characters were a little too clean, but I'm sure that by the Saturday performances, this would have been naturally remedied! Wigs were worn with confidence and looked natural.

Properties: A huge task for this show, but again, everything had been well resourced and gave authenticity and realism to the show, with the cast using the properties confidently.

Individual Performances:

Jean Valjean: A particularly mature and consistent performance, showing complete understanding and sympathy with the character. Excellent vocals and acting ability, you 'aged' without making a caricature of the process and 'lived' through a very emotional experience.

Javert: A perfect foil for Valjean with good stage presence and vocals. You also had a good interpretation of the complexity of the character and showed us both sides of the character.

Fantine: Pure, clear vocals and impressive spirit came through in your performance. Beautiful rendition of 'Dream' and powerful death scene.

Monsieur & Madame Thenardier: Wonderful characterisations and comic timing in these two horrendous characters. You worked well individually and as a duo, obviously relishing the roles.

Eponine: With superb vocals (a very spirited 'On My Own') you conveyed the hopelessness of unrequited love and gave real pathos to your character.

Enjolras: Sincere and spirited, your performance was believable and powerful.

Marius: Another complex character that you managed to capture perfectly, with good vocals and stage presence.

Cossette: A compelling performance, with genuine emotion and excellent vocals.

Young Cossette and Young Eponine: Excellent performances from these young actresses in a production that must have been very difficult for them to understand.

Gavroche: A very spirited and charismatic portrayal that was a joy to watch.

Bishop, Bamatbois, Grantaire, Feuilly, Courfeyrac, Joly and Combeferre:

All these young actors gave their all in their roles, giving us a real sense of comradeship and commitment to their cause. Excellent vocals and acting ability from each and every one.

Chorus: An exceptional chorus that had obviously worked long and hard on their individual characters and the set pieces. 'At The End Of The Day' and 'Lovely Ladies' being particularly dramatic and accomplished numbers, though all their appearances were animated and convincing.

It was difficult to realise that all the actors in this memorable production were so young, as it was a particularly mature and compelling production. The teamwork was obvious and the understanding of the complex characters and storyline was most impressive. The spontaneous standing ovation from the entire audience as the curtain went down was well justified and I am sure that I was not the only one to leave the theatre, feeling really choked with emotion!

A superb production which will live in my memory for a long time. Thank you so much for inviting me and for the wonderful hospitality of the Front Of House staff.

**Sharon Wood
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