

## Arts center stages 'Les Mis' in all its grandeur

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Good and evil, redemption, society, morality, religion, war, politics, justice and love are just some of the themes presented in the towering production, "Les Miserables," now on stage at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina.



"Les Miserables" is a high-style, musically appealing work, ambitious and grandly scaled. This "Les Mis," thanks to everyone involved, has it all.

Expertly performed and vibrantly acted, the familiar "Les Miserables" is forceful and loaded with new ideas designed for our audience, our cast, our stage and theater. The "Les Mis" of your memory is in place with all of its grandeur and intertwining of historic incidents and characters -- but this work truly is original.

Directed and choreographed by the iconic Casey Colgan, this is, after all, the real deal. Colgan has seen to the critical details of this musically sophisticated work, and everybody gets it. With particular attention to theatrical implications, along with a focus on purposeful, spare sets and dramatic back lighting, this production comes together to offer us the full opportunity of examining the depth of the storyline as well as each of the complex characters.

The production is about the storytelling, but in this case, is propelled by the music, almost throughout. So, with original music by Claude-Michel Schonberg and lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer and musical direction, here, by our own Frederick Willard, there is a kind of lyrical motif, a well-tuned musical dialogue that brings "Les Mis" to amazing life in the most immediate way.

The book "Les Miserables," on which this piece is based, was written in 1862 by Victor Hugo, and throughout its 1,200 pages, it dealt with the shifting details of French history. All of this is magically set forth in the most fulfilling way, and it registers with the audience. Towering performances from the entire cast are consistent throughout. The lead actors and ensemble members are stop-you-in-your-tracks phenomenal. Psychologically stated and understated, as appropriate, each performer in his or her role probes the depths of their many layered characters.

We in the audience all paid close attention as we realized we were part of something truly important that night. We witnessed the scenes before us that powerfully portrayed cultural, political moments as a red flag was unfurled against a gray, stage-filling barricade; or during intimate moments, dramatically and sensitively expressed between families, children and lovers.

The music you remember so clearly is not only beautiful but pitch-perfectly performed. The big pieces, such as "Castle On A Cloud," "Hear the People Sing" and "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables," are offered with shimmering beauty. But watch out, too, for the completely show-stopping "Master of the House." (Remember on "Seinfeld" all of those years ago when George could not get the melody out of his head?) Also, anticipate "I Dreamed a Dream," given the most unusual buzz recently because of Susan Boyle, a 47-year-old participant who auditioned with the song on "Britain's Got Talent."

Colgan saw to assembling the most appealing cast, well balanced with talent, enthusiasm and experience. Many are New York performers, but several live on Hilton Head Island or close by. Apparently, more than 800 hopefuls auditioned for a place in the 36-member cast.

Heading the cast in the most kind of existential role is Jason Kraack, who as Jean Valjean is focused on seeking redemption and re-creating his life. He acted and sang magnificently -- what a voice. Then, dealing with the other side in a most impressive way is Doug Jabara, as the unrelenting police officer Javert. The two, and their relationship, form so much of what blends "Les Miserables" together. Throughout the course of the piece, we are mesmerized as we watch their characters transform and ultimately redirect.

Fantine, played sympathetically by Meegan Midkiff, adds dimension as Cosette's mother, as we follow her tragic life. And the adult Cosette, played by Caroline Kobylarz, is astonishingly lovely

Offering equally outstanding performances about honor and relationships are Sam Underwood as Marius and Lindsay Van Winkle as the self-sacrificing Eponine. What striking performances they offer as they heroically handle their meaningful participation in the story.

The two Thenardiers are spot-on, too. As the scurrilous inn keepers with only themselves in mind, Christopher Vettel as Thenardier and Meghan Colleen Moroney as Madame Thenardier will charm in spite of themselves.

Two very young performers bring emotional focus to the performance. The two Hilton Head residents are incredibly polished and have such presence. Whitaker Gannon as Gavroche is perfect as the young boy (though a young girl), while Delaney Yurko as the young Cosette is so convincing, looking every bit like the logo face we associate with all of the productions of "Les Miserables."

The backstage staff -- the set designer, Bob Phillips; the costume designer, Jennifer P. Correll; the lighting designer, Terry Cermak; the sound designer, Bryan Rothrock; the stage manager, Ginger M. James, with assistance by Sarah A. Pantke -- help make this amazing production soar.

**'Les Mis' on Hilton Head Island**

*Les Miserables* runs through May 24 at the Elizabeth Wallace Theater at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina. Performances are at 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Sunday shows are at 2 p.m. Sunday, May 10, 17 and 24 and 7 p.m. May 24.

Details: 843-842-2787.