



Les Misérables



UK, 2012, 158 MINUTES, COLOUR

Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, Anne Hathaway, Amanda Seyfried, Sacha Baron Cohen, Helena Bonham Carter, Eddie Redmayne, Aaron Tveit, Samantha Barks. Director: Tom Hooper

For over twenty five years, (French opening, 1980, London, 1985) theatre audiences around the world have been profoundly moved by Victor Hugo's classic story, by the book and music of Alain Boublil (lyricist) and Claude-Michel Schönberg (composer). The wonderful English lyrics were written by Herbert Kretzmer whose fine work is not acknowledged enough.

There has been a DVD of the 25th anniversary performance. Wisely, the writers and director have decided to honour the theatre experience rather than 'opening up' the musical to a 'realistic' presentation.

This means that the audience who have seen the stage version will continue to remember and re-experience what they enjoyed. It is over to the power of the plot, the music and the performances to win over those who may have seen versions of the Hugo novel (1930s with Fredric March and Charles Laughton, 1950s with Michael Rennie and Robert Newton, 1990s with Liam Neeson and Geoffrey Rush) and those who have not. It may be a hard sell for those not used to this kind of musical theatre on screen. It is very long (157 minutes). It is basically sung. The locations (galleys, French mountains, town, Paris, the barricades and sewers) are real but stylized.

That the film adds to the theatre experience is the decision to film most of the songs in close-up,

something audiences cannot do in theatres except with theatre glasses. We realise this early in the film with the well-known song, sung by Fantine, I dreamed a dream. The camera stays close on Anne Hathaway's face throughout the whole song, drawing the audience to see her, hear her, feel with her and to do this intensely. It is a powerful experience.

The same method is used for songs by Jean Valjean, Inspector Javert, Cosette, Marius and Eponyne.

While there are close-ups of the Thenardiers at the inn and in Paris, the Thenardiers offer the only comic relief in this long saga of the miserable and the suffering. With Helena Bonham Carter, again looking bonkers as in so many of her films – just as well she portrayed the Queen Mother which reassures us she can do normal – and Sacha Baron Cohen bringing his satiric style to try to steal the show, there is a lot of singing, thieving, cooking and hypocritical lying to contrast with the somber story.

No complaints about the acting. Hugh Jackman is a wonderful presence as Jean Valjean, ranging through many emotions as he survives almost twenty years after his servitude in the galleys. Russell Crowe looks the part as Javert. Amanda Seyfried is Cosette and Eddie Redmayne is surprisingly strong as Marius. The drama of the film is communicated powerfully. The singing? It was all recorded in performance rather than pre-recording for lip-synch during filming which

offers more authenticity than in most films. Hugh Jackman is very good, though his tone and range are best suited to his successes on stage in Oklahoma, Beauty and the Beast. Others who have sung Jean Valjean have had a more operatic range that suits such songs as 'God, on high'. Colm Wilkinson, who plays the Bishop here, sang Jean Valjean for the tenth anniversary concert and has the ideal voice for the role. Russell Crowe's singing does seem forced at times and his singing voice is not the purest or clearest. The others are impressive, especially Anne Hathaway, as well as Eddie Redmayne and, particularly, Anthea Barks very moving as Eponine. Tom Hooper has directed after his Oscar-winning work for The King's Speech.

Jean Valjean is one of literature's great Everyman characters, living through humiliation for a meagre crime, bitter but redeemed by the kindness of the Bishop, able to do good for people, even when he is hounded by the legal rigidity of Javert. He learns to forgive, not hate. His joy is in Cosette as his daughter. This is powerfully seen when, as Javert says, he gives him his freedom but, in fact, has killed him and his reliance on the law for controlling his life.

Les Misérables has been popular with religious groups. With the film drawing us to the close-ups, we listen attentively to the lyrics, the language of grace, God and heaven, "to love another person is to see the face of God".

Fr Peter Malone MSC

Peter is a former president of SIGNIS - the World Catholic Association for Communication. He's a highly experienced film critic and author who has travelled the world watching, writing on and talking about movies. Since 1968, he's written reviews for a number of Catholic magazines and periodicals. He has also written many books on cinema including Films and Values, Movie Christs and Antichrists, Cinema Down Under and the excellent Lights, Camera, Faith (Movie Lectionary) series.