



"Les Miserables"

By Alain Boubllil and

Claude-Michel Schönberg

Based on the Novel by Victor Hugo

Music by Claude-Michel Schönberg

French Lyrics by Alain Boubllil

English Lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer

Directed and Choreographed by Kevin Archambault

Musical Direction by Matthew Woolever

Produced by Diana Di Grandi

Up in One Productions

Through Aug. 17

Fri. & Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m.

The Center for Performing Arts in Rhinebeck, 661 Rte. 308, Rhinebeck

Tickets \$27 general

\$25 seniors/children

(845) 876-3080

www.centerforperformingarts.org

In the theatre world there are certain roles and certain plays that have become the stuff of legend. Theatre people approach them with reverence and consider playing those roles or staging those shows with more than a little trepidation. The bar for success is very high and failure leaves an impression of ego having overcome judgment. "Hamlet" and "King Lear" come to mind, both as shows and as roles. There's "A Streetcar Named Desire," "Death of a Salesman" and half a dozen or more others we might name. In the world of musical theatre there are very few today; but "Les Miserables," better known simply as "Les Mis," stands nearly alone for magnificent music and unforgettable characters playing out their roles against a backdrop of history that resembles more a whirlwind than a simple look at a collection of lives.

With this in mind one visits a community theatre staging it or any of these shows with concern. Will it work? Can they do it?

If one didn't know better one would have to conclude that the Up in One production of "Les Miserables" could not possibly be community theatre and it can't be taking place in what looks like a barn on the road out of Rhinebeck. Logic would argue that it must be a complete road or touring production of Broadway professionals with their orchestra, sets, directors and choreographers being dropped out of the sky into Rhinebeck for a couple of weeks. This production is that good.

We almost never spend time in a review talking about the producer. In this case, Ms. Di Grandi, who has brought dozens of wonderful musicals to this stage, has simply outdone herself. Her courage in taking on this show and her wisdom in putting it into the hands of Kevin Archambault to direct and choreograph leaves valley theatre-goers even deeper in her debt.

We've often written with admiration of the talents of director/choreographer Kevin Archambault. One assumes he and Ms. DiGrandi collaborated in developing a shared vision for this creation and then poured their souls into making that vision a reality.

Musical director Matthew Woolever had the other difficult part of turning this vision into a reality. Schönberg's music is difficult and mastering it takes talent and a lot of hard work. Woolever and his musicians deliver the goods.

In order to make a show work at this level one needs more than vision. One needs actors/singers and one needs lots of them. Getting two or three in any community is not that horribly difficult. Getting more than that takes some good luck. "Les Mis" must need at least a dozen very competent actors, who can also sing at an impressive level. That's still not enough. To

C'est magnifique!

Up In One's 'Les Miserables' takes community theatre to a new level

have a top production also requires a number of others and the ensemble. This production of "Les Mis" lists 39 performers in the cast. That doesn't include musicians, just folks on the stage.

Victor Hugo's novel is massive. A recent edition runs 1,432 pages so there is more there than can be quickly related. The story of "Les Miserables" at its simplest is the hounding through the years of the hero, Jean Valjean, by the nasty and obsessed policeman, Inspector Javert. At its depths it's the story of Valjean's redemption by the actions of the Bishop of Digne and his life-long penance looking after the downtrodden and lovingly raising a child, Cosette. Cosette is the daughter of an ill-treated mother, Fantine, who dies in Valjean's arms. The real story, though, is the struggle between good and evil within the souls of individual men and women.

Let's move on to the details of the production.

The sets and the costumes are amazing. Lobsang Comacho has costumed the show to perfection. Most memorable is the appearance of Thom Webb's character, the sleazy Thenardier. The rest are as nearly as good. What, though, was that medal on Javert's chest?

The sets are extraordinary for such an intimate theater. Most impressive is the barricade for the insurrection scenes in the second half of the show. Taking advantage of The Center's temporary turntable on the stage, it works elegantly and offers the opportunity for dramatic visual surprises from time to time.

Overall, the staging rates a resounding "Wow!" The famous scene in the Thenardiers' tavern that accompanies the singing of "Master of the House" is as raucous as we have ever seen and it works like a charm. So do the scenes on the barricades. All are production numbers that are choreographed to perfection.

Though there are 39 performers, there are some particularly memorable roles.

The Valjean character is the center of the epic. Frank McGinnis is physically a lot slighter of build than we usually associate with Jean Valjean but his performance is superb. His first song, called simply "Soliloquy," sets the tone for the entire show. McGinnis' singing approaches flawless. Our only suggestion to improve the role would be to gray his hair a bit more near the end instead of having him bent over to signify his aging. Valjean is a powerful man up to his death since he's still strong enough to carry Marius home from the barricades through the sewers.

Joshuah Patriarcho, who seems born to take on bad guy roles, is Inspector Javert. He spends his life trying to find Valjean to take him back to prison. His singing is powerful and his acting just right.

Eponine is the self-sacrificing daughter of the Thenardiers, who loves Marius so much that she helps him reach the woman he loves with all his heart, Cosette. Cheyenne See is Eponine to perfection with a powerful voice and acting talents to match. Her death scene, one of many moving ones in the production, likely brought a tear to more than one eye.

Thom Webb and Lisa Lynds are perfectly cast as M. et Mme. Thenardier, part-time Inn Keepers and full-time unsavory human beings. They lend a high energy level to every scene they share. We're not sure we've seen Webb any better than he is here. In a weaker cast Webb and Lynds could have stolen the show. Instead they add a perfect counterpoint to the depth and emotion of the main story line. Kudos to the director for balancing their contributions so well.

Marius, the love interest of Cosette, is marvelously done by Zack Marshall.



From left: Richard Prouse portrays the Bishop and Frank McGinnis is Jean Valjean in Up In One's production of "Les Miserables" at The Center in Rhinebeck. Photo by Joanne Contreni

We've watched him now through several shows. He gets better every time and is maturing into a most impressive tenor with acting skills to match. We'd have preferred "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables" without the ghosts but it is still one of the many memorable songs and scenes of the evening, and Marshall's performance with it doesn't let us down.

We don't often see Richard Prouse on that side of the footlights. In his other life he's a world-class Broadway set designer and painter. In the role of the Bishop of Digne he displays acting and singing skills of consequence.

We are running out of space and still have performances in need of mention. Gavroche is played by Maddox Skigen. He's only eight years old? Somebody's got to be kidding. He not only sings and dances well but he does it with a foreign accent.

Cosette is a role the writers didn't develop quite as far as some others but Pamela Edmonds delivers a pitch-perfect performance with it.

Last, but hardly least, is Morgan Dean's portrayal of Fantine, Cosette's mother and, later on, sort of the angel of death. Her song, "I Dreamed a Dream," is central to the story and Ms. Dean gives it to us with an almost haunting wistfulness.

We can only beg the indulgence of the rest of the cast for not mentioning them by name. There isn't a weak spot to be found anywhere.

Where does that leave us? Up In One's production of "Les Miserables" has taken local community theatre to a new level.

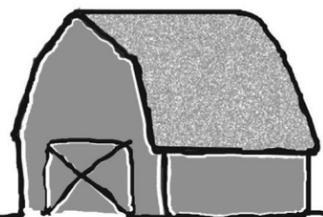
Broadway has the Tonys and Off-Broadway the Obies. If we could create a Hudson Valley Theatre award to match them we might call it the "Henry," which would be short for the "Henry Hudson." Were that to happen in 2014 then leading the nominations for Best Director of a Musical for this season would go to Kevin Archambault for "Les Mis" and leading the nominations for the Henry for "Best Musical" of the Season would be . . .yup, "Les Mis."

The original ran on Broadway for 16 years and 6,680 performances. This one only runs a couple of weeks. Order tickets now before they're gone. This production is very special.

Jim Donick is an award-winning automotive writer who dabbles from time to time in other topics, including theater and travel. He is the editor of Vintage Sports Car magazine and contributes to a number of publications.

Milan

Eat Fresh. Buy Local.



Milan Farmers Market

Fridays 3-7pm

May 23 - September 26

Milan Town Hall Rte 199

Ample Parking Rain or Shine

Red Hook



Red Hook Village Farmers Market

Saturdays 10am-2pm

May 24 - October 25

Red Hook Village Municipal Parking Lot

Farmers Markets