



BY STUART DUNCAN
NEWJERSEYNEWSROOM.COM
N.J. THEATER REVIEW

It has taken the international hit "Les Misérables" a quarter century to find its way to Paper Mill, but boy was it worth the wait! The show, opening a long tour in celebration of its 25th Anniversary, already has been extended an extra week (until Dec. 30,) already has sold out for much of the run and has a company that can easily match any production you may have seen.

And this production has been "tweaked that at times it seems quite new. A simple example: in the original opening in the UK in 1985 (or on Broadway two years later) the scene was in prison with Valjean; now it is on a slave ship with him serving his 19-year sentence for stealing a loaf of bread for his starving nephew. The Victor Hugo plot takes over from there; he is still pursued by the obsessed inspector Javert. Valjean continues to try to do the right thing, even though it may cause him grave consequences.

The one thing that makes this a strong production is the balance between the leading roles. Composer Claude-Michel Schonberg and lyricist Herbert Kretzmer have fashioned a modern opera that might permit a number of the cast to steal scenes if not careful, or entire sections of the complex story (which, after all, was a novel at its start.) Here directors Laurence Connor and James Powell have kept sensitive control. Lawrence Clayton, as Valjean, has auditioned for the role several times previously, the first time fifteen years ago. He has a stunning voice, easily handling his opening soliloquy, and then, two hours later, bringing the theater to tears with "Bring Him Home."

Andrew Varela, who plays Javert, is not unknown to Paper Mill audiences. His most recent appearance was in "Pirates," and has played Valjean both on Broadway and on the national tour. Clearly that has given him an insight into the role of the show's villain: Javert believes the Law is above God and thinking thus, he has lost his humanity.

Another pair of veterans (though not at Paper Mill) play Thénardier and his wife, who run a bawdy house, celebrated boisterously in "Master of the House." Michael Kostroff and Shawna Hamic rolic through the roles they have had their eyes on for years. In fact, Ms. Hamic apparently promised her mother 22 years ago that some day she would play the role (and called her in triumph when Paper Mill offered her the contract.)

Many others contribute heartily to the success of the show: Betsy Morgan, as Fantine, who, of course, gets to sing "I Dreamed A Dream"; Justine Scott Brown, as Marius; Chasten Harmon, as Éponine (who becomes an audience favorite with "On My Own.") Peter White conducts an orchestra of 15 that sounds like twice than number.

A new adaptation it might be, but it has remained faithful to Hugo and his stated mantra: "To love another person is to see the face of God."

"Les Miserables" will continue at Paper Mill Playhouse, Brookside Drive, Millburn Through Dec. 30. Please call the theater at (973) 376-4343 for information, reservation or performance times.

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