Les Misérables Review

By Lee Kane
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Producing a school musical is a big undertaking. Producing one of the most beloved, iconic, and theatrically demanding musicals is an undertaking of gargantuan proportions.

Yet that is what Cheryl Brown (Director), alongside Heather Montgomery (Musical Director), has done, bringing Les Misérables once more to the Dalriada School stage. And, *Mon Dieu*, have they done it well!

Set in 19th century France, Les Mis follows the story of Prisoner 24601, Jean Valjean, and his decades running from the law after breaking his parole. Always looking over his shoulder, ruthlessly pursued by Javert, a prison guard solely focused on upholding the rule of law.

Much of the success of a production of Les Misérables hinges on the performances in these two roles.

Edward Smith masterfully portrayed the many, often conflicted, sides of Valjean. He demonstrated exceptional skill in finding depth to the character, especially his fragility, that many overlook. Over the course of three hours, we watched him grow, Smith able to make subtle shifts in his characterisation to show Valjean's journey; from defiant prisoner, to confident Mayor, and finally to the tenderness of his last hours. His vocal ability was evident throughout, but it was his take on 'Bring Him Home' that broke me. Truly brilliant.

Always menacing in the background was Javert, played by Zach McIlhagga. His command of the stage, embodying that essential looming presence, even when not in the action, was remarkable. McIlhagga effortlessly peeled back the layers of Javert, and his inner struggle when facing his own demise. Not to mention his skill in falling to his death without doing himself (or an unsuspecting member of the stage crew) any damage!

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Perhaps the most challenging role in the show is that of Fantine. And not just because her number is '*I Dreamed a Dream'*. It has been done well (and not so well) many times, by such a range of artists. Often no way in keeping with the story it conveys. (Sorry, Susan Boyle.)

Lucy Parkhill had no such difficulties in the part. From the moment she stepped on stage, hidden in a chorus of factory workers, she demanded attention. Throughout she was committed fully to her role, drawing us into her story, right until the last curtain. In her performance of Fantine's signature number, Parkhill perfectly captured the heartbreak, but eternal longing, of her past, and her dedication to her daughter from afar.

That sense of longing was carried through in the role of Éponine, played outstandingly by Olivia Ogle. I was so impressed by Ogle's ability to place herself in the scene; always there, but always just slightly out of it. In the shadows, where Éponine lives. Her rendition of '*On My Own*' was astounding. It was raw with emotion, heartbreakingly captivating, yet expertly controlled. I apologise to those seated around me for my very audible 'wow' as it ended.

Éponine's unrequited love was made all the more aching by the blossoming affection between Marius (Andrew Beggs) and Cosette (Rhianna McGraw). The chemistry between the two was palpable, right from their first encounter on the rue Plumet. McGraw's portrayal of Cosette's sweetness and innocence reflected beautifully onto Beggs, and stood in stark contrast to the bloodshed and destruction around them. In Marius, Beggs found the more sensitive, with his performance peppered with deeply touching moments of love displayed towards Cosette, Éponine, Valjean, and his revolutionary comrades, especially Enjorlas.

Isaac Dunn shone as Enjorlas, a role too easily forgotten in other productions I have seen. He was in command, leading his volunteers to war, and to certain death. Yet in this, Dunn showed his empathy and care for his men, always through strength. The choreography of the final battle was outstanding, with pinpoint precision of the whole gang of revolutionaries, including Xander de Cock, Zach Dunn, Andrew Radcliffe, Noah Kelly, Erika Taggart and Matthew Woodrow.

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A special mention to de Cock (Grantaire) whose ability to drape that red flag in the exact spot it needed to be, while stood atop a 2-meter high barricade, with his back to the audience, and at the same time being killed by a gunshot to the heart, is nothing short of brilliant.

With so much misery (it's not called Les Misérables for nothing), the audience yearns for some comic relief. Thankfully it came in gallons.

Who are Andrew Warke (Thénardier) and Rachel Wilkinson (Madam Thénardier)? My goodness, these are two of the finest comic performances I have ever seen on the Dalriada stage. Warke's presence is astonishing. When he walked on stage, it was like he screamed 'look at me' and you couldn't take your eyes off him. And then Wilkinson appeared, and the battle begun. Vocally and physically they sparred their way through '*Master of the House*', each pushing the other to raise, and raise again, their performance, until I thought the roof was going to blow right off.

Yet both switched so seamlessly to the darker sides of their characters. For Warke, his spat with Éponine outside Valjean's house exposed his ruthlessness, temporarily dropping the façade of *bon-viveur*. As for Wilkinson, her treatment of young Cosette (Ella Mack) was chilling, made all the more so by Mack's haunting rendition of '*Castle on a Cloud'*.

Mack's performance, alongside those of James Sneddon as the street urchin Gavroche, and Grace Ogle as young Éponine, showed a glimpse of the future talent waiting in the wings for years to come.

The principal cast was ably complimented by a massive ensemble of supporting actors. The wall of sound coming from the stage in the big company numbers was overwhelming- we really could hear the people sing. Extraordinarily well.

Their performances were accompanied by a strong band, under the musical direction of Heather Montgomery. Make no mistake, Les Misérables is no easy score. There's no point

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trying to do it if you don't have the musicians to pull it off. To not only pull it off, but to do so to such a high calibre, is a testament to the talent and dedication in the department.

Lighting is rarely used to such great effect as it was here. The mood of '*Empty Chairs at Empty Tables*' was brought to another level by the clever use of backlighting, creating two worlds – the living and the beyond. A beautiful moment of theatre.

The whole production was elevated by wonderful costumes, and creative hair and make-up design. Everyone on stage looked the part, and both worked well in creating the mood of the piece.

Set design was both simple yet elaborate. Small moments in the apron contrasted with the sprawling bridge and barricades in the full set, beautifully marked against the starlight back curtain.

Cheryl Brown has once again shown what a school musical can be. And, once again shown what a Dalriada School musical is.

The school has a long tradition of finding and nurturing talent, and providing a platform for that talent of the young people to shine. The arts- theatre and music- has always been the crown jewel of Dalriada. And I, for one, am delighted to see it gleaming so brightly that not even Monsieur Thénardier would dare to pinch it.