

British Theatre Guide

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Les Misérables

Based on the novel by Victor Hugo; music by Claude-Michel Schönberg, lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer, original French text by Alain Boublil & Jean-Marc Natel

Palace Theatre, Manchester

19 January–13 February 2010

Cameron Mackintosh's revamped touring production of possibly the most successful musical production of all time, a tale of moral ambiguity and dealing with the consequences of one's actions, hits Manchester's Palace Theatre at the start of the new year for the first of two visits to Manchester this year.

The original Cameron Mackintosh production, directed by Trevor Nunn, of Victor Hugo's huge novel set around the student uprisings of nineteenth century France was adapted for the stage by French pop song writers Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg and has now been running in theatres around the world for a quarter of a century. The familiar production has been completely reworked by new directors Laurence Connor – who directed the touring version of Boublil and Schönberg's *Miss Saigon* – and James Powell into a version that could tour without having to rebuild every theatre it visits.

While some producers would simply cut back on elements that are difficult or expensive to tour with and present a stripped down version of the West End show, Mackintosh and his directors have gone back to the drawing board to create something both familiar and altogether different from the well-known blockbuster that many of us have seen before. Gone are the famous revolve and the creaky, troublesome barriers that now seem very 80s and technologically outdated, but little touches like the famous marching on the spot waving the red flag at the end of act one and the bright white glow when anyone dies are retained. The new set is far from basic, however, with lots of very large pieces of scenery coming on and off and one of the best uses of projected scenery I have ever seen. The projected titles for scenes have gone, but there is a nice wink to a cinematic convention when the title of the show is projected at the end of the prologue as we go into the main plot.

Many of the scenes now feel much more intimate in this production, helped by some lovely little subtleties that are rarely seen amongst the often broad and generalised acting styles of the blockbuster musical, and scenes like Fantine's death and the death of Eponine – as the others on the barricades gradually notice her and stop to watch – are considerably more emotional and real as a result.

A top-rate cast has been assembled for the production that would be (and mostly have been) perfectly at home on the West End or Broadway stage with very strong performances all round from the major roles to the one-line parts. John Owen-Jones gives a beautifully-nuanced performance as Jean Valjean, the central character who is both a criminal on the run and a great humanitarian, and ages totally convincingly and subtly as the show goes on. His nemesis Inspector Javert, who has such black-and-white view of morality that he cannot deal with the criminal Valjean saving his life, is played very effectively as an awkward, military-type by Earl Carpenter. Also

awkward is the character of Marius, played by Gareth Gates as a rather 'nerdy' and bookish youth, which actually works very well. Ashley Artus is devious, nasty and also very funny as innkeeper and criminal Thérnadier with superb support from Lynn Wilmot as his wife. The child parts are shared as always, but the young Gavroche on press night was absolutely superb.

The new set design by Matt Kinley has been inspired by paintings of the author Victor Hugo, which have an astonishing range from Constable-style pastoral scenes through stormy, impressionistic or Turner-esque backdrops to more expressionistic designs which seem to prefigure artistic movements from after Hugo's death. These are reflected through the set and the costume designs of Andreanne Neofitou, but they are used to stunning effect in the projected backdrops that fit seamlessly with the scenery and the action with some subtle animated effects, but later they are animated more obviously, making the scenes in the sewers feel like a roller-coaster ride.

On the downside, the fights are not at all convincing and the sound in the first number was very muddy but fortunately got better quite quickly. But maybe that's just being picky.

Frankly, Mackintosh could have toured this show with a cutdown version of the original set and a young, inexperienced cast and sold it out. Instead he has spent a lot of money on creating a whole new production that could easily grace the West End stage and taken it on the road. As the Palace's sister theatre the Opera House hosts *Britain's Got Talent*, at the other end of Manchester's city centre, Mackintosh shows us that popular entertainment with wide appeal can still have high artistic ideals, pose serious moral questions and pack a huge emotional punch. There was not a 'bum on seat' in the house during the bows as the whole audience rose and cheered even before the lead actors came on on press night.

Running until 13th February

Reviewer: [David Chadderton](#)