

Les Misérables
Westcliff High School for Boys
Wednesday March 20th 2024

I fell out of love with the West End run of *Les Misérables* last year. I had only seen it four times (barely approaching the thirteenth visit Mr Jeffrey writes about in his wonderful programme note for the production I have just witnessed). The first review at the Barbican in 1985 called it “The Glums”, but it proved its critics wrong when it followed Trevor Nunn’s success with his epic *Nicholas Nickleby* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. It was Cameron Mackintosh who had persuaded him to take it on, and some Angels to back it who might have been surprised at their staggering return on the investment after those first editions damned it.

By 2016 *Les Misérables* had grossed £5.6 Billion worldwide according to the *Financial Times*. And by now I was wondering what my guiding-star Bertolt Brecht might have thought of it? His principle of an epic theatre distanced through what he called the *Verfremdungseffekt*, protecting against an audience over-indulging their sentimental side, identifying too closely with the tragedy of the actions while forgetting the point was as Marx had reminded us, “not to interpret the world, but to change it”. The ‘poor little brush girl’ Cosette had narrow shoulders to bear that amount of profit, and as audiences left the theatre night after night, through the doorway of the Queens Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue (renamed the Sondheim), they would commonly have to navigate a gilded portal in which the homeless of London were left to sleep at night.

As we dragged ourselves away from the barricades, the sound of a song sung for ‘angry men’ still ringing in our ears, tears still brimming in our eyes, it took a brave-soul, hand outstretched, down on their luck, to ask us departing revolutionaries if we could spare “10p for a meal?”. And by the time after the Pandemic when the homeless had been ‘brought in off the streets’, they were being pressure-hosed away from the Strand doorways at Coutts and beyond, just down the road, I was beginning to wonder how the spectacle of the musical fitted into this blighted landscape called Theatreland anymore. As the homeless returned sodden to the West End I started to wonder what relevance this play might have in the 21st century? I mean the one we all, actually live in, some sheltered, some not?

Not least of all when Victor Hugo’s extraordinary early version of environmental politics, in his novel of the same name *Les Misérables*, were made relevant again by a group of Extinction Rebellion protestors who ‘invaded’ the stage and waved their own red flag, to bring the plush curtain down early on the first half, singing their own song of the ‘angry men’ and women in front of us. The calls from the audience towards the protestors on the stage: “You nasty people!”, surely referred to the protestors’ interruption of a cherished and possibly very expensive day out for those who had brought their families to witness this beautiful show. It could not have been for their principles: to ask us to consider what contribution we (and the theatre) might be making to the swiftening end of the world. Could it?

And despite my qualms, however badly we audiences behave, *it is*, beautiful that is. But *Les Misérables* like all theatre waits for re-discovery by each generation who might make the most of its phenomenal melodies and stirring lyrics from the Boublil and Schönberg classic. No more, no less than plays with names like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*. Surely all theatre is equal, it couldn’t be right for some theatre to be more equal than any other theatre? Victor Hugo would have corrected us on that, and those communards behind the barriers would have insisted on such equalities, surely that’s what we are cheering along. Anyway theatre is, in my view, always as perfect as it can be, depending on what is available to it at one time or place. I have never

thought it the role of a critic to undermine the efforts of those who make things, those who work to dance, to sing, to speak in such a way as to be heard, and understood? To entertain, or even teach us something? As Brecht had hoped.

In this instance the production that took place at Westcliff High School for Boys on the evening of Wednesday 20th March 2024 was beautifully sung, it was so precisely rendered as to make me look and listen again to words I thought I knew quite well enough. The ones I had fallen out of love with. Of course, it helps when Monsieur Thenardier's mum is sitting right behind you in the second row. When the Master and Mistress of the House bring the house down with their superb, sly rendition of that famous, show-stopping song, we could feel the love that was coming from behind us, willing them on. That's the marvellous dividend of school plays, the audience cares, because that's their day job with these young people, to keep them going to get to this point where in a challenging year of study they have the surplus to give to something so astonishingly resistant to the fatigue of the school term coming to its end. And we were too, showing our love, because no one wants a school play to fail, and this one never looked likely to be anything less than a 'success', by anyone's measure.

I knew from that old 'master of the house' the Maths-come-Drama teacher Jeffrey Winslow, who had directed so many great productions in this very hall through the 1960s and 1970s that the house style was simply: 'be excellent', 'be committed at all costs', 'be collaborative', 'be articulate', 'be yourself while being someone else'. All that was now on show in the sure hands of Mr Jeffreys, and the touching, demonstrative and just glorious scoring and conducting of Mr Wood. There are benefits to a front row seat, and one of them is being close to two percussionists, one on kit, the other on timpani who, literally, know and mouth the words of this long libretto to themselves, as they follow each fiendishly difficult tempo change.

Any naming of names, as we always note, leaves out others of equal note. When Fantine sings there is just such a still-centre of song to the room; when Young Cosette looks out there was that 'mountain' that Robert Walser always said a child brought to the stage with their demanding presence; and when you realise this is the twentieth school production appearance from Jacob Guylar (as Jean Valjean), you wonder how they have turned up to your own small talk that afternoon for the Sixth Form, sat in the front row and committed themselves to the ideas and others in the room. What a performance this was, a limpid voice covering the full range of this impossible rôle, the strength of a wrestler able to convince you the cart they lift from the stricken body is indeed deadly, and a lingering bow at the end which turns towards the exit from the stage as though to bid farewell to a place that he has made his own over his time at this remarkable school.

Curtain calls can tell you a lot about a play. But in *Les Misérables* less so, as the creators have arranged for everyone to reprise their best work irrespective of whether they are still alive, or long dead. As the cast congregate, working their way through the night's best numbers but rearranged as rousing finales, you are left with the feeling that the revolution will indeed keep turning. That the cycle of love and violence and love again of history will somehow survive, and maybe even win out. And if it doesn't doesn't, win out that is, there will be some lovely tunes to hum in the bad old days until the next time there is hope on the horizon. And then there are us, the audience, that 'community of a kind' as Richard Yates described us in *Revolutionary Road*, now as one offering a standing ovation for everything that had gone before, and would come again the next night for those fortunate ones with a ticket.

It was my first return to this school hall since I left the stage as Azdak, the drunken judge, at the end of our production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* in 1974. In his stage direction Bertolt

Brecht had asked whoever played this part (with as many words as Jean Valjean but mercifully fewer songs) “to disappear from the stage without notice”. Being an extrovert, trying to save my place at the school after a run of poor examination results, I had found this almost impossible to achieve. I paused at the side of the stage, on the last night, knowing that I would not be back, on this stage, nor indeed at this school. I really hadn’t meant to leave it half a century to return, but absence (and the hospitality of the Headmaster and the Community Development Assistant Jemima Clarke) have made my heart grow fonder. For the school yes, and *Les Misérables* of course, that thanks to this fine production, I have learnt to love again. Merci! Bravo!

Alan Read

alan.read@kcl.ac.uk

Alan Read is a writer and Professor of Theatre at King’s College London where he is Director of the Performance Foundation. He is the author of: *Theatre & Everyday Life* (1993), *Theatre, Intimacy & Engagement* (2007), *Theatre in the Expanded Field* (2014), *Theatre & Law* (2016) and *The Dark Theatre* (2020). He was introduced to theatre by Jeffrey Winslow when at Westcliff High between 1968 and 1975.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Read_\(writer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Read_(writer))