



Here is Kino Ken's review of the LES MISERABLES (THE WRETCHES) 2012 DVD, one of the LVCA's January, 2014 donations to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania.

United Kingdom / France / Australia / Singapore 2012 color 158 minutes live action feature musical drama Universal Pictures / Relativity Media / Working Title Films / Cameron Mackintosh Productions
Producers: Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner, Deborah Hayward, Cameron Mackintosh, Bernard Bellew, Raphael Benoliel, Francesca Budd, Thomas Schonberg

15 of a possible 20 points

**** of a possible *****

Key: *indicates outstanding performance or technical achievement

(j) indicates a juvenile performer

Points

- 2 Direction: Tom Hooper*
 - 2 Editing: Chris Dickens*, Melanie Oliver*, Emily Greenwood*
 - 1 Cinematography: Danny Cohen, Martin Foley (2nd Unit DP), James Swanson (Aerial DP)
 - 0 Lighting: Paul McGeachan
 - 2 Screenplay: William Nicholson*, Alain Boubil*, Claude-Michel Schonberg*, Herbert Kretzmer*
from the novel by Victor Hugo*
 - 2 Music : Claude-Michel Schonberg*, Anne Dudley* and James Fenton*
 - 2 Production Design / Art Direction: Eve Stewart* / Grant Armstrong (Supervising Art Director)*,
Gary Jopling*, Hannah Mosely, Su Whitaker*
 - 2 Sound: Stefan Henrix*, Lee Walpole*, John Warhurst*, Keith Partridge*, Simon Hayes*,
Simon Hill*, Johnathan Rush*, Luis Fernandez Garcia*, Craig Berkey*, Samir Foco*,
Dominic Gribbs*, Nick Gillett*, Sue Harding*, Billy Mahoney*, Kevin Penney*, John Simpson*,
Nigel Stone*, Jason Swanscott*, Tim White*, Andy Nelson*, Mark Paterson*, Frederick Cuevas*,
Stuart Hilliker*, Reagan Mendoza*, Andrew Stirk*
 - 2 Acting
 - 0 Creativity
- 15 total points

Cast: Hugh Jackman (Jean Valjean), Russell Crowe (Inspector Javert), Anne Hathaway*(Fantine),

Amanda Seyfried (Adult Cosette), Sacha Baron Cohen (Thenardier), Helena Bonham Carter (Thenardieress), Eddie Redmayne (Marius), Aaron Tveit (Enjolras), Samantha Barks* (Eponine Thenardier), Daniel Huttleston (j)* (Gavroche Thenardier, brother to Eponine), Colm Wilkinson (Bishop of Digne), Georgie Glen (Madame Baptistine), Stephen Tate (Fauchelevent), Michael Jibson (Foreman), Bertie Carvel (Bamatabois), Tim Downie (Brevet), Andrew Havill (Cochepaille), Dick Ward (Bamatabois' valet), Nicola Sloane (Hair Crone), Daniel Evans (Pimp), Adrian Scarborough (Toothman), Julia Worsley (Head Whore), Keith Dunphy (Client), Ashley Artus (Pawn Broker), John Surnam (Organ Grinder), David Cann (Magistrate), James Simmons (Champmathieu), Polly Kemp (Nursing Sister), Ian Pirie (Babet), Adam Pearce (Brujon), Julian Bleach (Claquesous), Marc Pickering (Montparnasse), Isabelle Allen (j)* (Young Cosette), Natalya Angel Wallace (j) (Young Eponine Thenardier), Patrick Godfrey (Gillenormand), Richard Cordery (Duc de Raguse), Killian Donnelly (Combeferre), Fra Fee (Courfeyrac), Gabriel Vick (Feuilly), George Blagden (Grantaire), Hugh Skinner (Joly), Stuart Neal (Lesgles), Alistair Brammer (Prouvaire), Iwan Lewis (Bahorel), Katy Secombe (Madame Huchloup), Michael Sarne (Father Mabouf), others

This 2012 film version of the smash West End and Broadway musical is an unexpected treat, transferring satisfyingly from stage to screen with both story and music essentially intact. Director Tom Hooper of *THE KING'S SPEECH* fame wisely elects to preserve drama at the sacrifice of some phrasing and tonal beauty in the singing. In this instance, lyrics are equal in significance to music, if not even more essential. So Hooper's choice was inspired.

LES MISERABLES is essentially a Christian parable about crime and redemption. It is suffused with religious symbols and pious clergy, both surrounded by a secular mass of atheists, blasphemers, authoritarian government officials both petty and imposing, street smart riffraff, beggars, orphans, pickpockets, whores, amoral opportunists, drunks, idealistic students, apolitical tradesmen, arrogant aristocrats, and marginally secure servants trying to survive on niggardly wages.

Neither the French Revolution nor its succeeding Napoleonic Republic improved living conditions significantly for a majority of the French people. Hugo knew this well, himself having ascended the social ladder from lower middle class to comfortably bourgeois during his lengthy life. In the character of Jean Valjean, he created a surrogate hero whose rise to wealth after encountering a charitable bishop parallels his own. Similarly, the exemplary character of Cosette is fashioned after one of Hugo's daughters, a young girl who by mischance drowned at the age of eight. Not coincidentally, eight-year-old Cosette is rescued from the potentially fatal grasp of Monsieur and Madame Thenardier in a pivotal scene of the book, one in which Valjean for the first time experiences both the thrill and pain of adult responsibility for a dependent child's welfare.

In the film, Valjean is initially encountered helping to tow a capsized naval vessel into drydock for repairs, a fiction not to be found anywhere in the source novel. At this point, he is a common criminal, imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread in 1795 to assuage the hunger of his older sister's children. The latter incident is recounted in Chapter 6 of Book 2 in the novel. Javert, onlooker of the drydock incident, does not appear until Chapter 5 of Book 4. The actual book by Hugo opens with fourteen chapters devoted to Monsieur Bienvenu, eventual Bishop of Digne, a man who first encounters Jean Valjean in Chapter 3 of Book 2.

Details cited in the above paragraph serve to indicate the jumbled chronology and imaginative additions which make Hooper's film more a severely abridged variation on Hugo's masterpiece than a faithful reproduction. Given abundance of contemplative and historical chapters in the novel, filmmakers must create images of their own to connect consecutive actions separated by dozens, or even hundreds, of printed pages. To keep a coherent story onscreen during that process is a formidable undertaking. Add musical interludes and the complexity of storyline juggling grows exponentially. Revelations of character must be embedded in song lyrics, occasionally by means of somewhat awkward half-spoken, half sung confessional monologues. Fragments of plot are communicated through dreams and oral readings of letters. With very few dialogue bridges, *LES MISERABLES* depends overwhelmingly on music cues and décor to generate atmosphere and momentum. It's an editorial challenge of the highest order, one met successfully in this case by the trio of Chris Dickens, Melanie Oliver and Emily Greenwood. Their craftsmanship insures a tight unity for a story whose print meanderings are legendary. Grand leaps over chasms of time and space are accepted unquestionably by viewers immersed in tribulations of eminently sympathetic characters. Their fictional misfortunes appear not only recognizable, but also still relevant. Economic injustice, abuse of power, the consolation of religion, political blindness, and social ostracism are just as operative today as two centuries ago.

So, too, is pursuit of the elusive goal of personal liberty. Enjolras, Gavroche and Eponine pay for this acquisition with their lives, despite residing in a nation theoretically enjoying peace and orderliness. Are we of the enlightened twenty-first century prepared to do likewise in order to assure a more perfect world?

Speaking of liberty, Jean Valjean is eventually freed from galley imprisonment in the fall of 1815. Making his way to Digne, he finds little assistance, with rejections from innkeepers and potential employers preventing acquisition of food and lodging in most villages. Small children mock and stone him, taking their cue from surly parents and scornful officials. Directed one evening by a devout parishioner to the dwelling of Monsieur Bienvenu, Valjean returns the generosity extended him there by stealing his host's silverware, intending to sell it eventually for dining funds. In this film version, it is the Bishop's disinclination to press charges against Jean after police apprehension for episcopal theft and an accompanying homily about employing the silver to transform into a virtuous man that ends the downward spiral of Valjean's life. However, in the novel, Valjean leaves Digne with his loot, wanders along a rural road in troubled meditation, then meets a twelve-year-old Savoyard boy named Petit Gervais. This boy is occupied in foolishly flipping coins into the air, one of which escapes the back of his hand and rolls towards ex-convict Jean, who promptly proceeds to crush it under his foot. Despite repeated urgings from the youth, the surly tramp refuses to relinquish his captured forty-sous piece. At last, Gervais retreats, bemoaning loss of his money. Valjean is left at sunset still famished, but possessed of yet another stolen item. He's repeating the cycle which landed him in prison. That knowledge, coupled with a futile belated attempt to return the coin to its rightful owner, is the catalyst setting the story's hero at last on the road to repentance. For now he has committed a crime for which direct restitution is impossible. It is this wretchedly acquired small change that redirects his life, not the preachments of the bishop.

This incident is followed by a geographic jump to the municipality of M --- sur ---M, where a stranger arrives late in 1815 with a notion of replacing gum-lac with resin and eliminating a costly soldering process used in local manufacture of black glass baubles. His idea proves highly cost-effective.

Coincidentally, at dusk on the day of arrival, this same journeyman saves the lives of two children from the family of the municipal captain of gendarmes. A grateful father forgets to inquire for the benefactor's passport, relieved his children were not consumed by a conflagration. Over the course of the next three years, this heroic journeyman becomes a tycoon and philanthropist. His glass factory, once built, employs both men and women in separate workhouse facilities. Two years later, prospering citizens demand he be appointed Mayor. Curiously, Monsieur Madeleine, as he is called, has an invariable habit of making donations to every little Savoyard who enters town in search of chimneys to sweep.

Chance leads to the appointment of fearsome Inspector Javert, formerly a guard of galleys at Toulon, as head of gendarmes at M --- sur ---M. He spots an old acquaintance, now no longer clothed in criminal garb, and is reinforced in his suspicion when Valjean displays prodigious strength in lifting a cart from the pinned body of its elderly peasant owner, one Fauchelevent.

About this same time, an unwed mother by the name of Fantine returns to her old home town of M -- - sur ---m, where she applies for work at the mayor's workshop for females and gets hired, fortunately. She desperately needs cash to pay off mounting bills from the Thenardier innkeepers in Montfermeil. This treacherous duo she's unwisely selected as guardians of her daughter. The child's actual father, Felix Tholomyes, disappears after a one-night tryst. Much changed by poverty and abandonment, receiving no response to letters posted to the errant dad, Fantine hopes to avert financial distress by steady diligence at work. But a relentless busybody gossip establishes to the satisfaction of the mayor's foreman that Fantine has a fatherless child dwelling with caretakers near Paris. Thus apprised, he quickly sacks the sinful woman, who subsequently drops from seamstress for soldiers, to tubercular mistress of an impoverished musician, and finally to common prostitute. It is while pursuing this later employment that she is arrested for attacking a repulsively possessive client. Valjean happens to be nearby, intervenes over the protests of arresting officer Javert, and takes the accused to a hospital as compensation for his company's dismissive treatment, the details of which a vindictive Fantine has been only too willing to communicate to him.

Fantine dies there from disease. A case of mistaken identity forces Monsieur the Mayor to disclose his true name to authorities. Under pledged deathbed obligation to pry Cosette from the manipulative Thenardiers, Valjean dodges Javert and travels with private funds to Montfermeil where, on Christmas Eve, he buys the freedom of Fantine's beloved child. The two homeless wanderers withdraw to Paris, where the elder prevails upon a transplanted Fauchelevent to supply haven at a convent. There, Valjean serves as assistant gardener to his benefactor. Cosette's introduced to supervising nuns as his daughter. They prove willing to employ her "father," who gratefully permits the girl to be educated at their school.

Time passes. The Thenardier family, which now includes gamin Gavroche, moves to Paris, where they supplement their income with burglaries.

One of a group of fervid collegiate reformers, Marius, repeatedly spots an old gentleman and accompanying young girl while promenading in the vicinity of the Luxembourg Gardens. He develops a friendly interest in the elder and a bias against his companion's chattering frivolity. The latter prejudice is eventually replaced by fascination as the girl matures into a beautiful young lady whose charms captivate him.

Another of the Thenardiers, independent spirit Eponine, becomes similarly infatuated with neighbor Marius. To further complicate the tale, Javert is reposted to Paris, where he continues to hunt for the elusive Valjean.

As young men across the city prepare for violent social change, intertwined paths of Thenardiers, Valjean, Javert, Cosette, Marius, and Enjolras's confederates will lead first to street barricades and then to the sewers of Paris. Once more, the past relentlessly snares the protagonist, impelling him to consider a final self-sacrifice. Will it be enough to insure freedom and happiness of the one human being he's determined to preserve from a life of undiluted misery?

In spite of losing a host of minor characters, including three additional juvenile Thenardiers, a buoyantly energetic screenplay keeps audiences vitally involved with this extremely labyrinthine plot. Period décor, camouflaging makeup and convincingly archaic costumes establish a lively mid-Victorian ambience, only partially sapped by the outrageous grimacings of Sacha Baron Cohen and Helena Bonham Carter, both intent on reinventing the profoundly evil taverner and his wife as simply conniving clowns. That is utterly at odds with Hugo's work. His Thenardier is not above stooping to rob deceased soldiers of their jewelry on the battlefield of Waterloo. Nor is the Thenardieress of the novel any more virtuous. Her greatest pride seems to consist in the moral degradation of her children, who are instructed to lie, cheat, steal, spy, and decoy. Madame Thenardier, as portrayed by the author, is a monster masquerading in human likeness.

A pronounced weakness in the film is its reliance on grandiose special visual effects, as if to downplay verbal accomplishment. Not only is this disrespectful of the source, but it also insults screener intelligence. LES MISERABLES ought not to be just another lavish costume spectacle. It merits more adult showcasing, with meticulous production design, such as Raymond Bernard offered in his epic length 1934 French sound version, and literate dialogue. The latter is highlighted by an exemplary Valjean characterization from Frederic March in Richard Boleslawski's 1935 American adaptation, marred only by screenplay omission of the pivotal episode with Petit Gervais.

Claude-Michel Schonberg's superior music is left intact by the producers, a wise decision. Only one song is added to familiar Broadway / West End tunes which, while necessitated by a bridging scene, lacks the melodic memorability of its counterparts. Acting singers trump singing actors in this production, appropriate for the medium of cinema.

Several performances are unforgettable. Most notably, the corporeal one by Anne Hathaway as Fantine, whose dynamically expansive rendition of "I Dreamed A Dream" serves as LES MISERABLES' showstopper. It's one of the most laceratingly poignant scenes in this century's cinema. Sadly, the director failed to resist an impulse to resurrect her ghost in later scenes, which pale into amorphous, sentimental slop beside the preceding powerhouse. Daniel Huddleston's freedom-fighting, brazenly crude, playful Gavroche is one of the two best embodiments of that urchin on film, comparable to the 1934 benchmark performance of Emile Genevois in Raymond Bernard's classic. Isabelle Allen, a real find as the youthful Cosette, is not quite as meekly wistful as Gaby Triquet in the 1934 film. But she more than makes up for that by definitively nailing "My Castle in the Clouds."

LES MISERABLES is one of the most richly entertaining and dramatically compelling films of 2012, replete with some of the finest show music created since the glory days of Richard Rodgers, Jerome Kern and Cole Porter. Highly recommended to teens aged 16 and up, as well as adults. A most welcome

addition to the Heritage United Methodist Church library. Caution: sexual content and street fighting make the motion picture unsuitable for younger teens and preadolescents.

The dvd includes five special features. One eleven minute featurette focusses on cast members of LES MISERABLES, with some notable insights into their backgrounds. Tom Hooper's audio commentary sheds welcome light on the process of converting an intricately plotted epic novel into a two and one-half hour musical. A third featurette, also lasting eleven minutes, supplies key background information about the original book and its author. There's also a brief featurette on the construction and filming of a counterfeit Paris. Subtitles are included, enriching the song performances.

Be sure to share this dvd with anyone old enough to appreciate its majestic melodies, historical sweep, and riveting drama.