Les Misérables: The Study Guide

Elizabeth & Joe LeVaca Present

LES MISÉRABLES

Music by Claude-Michel Schönberg / Lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer
Directed by Matt Joslyn / Musical Direction by Kristin Baltes

December 5 – January 10

Original French text by Alain Boublil and Jean-Marc Natel / Based on the novel by Victor Hugo
Sponsored by EFS / Gibson Theater / 123 East Water Street / 434.977.4177 / livearts.org
About the Show: The Minds Behind Les Mis

Victor Hugo (original novelist) was born in Besancon, France, on February 26, 1802. His father was a military officer who later served as a general under Napoleon. Victor Hugo trained as a lawyer and then began a literary career with his mother’s encouragement. He founded the Conservateur Litteraire, publishing poetry and the work of his friends. In 1821 Hugo’s mother passed away, and that same year he married Adele Foucher and published a book of poetry. Over the next decade Hugo published a novel, a number of plays, and other works in the genre of Romanticism.

In 1831 Notre-Dame de Paris (The Hunchback of Notre Dame) was published, which marked the beginning of Hugo’s political writing. Following the accidental drowning of his daughter and son-in-law in 1843, Hugo began writing privately rather than for publication, and in 1851 he fled to Brussels following a coup. One of the writings from this period was Les Misérables, which was an immediate success in Europe and the United States after its eventual publication in 1862.

Alain Boublil (Book and original French lyrics) is a musical theatre lyricist and librettist born in Tunisia. He immigrated to Paris at 18 and worked in publishing before writing lyrics. La Révolution Française was the first-ever staged French rock opera, and the first collaboration between him and Claude-Michel Schönberg. Les Misérables was their next, followed by Miss Saigon and Martin Guerre.

Claude-Michel Schönberg (Music/Book) is a French record producer, actor, singer, songwriter, and composer. Schönberg was born to Hungarian parents and wrote the musical score for La Révolution Française (1973), Les Misérables (1980 for Paris and 1985 for London) and later Miss Saigon in 1989. Since then Schönberg has also composed a ballet score for Wuthering Heights and then tackled the musical The Pirate Queen. In 2013 Schönberg was nominated for Best Original Song at both the 70th Golden Globe Awards and the 85th Academy Awards for the new song “Suddenly” featured in the 2012 film adaptation of Les Misérables.

Herbert Kretzmer (Lyrics) began a career in journalism in South Africa and moved to London pursuing a career as a lyricist and a newspaperman. He became the chief drama critic for the Daily Press and wrote for the Daily Mail through television criticism. Kretzmer wrote the book and lyrics to Our Man Crichton, a West End musical, in addition to lyrics for The Four Musketeers which ran at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. His work in writing lyrics for French star Charles Aznavour captured the attention of British Producer Cameron Mackintosh, who brought Kretzmer on board to write the an English version of Les Misérables which led to Tony and Grammy awards for Kretzmer.
Les Mis Productions

Original West End production
1985 – Nominated for 4 Olivier Awards
   Best New Musical
   Best Actor in a musical – Colm Wilkinson
   Best Actor in a musical – Alun Armstrong
   Best Actress in a musical – Patti Lupone (Won)
2012 – Selected for Audience Award for Most Popular Show
2014 – Selected for Audience Award for Most Popular Show

Original Broadway Production
1987 – Nominated for 12 Tony Awards
   Best Musical (Won)
   Best Book of a Musical – Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg (Won)
   Best Original Score – Claude-Michel Schonberg and Herbert Kretzmer (Won)
   Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical – Colm Wilkinson
   Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical – Terrence Mann
   Best Performance by a Featured Actor in a Musical – Michael Macguire (Won)
   Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical – Judy Kuhn
   Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical – Frances Rufelle (Won)
   Best Direction of a Musical – Trevor Nunn and John Caird (Won)
   Best Scenic Design – John Napier
   Best Costume Design – Andreane Neofitou
   Best Lighting Design – David Hersey (Won)
1987 – Nominated for 7 Drama Desk Awards
   Outstanding Musical (Won)
   Outstanding Actor in a Musical – Colm Wilkinson
   Outstanding Featured Actor in a Musical – Michael Maguire (Won)
   Outstanding Featured Actress in a Musical – Judy Kuhn
   Outstanding Music – Claude-Michel Schonberg (Won)
   Outstanding Set Design – John Napier

2014 Broadway Revival
2014 – Nominated for 3 Tony Awards
   Best Revival of a Musical
   Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Musical – Ramin Karimloo
   Best Sound Design of a Musical – Mike Potter
Jean Valjean is a man of about 45 years of age who’s been imprisoned for 19 years because he stole a loaf of bread and tried to run from the police. Officer Javert tells Valjean he will be released on parole and Valjean gets excited until he realizes no one wants to hire him to work since he’s been marked as a criminal. He meets a kind Bishop and tries to steal silverware from him, but is caught on the run. The Bishop says it’s no big deal and gives Valjean more silver to start his life anew, and then is never seen again.

Fast-forward about eight years, and Valjean has used the silver to establish a new identity as a wealthy factory owner and the mayor of a town. Fantine gets sacked from working at his factory because she has an illegitimate child, and she then turns to prostitution for money. More bad luck as she encounters an abusive customer, gets in a fight, and Javert comes to ruin the day and arrest her. Luckily Valjean comes to save the day and brings Fantine to the hospital, where she becomes delirious from illness and dies right after Valjean promises to save her daughter Cosette. Death toll: 1. Javert arrives to arrest Valjean after discovering his true identity, but after a heated confrontation Valjean gets away to save Cosette from the Thénardiers, who we discover are really awful people.

Nine years later Paris government is crazy, people are poor, and we meet several supporting characters that we’ll become really attached to. The Thénardiers are up to their usual tricks, and their daughter Éponine also takes part in their schemes. A student named Marius has a brief encounter with a now-teenaged Cosette, and falls deeply in love with her. Cliché love-at-first-sight subplot: check. He gets Éponine to take him to Cosette’s home, and, after Thénardier tries to ruin the day Éponine saves the day. Unfortunately for Marius, Valjean becomes paranoid and takes off with Cosette. Meanwhile, the students prepare for the 1832 Paris Uprising.

The students build a barricade, and Javert disguises himself as a rebel and volunteer spy. Éponine comes by dressed as a boy to participate in the fight, and Marius sends her to deliver a farewell letter to Cosette, thereby breaking Éponine’s heart because she loves him. Battle ensues, Éponine gets shot and dies. Death toll: 2. Valjean comes to the barricade and successfully helps out the students, and is then invited to execute Javert after the students discover his betrayal. Shocking turn of events: Valjean sets Javert free!

The next day the students are still alone and no one else in Paris is fighting. Gavroche, a boy who’s been helping out, tries to get ammunition for the students but gets shot in the process. Death toll: 3. Rebels refuse to surrender to the army, and then the battle escalates and everyone except Valjean and Marius die. Death toll: high. Valjean runs into Javert while carrying an unconscious Marius on his back and convinces Javert to let them pass. Javert, shaken in his beliefs, throws himself off a bridge. Death toll: high + 1.

People mourn the students, and Valjean leaves after confessing to Marius that he is an escaped convict. Cosette and Marius marry; Valjean grows old and awaits death. Cosette and Marius arrive to see Valjean in his last moment, and then he dies. Fin!
Themes of the Story

Compassion

Probably the most genuine moment of compassion in this musical is when the Bishop of Digne offers temporary shelter to Jean Valjean after he’s released from prison. Even after Valjean attempts to steal silver from his home, the Bishop covers for Valjean, prevents him from being taken to jail, and even gives him silver candlesticks to help him start a new life.

In response to experiencing this compassion, Valjean begins to “pay it forward” and models his actions on the Bishop’s. For example, Valjean becomes the mayor of a town and he keeps its businesses running, providing many jobs to the factory workers. After his unintentional wrongdoing to Fantine he helps bring her to a hospital and offers to protect her daughter, Cosette.

Justice

On one side of the spectrum the Bishop considers Valjean’s predicament following his time in jail, and lack of money, food, and shelter because he cannot find work, and, thinking about how Valjean is not given a fair chance by other people, the Bishop takes a chance and helps him out.

On the other side, Inspector Javert is on a mission to arrest Valjean, an escaped convict, because he views the law as the ultimate justice system, and wants to serve it faithfully. Javert cannot show mercy or break any rule, which demonstrates an overwhelming amount of rigidity in the way he lives his life. But does this make Javert the “bad guy,” or is that our perception because the story designates him Valjean’s foil and antagonist?

Poverty

Poverty is a major aspect of Les Misérables. Poverty is the reason Jean Valjean steals the bread that eventually leads to his imprisonment. Poverty (and desperation) leads Fantine to prostitution and her eventual illness. A lot of poverty is seen in “At the End of the Day” when the ensemble sings about the life they experience – their struggle to survive hunger, illness, and their environment.

The lines: “And you’re lucky to be in a job and in a bed!” show how even these seemingly basic things were prized by the people of this time. Later in the musical we hear the beggars of Paris singing:

“Look down, and see the beggars at your feet;
Look down and show some mercy if you can.”

Gavroche then adds:

“Here in the slums of Saint Michele
We live on crumbs of humble piety.”

The issues of poverty affect all kinds of people and all kinds of families, as reflected by Victor Hugo in his novel; obviously poverty is still an ever-present worldwide problem.

Sacrifice
Valjean sacrifices his early life when he chooses to steal the loaf of bread for his family. He can also be said to have sacrificed his future when he decides to confess his identity in court; and, in a different sense, when commits to caring for Cosette.

Revolution
- A sudden overthrow and thorough replacement of an established government.

During “Look Down” we hear the beggars singing about the issues of poverty, specifically with the lines:

When’s it gonna end?
When we gonna live?
Something’s gotta happen now or
Something’s gonna give...
It’ll come, it’ll come, it’ll come
It’ll come, it’ll come

They anticipate an improvement in conditions post-revolution. The ABC students express their concerns about how the lower-class is neglected by the wealthy, and this social injustice is one stepping stone on the path to rebellion.
A Sense of History

History of the June Rebellion

A common misperception of Les Mis is that the rebellion that occurs in the story is part of the French Revolution, but it is in fact part of the June Rebellion of 1832, which took place afterwards. Succeeding Napoleon was Charles X, a member of the royal Bourbon family, put in place by Austria-Hungary in hopes of avoiding another revolution. The French were displeased by this extremely conservative ruler who took over due to heredity, so they got rid of him in 1830 during the July Revolution and replaced him with Louis-Philippe I. Because he wasn’t elected people wanted him out, but the problem overall was that only the richest bourgeoisie citizens could make their voices heard through the vote.

Eventually members of a republican group, the Societe des Amis du Peuple, surfaced as a student-led group that believed in conspiracy and careful planning to fight successfully (aka the ABC students in the show!). Also during this time Paris was going through a cholera epidemic, and the poorer neighborhoods suffered because the government was poisoning the wells. Cholera soon took the life of General Jean Lamarque, a popular hero, becoming the catalyst for events that followed.

At Lamarque’s funeral the revolt began and insurgents made barricades on the sides of the Seine, but problems arose because not enough marchers were prepared to fight and fewer were willing to battle. In the end the June rebellion didn’t accomplish anything nor did it really threaten the ruling regime. Later events, such as the July Rebellion and 1848 Rebellion had success, but the June Rebellion continues to be studied because it was largely student-led.

Prostitution in 19th Century Paris

While it may be impossible to estimate the number of prostitutes who walked the streets in Paris in the 19th century, it is known that registered prostitutes often were victims of assault, rape, and murder. Members of the Gendarmerie Royale kept some records of prostitution, which focused on the arrest of prostitutes. Brothels were prosecuted for petty criminal acts such as noise complaints, and many prostitutes were interrogated for “contravention.” Venereal diseases were often a reason to arrest prostitutes, possibly to prevent the spread of these diseases – although records also suggest that prostitutes would actually contract the
diseases from their clients. Contravention or “breaking the rules” applied to offenses committed by prostitutes. Vagrancy and theft also led to arrests, as well as some ambiguous “crimes against persons.”

Prostitution occurred out of many reasons – extreme poverty, loss of family members, or being brought to Paris and left behind without livelihood by soldiers, clerks or students. Registration was a relatively simple process and allowed prostitutes access to certain regulated areas and time periods that were blocked to unregistered prostitutes. Social stigma is doubtless what prevented more prostitutes from registering.

**Cholera Epidemic in Paris 1832 (the Illness)**

In March 1832, many Parisian citizens began to suffer from symptoms such as fever, chest pains, headaches, and apoplexy (bleeding within organs or loss of blood flow to an organ). Most of the afflicted died within a day or two, and a six-month period begun in which a cholera epidemic claimed many lives. Paris and its hospitals were flooded by sickly patients. A few records remain of the kinds of symptoms patients displayed; doctors were perplexed by how cholera could prove fatal quickly or over a more gradual period.

Precautions such as a hot bath infused with vinegar, salt, mustard, and lime tea were deemed to lower the severity of this epidemic. One positive impact of the epidemic was on urban planning. A new sewage system was in place by the early 1800s, with gutters placed to the side of the streets and improved drainage.

**Victor Hugo’s Perspective on Government and Revolution**

“What makes a riot? Nothing and everything. Electricity released a little at a time, a flame suddenly shooting out, a roving force, a momentary breath of wind. This breath of wind meets beings that think, brains that dream, souls that suffer, passions that burn, howling torments, and carries them away.”

“For a long time, I thought the Republic was only a political vehicle... I didn’t realize that it partook of that essential, absolute truth of which all principles are composed. The Republic is a principle. The Republic is a right. The Republic is the very embodiment of progress.”

“When dictatorship is a fact, revolution becomes a right”
What do these quotations of Victor Hugo’s on revolution and the Republic suggest about the meaning behind *Les Misérables* and its focus on the June Rebellion?

Additionally, consider this passage that Hugo quotes as a preface to his novel:

“So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation which, in the midst of civilization, artificially creates a hell on earth, and complicates with human fatality a destiny that is divine; so long as the three problems of the century – the degradation of man by the exploitation of his labor, the ruin of woman by starvation, and the atrophy of childhood by physical and spiritual night – are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a still broader point of view, so long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, there should be a need for books such as this.

- *Hauteville House, 1862*

Based on this preface, what would you deem to be Victor Hugo’s goals for his novel?
MONEY/CURRENCY

The basics of French currency:
1 franc = 1 livre = 100 centimes
1 sou = 1/20 of a franc = 5 centimes
Special coins:
1 écu = 5 francs = 100 sous
1 louis d’or or gold Napoléon = 20 francs

Rule of thumb for exchange rates of the time (relatively stable, since most countries were on the gold standard): one British pound sterling – 25 francs, one American Dollar = 5 francs, one Russian ruble = 4 francs (in Russian-occupied Poland, one zloty = 0.6 francs), one Prussian thaler = 3.75 francs.

A sense of history: In the early 19th century in France, gold coins were minted in denominations of 40 and 20 francs, and silver coins in denominations of 5 francs, 2 francs, 1 franc, ½ franc (50 centimes), ¼ franc (25 centimes), and sometimes 1/10 franc. Copper coins in denominations of 10, 5, and 1 centime were minted and continued to circulate through the early 19th century. In 1795 France had switched to decimal currency. 1 livre was generally interchangeable with 1 franc, although the equivalences were a little unsteady and the minting of the new coins didn’t get underway until 1796. Some of the old coins stayed in circulation, but over time they became rarer and rarer.

To put the currency in context of Les Mis, here are some examples of lines that provide what characters are paying or charging in the story:

“I’ll give you five” - Old Woman 1 buying the trinket, “this bagatelle” from Fantine; presumably she’s paying in francs.

“What pretty locks you’ve got there. What luck you’ve got, it’s worth a centime my dear” - Old Woman 2 who’s interested in Fantine’s hair. She then says, “Let’s make a price. I’ll give you all of ten francs”

“Ten rotten francs your mother sends me” – Madame Thénardier in reference to how much Fantine sends to the Thénardiers to take care of Cosette

“Ready to relieve them of a sou or two” – Thénardier in “The Innkeeper’s Song”

“No more words, here’s your price... fifteen hundred for your sacrifice” - Valjean, in getting Cosette from the Thénardier, pays them fifteen hundred francs.

To look at some conversions to modern day currency, (or 1992 France, at least), visit: http://chanvrerie.net/history/general/units-of-measure-en/
Adaptations

*Les Misérables* has been adapted in many different formats aside from the musical, including films and television series, anime and manga, and even staged plays. Wikipedia has a page solely dedicated to the purpose of listing the different adaptations. Here are a few fun facts about some of the various adaptations:

- There have been 7 Japanese film adaptations of *Les Mis*, with the very first being *Aa mujo* in 1910. Five of the later Japanese adaptations share the same title.

- While Japanese adaptations seem to be more noticeable, there have been other international adaptations of the story including Egyptian, Mexican, Soviet, Indian, Brazilian, Korean, and Vietnamese!

- There have been a few animated adaptations, including a Soviet Claymation short on Cosette, and 26 episode French TV series, and a 52-episode Japanese anime series called *Les Misérables: Shōjo Cosette*.

- A number of the Les Mis film adaptations are available on Netflix, if you’re interested in exploring the story further through other interpretations.

- A downloadable PC game called *ArmJoe* is a 2D fighting game that features characters from the story, including Valjean, Javert, Cosette and Marius.

- Indirect adaptations include spinoff books that focus on individual characters and their backstory before, during, and after the events of the original novel.
Because *Les Miserables* is more operetta than strict musical, the lyrics are crafted to reflect many of the inner thoughts of the characters, thoughts that are detailed extensively in the novel. An example is Valjean’s “Who Am I,” a 3-minute song that summarizes numerous chapters-worth of his inner thoughts about turning himself in versus letting a man named Champmathieu take the blame for Valjean’s crimes. The following passages take place in one of the chapters illustrating Valjean’s internal struggle:

“If this man has in fact stolen a few apples, that is a month in prison. There is a wide distance between that and years in chains. And who even knows? Has he committed a theft? ...The name Jean Valjean overpowers him and seems to dispense with proofs. Don’t prosecuting officers habitually act this way? They think he is a robber because they know he is a convict. At another moment the idea occurred to him that, if he should turn himself in, perhaps the heroism of his action, and his honest life for the past seven years, and what he had done for the region, would be considered, and he would be pardoned... He turned away from all illusion...if he let matters alone, if he stayed at Montreuil-sur-mer, his reputation, his good name, his good works, the veneration he commanded, his charity, his riches, his popularity, his virtue, would be tainted with a crime, and what pleasure would there be in all these holy things tied to that hideous thing? Whereas, if he carried out the sacrifice, in prison, with his chain, his iron collar, his green cap, his perpetual labor, his pitiless shame, they would be consecrated” (Hugo 228-9).

Consider this next passage where Valjean thinks of repercussions of turning himself in:

“Let’s see, let’s examine! I’m gone, taken away, forgotten; what will become of all this? I turn myself in? I’m arrested, this Champmathieu is released, I’m sent back to the chain gang; very well, and what then? What happens here? Ah! here, there is a district, a city, factories, a business, laborers, men, women, old grandfathers, children, poor people! I have created all this, I keep it all alive...I take myself away, it all dies – and this woman [Fantine] who has suffered so much, who is who is so virtuous in her catastrophe, whose misfortunes I have unconsciously caused! And that child I wanted to bring here, whom I have promised to the mother! Don’t I owe something to this woman too, in reparation for the wrong I have done her? If I should disappear, what happens? The mother dies. The child becomes whatever she may. This is what happens if I turn myself in” (230)

The passages above, along with sequential chapters, are recreated in the following lyrics:

He thinks that man is me.  
He knew him at a glance.  
That stranger he has found,  
This man could be my chance.  

Why should I save his hide?  
Why should I right this wrong?  
When I have come so far and struggled for so long?
If I speak I am condemned.
If I stay silent, I am damned.
I am the master of hundreds of workers they all look to me.
Can I abandon them?
How would they live if I am not free?
If I speak I am condemned.
If I stay silent I am damned.

Who am I?
Can I condemn this man to slavery?
Pretend I do not see his agony?
This innocent who bears my face who goes to judgment in my place?
Who am I?
Can I conceal myself forevermore?
Pretend I’m not the man I was before?

Must my name until I die be no more than an alibi? Must I lie?
How can I face my fellow men?
How can I ever face myself again?
My soul belongs to God I know I made that bargain long ago.
He gave me hope when hope was gone. He gave me strength to journey on.
Who am I?
Who am I?
I’m Jean Valjean!

And so Javert you see it’s true.
This man bears no more guilt than you!
Who am I? 24601!

After reading the passage, how do the lyrics compare? Do they do justice to the original work? Does listening to the song, with music and the melody, help convey the emotions originally presented in the novel’s passage?

Do you think Valjean did the right thing by confessing his identity to save the man at the cost of abandoning the hundreds of workers he employs?

Some might say that Valjean did not confess for the sake of saving the man. In the lyrics he says, “If I stay silent I am damned.” This suggests that his motives may be specifically to save his soul from damnation. How does that affect the way we perceive Valjean’s decision to confess at the trial?

Another song to consider: “Stars,” which is sung by Javert to illustrate his loyalty to the law. Reading his story and inner thoughts in the novel, and comparing them with the lyrics of “Stars” can help audience members understand Javert’s passion for law and justice, and whether or not it is a flaw or value. Additionally, “Javert’s Suicide” is another song that showcases a close interpretation of Victor Hugo’s text, and brings out Javert’s dilemma.