

Miserable Musical Musings

Some of you may recall (though not with much joy), I submitted an article to the Holyoke Enterprise about my experience of attending my first (and only) opera in June 2007. In the article, I stated, after several analytical paragraphs explaining “Madam Butterfly,” that I would not go to another “fat lady sings” event unless they served Coors beer to the audience and the cute female singers were naked. I have kept that promise.

Always striving to improve my suave personality, I then attended my first (and only) ballet in December 2008—also documented via the Holyoke Enterprise. I once again explained, tongue-in-cheek, the nuance of “The Nutcracker Ballet,” which consisted of men and women in sheer tights jumping wildly and spinning round and round on their toes. I also resolved “The Nutcracker” would be my last ballet. I have kept that promise.

So here we are: another four years have passed and it was time to go experience a musical. Well, sort of. It was a movie about a musical. Victor Hugo, in 1862, published a 1,900-page French novel entitled “Les Miserables,” which, loosely translated from French to Arkansan, means “Miserable Musical.” Trust me. The musical (as well as the book) offered a look at the horrid rule of French kings and their amazing indifference to life—read: they starved and enslaved the poor until they died. Why anyone would want to sing about this, I have no idea...but I am not here to defend musicals, just explain this one.

Of course, in movies, central casting is the entity responsible for finding actors that can look the part AND sing, especially if 99 percent of the two-hour musical is sung. (By the way, the last good musical I liked was “West Side Story,” perhaps because it had to do with gangs and fighting, but probably because it featured the sexy and fetching Natalie Wood, and it also had lots of actual speaking and only periodic singing and dancing.) Not so in “Les Miserables,” which has vocal outpourings the entire time it is on screen. I think maybe 35 words were spoken—I counted them.

Anyway, there are three main actors in “Les Miserables,” none of which anyone in Hollywood knew could sing (but that never stops directors). The good guy from the novel is Jean Valjean (slur the name like you have slush in your mouth and it will sound French), a released convict who miraculously becomes a mayor and saves the day (and many people en route).

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Played by Hugh Jackman, one hopes this rough, tough killer (Jackman has entrenched himself in the thriller series “X-Men” whereby Hugh is known as Wolverine, a half-man, half-wolf person who has stiletto knife blades for fingernails and slashes and gashes everyone for two hours) should be OK singing his part. In “Les Miserables,” Mr. Jackman is actually a very likeable character and (who knew?) can pretty well warble in a musical. And his fingernails were trimmed nicely.

The second main actor (though her supporting part is way too little) in “Les Miserables” is the gorgeous Anne Hathaway (intriguing and sensual in “The Devil Wears Prada” and downright naked much of the time with Jake Gyllenhaal in “Love and Other Drugs”). Alas, Ms. Hathaway remains mostly clothed during “Les Miserables” and is portrayed as Fantine, a grisette (young, poor French woman) who becomes a prostitute who sells her teeth, hair and virginity in order to provide for the survival of her daughter, Cossette. Fortunately, Anne is one of those women who looks good, no matter what you do to her or what she is wearing, so I was totally mesmerized by her character.

The third main actor was where the casting department departed reality, no doubt smoking the marijuana that is now legal in Colorado (where can I get some in Holyoke?—I need to come home to visit my sister). Central casting chose (get this) a rugged man who bested tigers and chariots and dozens of Roman centurions in “Gladiator,” no other than manly he-man Russell Crowe. Crowe plays police inspector Javert (again, slur your words to make the name sound French). I almost walked out, as having Crowe sing his part is like asking Arnold Schwarzenegger to don a sheer chiffon tutu and dance on his toes in “The Nutcracker.” Some things just aren’t meant to be.

Nonetheless, Crowe played his part well as the evil French gendarme but sings way too much until he plummets to his death by doing a half gainer off a bridge near the end of the musical (oh, did I give it away?). It would have been much better if he had died in Act I and let my sexy Anne Hathaway live through the entire musical (oh, did I give it way that she also dies?). And, go figure, even Hugh Jackman, after saving nearly every poor person in France, goes up to heaven (oh, did I give it way that he also dies?). Finally, since there were no more main characters, the movie came to a close and ended.

Okay, so I assume you think I thought “Les Miserables” sucked! Au contraire, my friends (that’s French for “on the contrary”). I thoroughly enjoyed it (well, two-thirds of it, since I had to put my fingers in my ears when Russell Crowe started warbling). The set designs and some of the

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music are superb in the movie. Jackman and Hathaway (separately) belted out excellent versions of “I Dreamed a Dream” which Susan Boyle, the middle-aged British lady, sang to woo the judges and win “Britain’s Got Talent” a few years ago—I thought I might be tearing up, but realized I just spilled some of my drink on my face.

Would I recommend “Les Miserables” for an enjoyable evening? Well, not if you are one of those men who only wants to see Crowe killing people or wild animals. But...if you are familiar with Ms. Hathaway’s “credentials,” then you will enjoy seeing and listening to her. Old Hugh Jackman ain’t bad either. Plus, you will learn a little about the French Revolution, not that anyone really cares if the French revolted 150 years ago. Some of us find them revolting today. Viva la French Toast!

Bob Russell graduated from HHS in 1964. A retired USAF pilot and mostly retired Lockheed Martin fighter cockpit designer, Bob likes to think he can write. Fortunately, when not drowned out by a church choir, Bob only sings in the shower—much to the chagrin of his wife, Judy. He thanks the Holyoke Enterprise for holding back meaningful articles to let him demonstrate his lack of writing skills. His deepest apology goes to Mrs. Salomons, his high school English teacher, and to his nephew, Bret Miles, school superintendent.

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