

# ARTS

## Les Miz: worth the nosebleed

By LAUREN GILLEN

*Les Miserables*  
directed by Richard Jay-Alexander  
Royal Alexandra Theatre

Yes, folks, the era of the mega-musical in Toronto has begun. Like New York's Broadway or London's West End, Toronto is fast becoming a city bursting with highly priced, highly publicized live theatre.

For only \$50 you can relax in the comfort of large, red, velvety seats and enjoy the luxurious surroundings of the Royal Alexandra Theatre while you wait in anticipation for one of Toronto's most advertised musicals — Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*.

If \$50 is a little rich for your blood, don't despair; for a mere \$25 you can cram yourself into one of the much smaller and less velvety seats in the upper balcony — more affectionately referred to as the nose-bleeder seats.

Unless you've been hiding under a rock for the past few months, you have probably seen the larger-than-life billboards displaying the face of a haggard French girl carrying the flag of the French revolution. Alongside her the phrase "fight to get a ticket" denotes a sense of urgency.

The play begins in 1815 Digne, France, and Jean Valjean (York theatre grad Michael Burgess) is given his parole papers after serving 19 years on a chain-gang for stealing a loaf of bread. Only after he is released, however, does his hardship begin.

His ticket-of-leave (which, by law, he must display) makes him an outcast. Treated by society as a criminal, Valjean is left penniless and homeless until he is taken in by the Bishop of Digne. Fearing for his future, Valjean steals the Bishop's silver and slips into the night. He is caught by the police who return him to the Bishop.

To everyone's surprise — most of all Valjean's — the Bishop lies, saying he gave the silver to Valjean but that he forgot to take the best of the

lot — the candlesticks. Valjean is released.

At this, Valjean decides to start his life over.

Eight years pass and Valjean, breaking parole, has changed his name and become a factory owner and mayor of Montreuil-Sur-Mer. When the foreman discovers that one of the women in the factory is supporting an illegitimate child, he dismisses her. With no money to support herself or the child she has left in the care of innkeepers, Fantine (Louise Pitre) falls into a life of prostitution. Sick and dying, she is taken to a hospital by Valjean, who promises to find her child Cosette and take care of her.

Valjean travels to Montfermeil to find Cosette in the care of the Thénardiens (Janelle Hutchison and Graeme Campbell). They are typically sly, conniving, cheap, and generally unsavory characters who spoil their daughter Eponine and work Cosette to the bone. After Valjean pays an extraordinary sum of money to the Thénardiens, Cosette is released into his care. He takes her to Paris where they live happily for nine years.

Sounds simple, right?

Wrong! A police inspector named Javert (Thomas Goerz) has been stalking Valjean for years, vowing to return him to prison for breaking parole. Cosette — who is now in her late teens — has fallen in love with a student in Paris named Marius (David Malek). He too is madly in love with her, unaware that young Eponine Thénardier has desired his love for years.

Unfortunately, Valjean — who has never told Cosette about his past — must escape Javert's grasp. Cosette and Marius are separated. Meanwhile, Paris stirs with the rumblings of revolution.

And that is a very quick version of only half the play!

How does one fit all of this into only three hours and 15 minutes? It's simple: remove all character development and dazzle the audience with the set! In this case, no expense has been spared.

Huge sets move magically into place to become run-down Paris streets, or revolution barricades made from odds and ends of broken down furniture. A revolving platform also helps to move scene changes quickly, giving the play its rather filmic quality. Add to that some superb lighting and sound effects, and you have some sensory images of a spectacle that will be remembered long after the plot is forgotten.

Also on the upside of this musical production is the strong showing of Canadian talent. Michael Burgess has a rich voice, and songs like "Bring Him Home" show off its wonderful falsetto quality. Louise Pitre as Fantine, Loretta Bailey as the adult Eponine, and Kymberley Huffman as the adult Cosette have equally delightful voices. All four of these leads play their sometimes overly-romantic parts with as much depth as the script allows.

Thomas Goerz's deep bass voice

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## A "chilling blast" from Habitat

By SHAKTI RAMLAL

Curiosity about where we choose to live is the theme for York student Lee Paquette's mixed-media show *Habitat* at the D Gallery.

Brilliant photography and appealing drawings deliver a chilling blast of reality that simultaneously repulses and attracts its audience. The black and white pictures emphasize the stark reality of death without being grotesque. The subject matter, although not particularly appealing, arouses a number of emotions — frustration, anger, and pity — for the horror that these photographs depict.

The show is definitely not for those with weak constitutions, as it mainly features the pitiful remnants of birds who have plummeted to their deaths in bins of acid. According to Lee, the photographs were

taken over a period which began on a Sunday canoeing trip in the Toronto Harbour.

His attention was first caught by the steel barges which these birds chose as their home. Only on closer inspection did he realize that a number of birds had fallen into uncovered bins of acid.

In his attempt to make sense of this experience, he used his camera to express his feelings at that moment — he had no intention of repulsing anyone. Instead, his aim was to make people aware of their environment and how they perceive things.

And we are certainly made aware. In fact, we are rudely awakened to the carelessness of the authorities who would allow such a thing to occur. Their deaths could have been prevented by simply covering the bins.

On a more profound level, the exhibition forces one to examine how animals and humans adapt to the environment and why we alter the environment in such self-destructive ways. If we continue to live in an environment that is slowly killing us, why have we done nothing to change it?

The drawings in the show are particularly appealing, as they are not clearly defined — leaving the viewer to draw his own conclusions. However, the drawings of his birds have a distinct air of defeat, and one cannot avoid pitying these helpless creatures.

The show runs until April 2, and for those who enjoy great photography it's a must. Besides being shockingly vivid, it arouses different emotional responses — and this is exactly what Lee hoped to accomplish.

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