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## Les misérables musical summary

In 1973, Alain Boublil was invited to the Broadway premiere of Jesus Christ Superstar and it changed his life. Already a big fan of musical theatre, here he saw a work that combined the conventions of grand opera, historical subject matter, and contemporary pop musical vocabulary. He decided instantly that he wanted to write in that form, and that same night, realized the French Revolution would be a perfect subject. In collaboration with several friends (including Claude-Michel Schönberg), the pop opera La Revolution Française was written, recorded, became a best selling album in France, and soon after was staged at the Palais des Sports for a full season’s run. Several years later, Boublil convinced Schönberg to make a pop opera of Victor Hugo’s epic novel Les Misérables, which centered on the student insurrection of 1832, forty years after the French Revolution. In 1980, an album was recorded and sold 260,000 copies; that same year the show was staged at the Palais des Sports and played to over 500,000 people. A friend brought the recording to Cameron Mackintosh, British producer of Godspell, Cats, Little Shop of Horrors, and other hugely successful musicals (including Phantom of the Opera a few years later). Mackintosh immediately decided to produce it, but it was re-structured, and further adapted as it was translated into English. Though French audiences knew the novel intimately, British and American audiences did not, so many scenes originally left out of the show were added, as well as a lengthy prologue. The show received generally scathing reviews in most of the London papers (British composer Andrew Lloyd Webber strongly disliked it), but within three days after opening, audiences had spread the word, ticket sales sky-rocketed, and it played to sold-out houses from then on. Les Misérables is an epic theatre piece about history, faith, and humanity. It’s a big show in its emotion and its sweep, but not a show that has to be physically big. Underneath the surface, woven through its various themes, the show is about perpetual motion—the inevitable flow of history, Jean Valjean’s continual flight from the pursuit of Inspector Javert, Eponine’s ever-growing love for Marius, the quest for freedom. The show’s motor, its pulse, can be summed up in one of the student revolutionaries’ lines, “There’s a river on the run, like the flowing of a tide….” “One Day More,” the show’s Act I finale, illustrates this central metaphor. Every character in the show (including the chorus) is caught up in the sweep of events which leave love and life trampled in their wake. Yet through it all, they all maintain a faith in the future—“Tomorrow we’ll discover what our Lord in Heaven has in store.” Even the title of the song refers to the continuum of time, history, fate. Like the show as a whole, this song displays the determination, hope, and faith of every character in the show. Because of its epic scope, the lyrics in this show are unlike most musical theatre lyrics. They are bigger, more formal, more extreme, more tragic, more melodramatic. How many musicals could support the weight of a poetic lyric like Yet it works here because the entire show is built on this bigger than life style. It is said that an audience will accept anything in a show as long as its presented within the first ten minutes; and Les Misérables does just that, projecting its huge tragic language and subject matter from the first notes. Over the course of the show, we see great social injustice, a single mother reduced to prostitution, star-crossed lovers, war (on a small scale), the death of major characters, suicide, social reform, marriage—all within the framework of a single musical. Boublil and Schönberg were told they were crazy for trying to bring such an epic novel to the stage, especially the musical stage; and they probably were, but they succeeded. Director Trevor Nunn said that Les Misérables is a show about God. It is also a show about the nobility of the human spirit, faith, redemption, and other spiritual concepts. Religion and spirituality—as well as the distortion of it and the lack of it—informs most of the action of the show. Jean Valjean sings in Act II, “To love another person is to see the face of God.” Valjean and Inspector Javert both believe fervently in God, but they believe in very different Gods. Javert believes in an angry, vengeful, Old Testament God, in the absolutes of right and wrong, good and evil. He believes that Valjean broke the law (which he did) and must be punished according to the law. In “Stars” he sings: And later in the song: Though he is a man obsessed, he believes in the law, both man’s and God’s. How many people today—especially today, as everyone clamors for stricter punishment for criminals—would accept that some criminals shouldn’t have to be punished according to the law? We can look back now and say that the law of the time was too severe, but Javert has sworn to uphold the law, and how can we condemn him for that? Yes, Valjean’s family was poor and starving; but is that justification for breaking into someone else’s home and stealing their food, and then later, breaking parole (Remember that Javert is pursuing Valjean not for the theft but for breaking his parole)? Many people today believe that if our legal system was more like Javert’s code of justice in its severity and consistency, crime might be reduced. Javert is trapped by the strictness of his own beliefs, so that when Valjean turns those beliefs upside-down by releasing him in Act II, he has no alternative but to kill himself. He sings: Javert’s world, his convictions, the rules by which he’s lived his entire life, are called into question, and because of the single-mindedness of his existence, he now has nothing left to live for. It’s hard to say he was a bad man; after all, he was upholding not only the laws of man, but the laws of God as well. For the most part, Javert is portrayed as the villain of Les Misérables, but it’s clearly not that simple. His sin lies in his extremism. He sees the world in black and white. He sees the divinity in the world and believes it is his duty to preserve it. In his song, “Stars,” he sees the night sky as a symbol of the immutability of the universe. The stars represent God and the natural order of things, “filling the darkness with order and light.” Valjean has violated Javert’s view of what the world should be. There is no question that Valjean is guilty of the crime with which he was charged. In nineteenth century Paris or in modern day America, it is dangerous to apply the law only periodically. Like his descendant, Detective Gerrard in The Fugitive, Javert doesn’t care whether or not the law is fair; it’s the law. Could he have tempered the law with mercy? Perhaps, but again, many people today would say we employ entirely too much mercy when dealing with crime; and after all, isn’t that the job of a judge instead of a police officer? In contrast to Javert, Jean Valjean believes in a benevolent, forgiving, New Testament God. He believes in redemption. When the bishop in the prologue not only lies to the police on his behalf, but also gives him the silver candlesticks, Valjean sees that he’s being given a second chance, a chance to live life according to God’s dictates (“My soul belongs to God, I know,” he sings later). He has broken the law, has repented, and has been forgiven (by God, anyway). He aspires to goodness and he achieves it; the audience identifies with his desire to be a good man and lead a good life. He is the man we all wish we could be. He risks his life to find and protect Cosette. He actually offers up his own life to God in exchange for Marius, so that Marius and Cosette can be together. English lyricist Herbert Kretzmer sees “Bring Him Home” as Valjean’s final transformation from selfishness to genuine altruism. The song is literally a prayer, and perhaps more than any other moment in the show, invokes the spirituality that lies beneath the entire musical. (When Colm Wilkinson, the original Valjean, first sang the song in rehearsal, a hush fell over the company. Trevor Nunn said, “See? I told you this show was all about God.” And one of the company members said, “Yes, but you didn’t tell us you’d engaged Him to sing it.”) Thénardier doesn’t believe in God at all. He is completely amoral, living only by the rules of survival. He believes that it’s every man for himself, and looking at his life it’s no surprise that he feels that way. Again, it’s hard to say he’s a bad person; he lives outside the realm of right and wrong. Thénardier and My Fair Lady’s Alfred P. Dolittle are cut from the same cloth. In My Fair Lady, when Col. Pickering asks, “Have you no morals, man?,” Dolittle replies, “No, I can’t afford ’em, Governor.” We impose our middle class morality on Thénardier without a practical consideration of the difficulty of his day-to-day survival. He sums up his life in “Dog Eats Dog.” When Thénardier sees the chaos, the injustice that runs rampant through the streets he can come to only one conclusion: If there was a God, Thénardier reasons, He would not allow a world as black and unforgiving as this one. The Thénardiens are even more despicable because they steal not only from the rich, but from the poor as well. It is truly a dog-eat-dog world. So many morally ambiguous situations are scattered throughout the show—Fantine turning to prostitution in order to make enough money to support Cosette, the Thénardiens taking more of Fantine’s money than they need to keep Cosette, the Thénardiens’ looting of the dead bodies after the insurrection, even the insurrection itself. So many of these situations have no clear right or wrong, and perhaps the message of Les Misérables is that people are basically good, that they do what they have to do to survive, that ultimately good always triumphs, and that we are judged not by each other, but by God. Some pop/rock operas, like Phantom of the Opera and Sunset Boulevard use musical motifs at random. Melodies are repeated throughout the show, but not for any particular dramatic purpose. Other works, like Jesus Christ Superstar and Les Misérables, use musical motifs to connect characters, concepts, or dramatic situations, like classical opera does. This use of motifs helps audiences recognize important dramatic and subtextual ideas, even if only on a subliminal level. In Les Misérables, there are two musical motifs which dramatize two of the show’s primary concepts, moral dilemmas and loneliness. The four-note accompaniment figure that opens Act I (after the Prologue, leading into “At the End of the Day”) represents Jean Valjean and is used when he and other major characters grapple with difficult moral dilemmas. A slight variation of this figure appears underneath Valjean’s first entrance in the factory scene (“Will someone tear these two apart...”), introducing him musically and connecting him to the textual theme of moral dilemmas. A minor version of this motif is heard later when Valjean steps in to keep Javert from arresting Fantine. Valjean is risking a great deal by talking to Javert, who might recognize him, but justice is more important to him than safety. It appears again as accompaniment to Valjean’s greatest moral dilemma, “Who Am I?,” in which he decides whether or not to reveal himself to Javert in order to save another man’s life. In this case, the figure accompanies almost the entire song. The figure next appears when Marius first meets Cosette, foreshadowing the fact that this music will also underscore their farewell at the end of the act. In the “Rue Plumet” scene, Cosette sings her love motif as she thinks about Marius. Valjean sings to her that he sees her loneliness, to the slightly altered melody of “On My Own” (which is used as a loneliness and separation motif), accompanied by his “moral dilemma” music underneath. He wants to protect her, but knows that at some point he has to let her grow up; he has to decide what to do. Valjean’s motif breaks out in full force as the accompaniment to “One Day More,” in which all the major character must make life-changing decisions about what they will do. To reinforce the “moral dilemma” motif, the vocal melody from “Who Am I?” also reappears as the melody of “One Day More.” In the second act, the decisions have all been made and Valjean is no longer the focus of the story; Cosette and Marius are. The only time the figure is used in the entire second act is when Valjean tells Marius the story of his life. The loneliness motif is best remembered as the melody to “On My Own,” but the song’s accompaniment figure also appears elsewhere in the score. The accompaniment shows up for the first time in the instrumental tag at the end of Fantine’s “I Dreamed a Dream,” a song about losing the man she loved. This figure will come back in Act II in “On My Own,” Eponine’s song about never having the man she loves. The melody from “On My Own” first appears in Fantine’s death scene, as she lies alone in bed, dreaming that Cosette is there with her. When the melody reappears as “On My Own,” Eponine is alone on the street, dreaming that Marius is there with her. Those these two characters never interact directly, their music reinforces the strong connection between their loneliness and their dreams. There are a number of other musical motifs used to a lesser extent, which are nonetheless effective in reinforcing dramatic concepts. For example, the show’s Prologue acts almost as a kind of overture, using several of the musical motifs we will hear later in the main body of the score. In this way, the Prologue not only introduces the plot, the character of Valjean, and the themes of God and destiny, but also introduces some of the musical material as well. In addition to the musical motifs, there are a great many textual themes woven throughout Les Misérables. As already discussed, God and religion figure prominently in every story line and most of the scenes, coupled with the concepts of fate and pre-destination (“Tomorrow we’ll discover what our God in heaven has in store...”). Marius and Cosette sing, “I was born to be with you.” Javert sings, “And so it has been, and so it is written on the doorway to Paradise...” It’s interesting to note that Javert and Valjean share an important bit of music and lyric. At the end of the Prologue, Valjean sings the melody from “Javert’s Suicide.” In both songs, these men are questioning their view of God and the world, and both of them decide to end their lives, in Valjean’s case, by becoming someone else. Their lyrics are nearly identical: Connecting this closely through music and text is an interesting choice, especially since they both go through the show with a passionate devotion to God and to what they believe is Right. However, the connection may be lost on an audience since the two occurrences of this music are so far apart. The other major textual theme in the show is revolution and freedom. Jean Valjean’s personal freedom is linked to the political and economic freedom the students are fighting for. We see that freedom is not gained or preserved easily. As the music indicates with the “moral dilemma” motif in “One Day More,” the students’ decision to fight is a difficult one. It will probably involve death for some of them, and they must each decide if this goal is worth such a price. This theme is also connected to the running themes of poverty and class inequality throughout the show. It is the poor, or les misérables (literally meaning the miserable or wretched ones), for whom the students are fighting, for whom they are trying to win a better life. Valjean, Fantine, and Javert all come from the ranks of “the miserable ones” as well. Javert sings in Act I. Javert rises to a higher social level by becoming a police officer. Valjean rises out of poverty by literally becoming someone else (as Eliza Dolittle does in My Fair Lady). But Fantine is hopelessly trapped there, due in large part to the fact that she must support Cosette as well as herself. Why is Les Misérables embraced so fervently by audiences today? Most of the themes of the show are both timeless and universal. The concept of revolution is one that still today echoes around the globe. Americans will forever see themselves as the scrappy revolutionaries who fought for and won the world’s first democracy. The poor people in nineteenth century France faced many of the same injustices and violations as the American colonists. Later in America’s history, with the race riots in the mid-1960s, the riot at the Stonewall Inn in 1969, the riots over the Rodney King verdict, and other incidents, Americans have maintained their willingness to stand up for their rights through violent confrontation if necessary. In 1989, while Les Miz was playing around the world, Chinese students in Tiananmen Square staged an insurrection not unlike the one in the show, and were similarly defeated. Throughout the world, there are “the miserable ones” like those in Les Miz, and as long as there are, there will also be revolutions and demonstrations. Audiences also find universality in the love story of Marius and Cosette, and in the unrequited love of Eponine, as well as in the internal struggle of Jean Valjean to control the beast within him and live a good life. Victor Hugo populated his novel with characters that are universal archetypes, making his story one that will last indefinitely. Les Misérables is a show about people and relationships, not about sets. Don’t let the original two-ton, computer-driven set lead you to believe that this is a show that needs spectacle to work. Remember that even in the original production, the majority of the action takes place on an empty stage, or in scenes with one or two pieces of furniture. The revolve used in London and New York is a wonderful way to convey that sense of perpetual motion, of the chase, and you can do without it. Javert’s leap from the bridge and the scenes in the sewers were achieved through ingenious lighting. The universality of the show will be communicated more easily if you don’t clutter up your stage with sets and props. The costumes should be realistic and in correct period when possible, but even if you play fast and loose with period (the original designs for the “Lovely Ladies” costumes weren’t strictly period), the clothes must look worn. It’s alright to ask the audience to use their imagination, but don’t pull their focus with bright, shiny costumes that contradict the mood of the show. A decision must be made early on whether or not the actors should use accents. There is a case to be made that in a pop opera characters should be audibly as well as visibly distinct. In the London production, the Thénardiens had thick cockney accents that immediately branded them as lower class, distinguishing them from Valjean, Javert, the students, etc. But why should characters living in France have British accents instead of French accents? Realistically, why should they have any accent at all? People in nineteenth century France didn’t speak with French accents; they spoke in French. A similar question could be asked about Sweeney Todd—why did half the characters (in the original production) speak with British accents and the other half with American accents? In Sweeney’s case, it helped characterize Mrs. Lovett for her to sound that way. Perhaps it could work for the Thénardiens to have their cockney accents without giving the rest of the cast upper-class British accents. It’s something to think about and maybe experiment with early on in rehearsals. All technical considerations aside, your first priority must be to serve the show’s score. Les Miz’s greatest strength is the emotional power of its music. No matter what language the lyrics are in (and they are now in many different languages), the same emotions are evoked—painful yearning in “On My Own,” tremendous resolve and inevitability in “One Day More,” and great optimism in “Do You Hear the People Sing?” Though people of the pre-rock generations may feel less of a connection to the music than those of us raised on rock and contemporary pop, the score still packs an undeniable punch. With or without giant sets and computer driven barricades, Les Misérables is a tremendously moving piece of theatre. You don’t need Cameron Mackintosh to bankroll your production; you need only emotional truth, a sincere love for the material, and a cast that will dig down deep in their souls for the epic-sized passion of the piece. ----- Copyright 1996. Excerpt from Scott Miller’s book From Assassins to West Side Story. All rights reserved. Miller is also the author of Strike Up the Band: A New History of Musical Theatre, Deconstructing Harold Hill, Rebels with Applause, Let the Sun Shine In: The Genius of HAIR, and Sex, Drugs, Rock & Roll, and Musicals..



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