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Les Miz at NC Theatre

By Emma D. Miller



Photo by Curtis Brown

English Bernhardt as Éponine in *Les Misérables*.

Most theatergoers at productions of *Les Misérables* are not first-timers. They know Victor Hugo's story of revolution and redemption in early 19th-century France; they've cried to Claude-Michel Schönberg's surging score and Herbert Kretzmer's passionate lyrics.

This familiarity has its advantages and drawbacks. On the one hand, audiences are primed to follow the complicated story and ready to be moved. On the other, expectations are high for anyone who has heard Colm Wilkinson's breathtaking tenor as Valjean on the original cast recording of *Les Mis*.

Fortunately, NC Theatre's production of *Les Misérables*, featuring a mix of local actors and Broadway vets, meets all of these standards. Director Dave Clemmons crafts picturesque tableaux out of an engaged, well-articulated ensemble, accentuated by moody lighting design by John Bartenstein. Craig Schulman (as Valjean) and Chuck Wagner (as the doggedly moralistic police inspector Javert) demonstrate impressive vocal control, bringing emotional complexity and tension to musically challenging roles. Lauren Kennedy, artistic director of Theatre Raleigh, is also vocally strong, if somewhat too polished, as the dying Fantine (a role she played on Broadway).

Alison Cimmat and Dirk Lumbard are delectably loathsome as the Thénardiens, the slimy, ethically challenged innkeepers. Julie Benko shines sweetly as Javert's adopted daughter, Cosette, and the swoon-worthy Bruce Landry is tender and passionate as her lover Marius, the revolutionary student.

Of particular note is Raleigh high school senior English Bernhardt's Éponine, an impoverished girl in desperate, one-sided love with Marius. Bernhardt's powerful voice and nuanced acting shine even among performers decades her senior. On opening night, her heartbreaking rendition of "On My Own" brought down the house. This is an up-and-coming local actress to watch in a moving, accomplished production.

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