

‘Les Misérables’ Paints Emotion in Widescreen Colors

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 19, 2012 - 3:21pm

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Rating: **5.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Tom Hooper’s “Les Misérables,” the best movie musical in over a decade, is what a musical like this should be – unabashed, unashamed emotion painted in vibrant, broad colors across a massive screen. It is gloriously bereft of the cynicism that has sapped so many stage-to-film adaptations from achieving the heights of their source material and features some of the most striking performances in the history of the genre. And the smart, daring decisions made by Hooper in terms of staging keeps audiences rapt and thrilled for a running time that would have proved too great a challenge for many other filmmakers. Hooper may have won Oscars for “The King’s Speech,” but this is the film for which he’ll be remembered.

The story of “Les Miz” is well-known and widely influential. A convict named Jean Valjean (Hugh Jackman), who was made a pariah of the law simply because he wanted to steal some bread to feed his starving family, hides his past with a name change and a new life while an officer named Javert (Russell Crowe) tries to track him down. Upon this base structure of plot, numerous subplots are sent spinning, including a woman named Fantine (Anne Hathaway), who begins near the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in a city where the chasm between the haves and the have-nots is starting to take more lives and falls from there. Years later, her grown daughter Cosette (Amanda Seyfried) falls for a revolutionary named Marius (Eddie Redmayne), who is unrequitedly loved by Eponine (Samantha Barks). As revolution brews in the background, Valjean comes to terms with why he has been saved so many times where others have fallen and Javert draws closer to his target.



Les Misérables

Photo credit: Universal

All of this complex storytelling is told in song. “Les Misérables” is not your traditional Hollywood musical in that except for a few numbers it is told almost entirely without traditional choreography. Don’t expect the lavish dance sequences of films like “Moulin Rouge” or “Chicago.” On the contrary, “Les Misérables” is more of an opera than a standard movie musical. Lines that would otherwise be dialogue to get from one set

piece to another are sung, creating a rarely-stopped wave of music to carry the viewer from opening to closing credits. To be fair, if that sounds like torture to you, it probably will be. To say that Tom Hooper made smart decisions with "Les Misérables" is to imply that he made the decisions that fans of this musical and musicals in general would like. I believe that fans of all movies could see the grand spectacle on display here as something worthwhile and interesting but if you "don't like movies where people sing," this won't turn you around.

However, it will turn around anyone with apprehension given the recent rash of disastrous or near-disastrous adaptations of Broadway hits like "Rock of Ages" or "Rent." What Hooper does here is so simple and yet so antithetical to what so many modern musical film directors have done – he lets the actors and their voices do the dramatic work. It sounds easy enough but most musicals do everything they can to disguise the actual acting in the genre. They spend more time admiring their lavish sets and detailed costume design than trusting their ensemble in the way that a stage director does when he kills all lights but for the spotlight on his leading man. Hooper often places the camera directly in front of his actors and lets them act and sing, uncut, without the clichés of the genre that so often mask the true emotion.



Les Misérables

Photo credit: Universal

It helps significantly that Hooper allowed his cast to actually sing on-set instead of merely lip-syncing to pre-recorded numbers. With an earpiece that allowed the actors to change tempo as a live musician kept up with their lead, it allows for true emotion, alternate takes, and being in the moment in the way that most musicals do not. The result is at least two of the best performances of 2012 from Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway, along with solid work from Samantha Barks, Sacha Baron Cohen, Helena Bonham Carter, Russell Crowe, and others. The movie belongs to Jackman, the one character who arcs from first scene to last, and he completely owns it, finding raw emotion in lines of song that would have sounded hollow coming from a studio. Crowe, to be fair, can't sing quite as well as the rest of the cast but his commitment to the character overcomes his musical inabilities.

That's how I feel about "Les Misérables" overall in general – whatever flaws I can find in it are overshadowed by the scope, emotion, and heart of the piece. Yes, it's too long. Yes, the love triangle that dominates too much of the second act is narratively thin (but it is in the play too). Yes, Crowe can't sing and Amanda Seyfried way overplays her wide-eyed youth routine. However, all of these criticisms pale when I consider the peaks that this film reaches in numbers like "I Dreamed a Dream," "Bring Him Home," and "Empty Chairs at Empty Tables." In those moments, emotion overtakes cynicism and overly intellectual criticism of the film. This is an old-fashioned musical painted broad across a wide screen, a soaring chorus of emotions that rises and falls in ways that actively try to move the audience with human toil and triumph told through song. I was carried away in ways that tore down my critical faculties. And I wish more movies would do the same.

"Les Misérables" stars Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, Anne Hathaway, Eddie Redmayne, Amanda Seyfried, Samantha Barks, Sacha Baron Cohen, and Helena Bonham Carter. It was adapted by William Nicholson and directed by Tom Hooper.



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By [BRIAN TALLERICO](#) [15]

Content Director

HollywoodChicago.com

brian@hollywoodchicago.com [14]

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