Tom Hooper's *Les Misérables*: Social misery, with a vengeance

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Directed by Tom Hooper, written by Claude-Michel Schönberg, Alain Boublil, Herbert Kretzmer, Jean-Marc Natel, James Fenton and William Nicholson

The screen adaptation of *Les Misérables* [the wretched ones], the long-running stage musical based on Victor Hugo's classic 1862 novel, has found a large audience and a mixed but generally favorable critical reception. The film was recently nominated for eight Academy Awards, including in the best picture category.

The work takes up major social and historical themes, or at least borrows them from Hugo (1802-1885), one of France's leading Romantic writers and an enormously popular figure. In Tom Hooper's film we encounter the most perverse forms of social inequality in 19th century France, a brutal system of slave labor in the jails and the obsessive and vindictive law-and-order mentality embodied by the merciless Inspector Javert. In the movie's climactic moments, we are taken behind the barricades of the June Rebellion of 1832, a republican uprising against the monarchy of Louis-Philippe.

Audiences are starved for serious historical material, as the popular response to Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* attests. Large themes, however, do not automatically make for great art and *Les Misérables* suffers from significant artistic weaknesses, both as a film and a piece of music.

Briefly, the story is this: in 1815, Jean Valjean (Hugh Jackman) is released from prison after serving 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his niece. Out on parole, his past and reputation prevent him from finding work. Valjean eventually breaks parole and assumes a new identity. Within another decade, he becomes a wealthy factory owner and mayor of Montreuil-sur-Mer.

When a worker named Fantine (Anne Hathaway), employed in Valjean's factory, is unjustly fired by a shop manager and meets a tragic end in the streets, Valjean agrees to take her daughter Cosette (Amanda Seyfried) under his care. By this time, however, the brutal Inspector Javert (Russell Crowe) has uncovered Valjean's true identity, forcing the latter and Cosette to spend their life on the run. The cat and mouse game comes to an end at the barricades of the June Rebellion where Valjean goes to rescue a young student revolutionary with whom Cosette has fallen in love.

For a work so rich in themes and the dramatic and musical possibilities that go with them, one is struck by how little real drama there is in the work. At two hours and 40 minutes, the film becomes extremely tedious.

The music by French composer Claude-Michel Schönberg and lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer are very poor and thin. One does not find in these compositions the sense of conflict, character and compelling narrative that one finds animating superior works such as *West Side Story* or *Porgy and Bess*. *Les Misérables* is a sung-through musical, meaning every line of dialogue is sung. This "recitative" is largely repetitive, dull and lifeless. The film's characters, apparently conscious of their every motive, simply state again and again who they are and what they are up to. With everything spelled out, there is nothing for the audience to discover on its own. Virtually any drama is killed in the process. It's as if one sat down to a meal only to have the chef read out the ingredients of the various dishes instead. There's very little that's satisfying in that.

In an effort perhaps to make up for the deficiencies in the material, the actors tend to lay everything on the line. With a vengeance. The overwrought intensity in many of the performances is overwhelming, all the more so because director Hooper (*John Adams*, *The*

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King's Speech) shoots so much of the movie in invasive, almost claustrophobic close-ups. His actors—brutalized, covered in mud, heads shaven, teeth missing—sing their guts out and weep uncontrollably for hours. We are not moved by this so much as we are demanded to be moved. The work is pushed with considerable force in the direction of melodrama.

The one scene in *Les Misérables* that has attracted the most attention is Anne Hathaway's rendition of the musical's best-known song, "I Dreamed a Dream." Hathaway sings it as well as anyone has, though her voice is choked by tears during some parts of the performance. One can see why the song, about a dream of a better life crushed by the most brutal social misery, connects with so many who struggle in their daily lives. And the right performer, like Hathaway, can at times lift the piece above its limitations. But this song, like the rest, is terribly overwrought and melodramatic. More than a "tearjerker," the song and performance reach out and absolutely wring the tears from audience members' eyes.

All of this adds up to an experience that is simply exhausting. At the end of the almost three-hour film, the viewer leaves the theater as if returning to the surface after a long time working underground, and not much wiser for the experience.

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