

Toronto International Film Festival 2019

An interview with Ladj Ly, director of *Les Misérables*: “Victor Hugo described the social misery perfectly”

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During the recent film festival, I spoke to Ladj Ly, the director of *Les Misérables*.

David Walsh: Can you explain why you were inspired to include the final section, a mini-revolt, in *Les Misérables*? Do you see signs of organized opposition to oppression and poverty?

Ladj Ly: If you mean the very final moment, which is left open, it's because I want to let people have some hope, let them think, yes, we can sit around a table and discuss this. The film is a cry of alarm. Admittedly, the situation is very, very bad, very dramatic, but that's precisely why I did it the way I did, in terms of the very final sequence.

DW: I understand that. But, before that final moment, there is a kind of revolt. I wonder if you see signs of opposition, this is the year of the “yellow vests” and other movements. Because I have not seen that element of revolt in a great many films. It's something new.

LL: They are the poor, the wretched. And the poverty-stricken must revolt, like young Gavroche in Hugo's *Les Misérables* [who, in the novel, joins the revolutionaries in 1832]. Like Gavroche, the youth are rebelling against all form of authority. It's not just a revolt against the police, it's a revolt against everything, against the entire system that puts in place these figures, whether it's the cops, the self-appointed “mayor,” the drug trafficker. It's a general revolt.

I grew up in this kind of neighborhood. Things develop to a point. Young people look around and think, “Now what?” Things explode.

DW: Could you explain the significance of the connection to Victor Hugo and his novel?

LL: These are also the wretched. There is no difference, poverty stays the same. It's not the same epoch, but poverty remains in this area.

Victor Hugo described the social misery perfectly. You could take practically the entire book and apply it to the present conditions there.

DW: Can you describe the conditions that exist in that neighborhood?

LL: The situation has been like this there since the 1980s. Thirty years ago all of these areas were abandoned by the authorities. The jobless rate is 40 percent, there's delinquency, young and old, all the numbers are in the red. Nothing has changed during the period I can remember.

It's a universal film. It's not specific to Paris or France. The conditions exist in the US, Brazil, Africa. They create ghettos where the poor are forced to live. It's a global movie.

DW: Specifically, speaking of France, the unions, the so-called left parties, really have nothing to say to the youth in this neighborhood, do they?

LL: The “left,” the right, there's no difference. Even the far right. For 30 years, politics has not changed. You have a right government, a left government, a right government, a left government, and, in the end, nothing changes. It remains politics. The government in power makes absolutely no difference to the lives of the youth.

Does the “left” really exist today?

DW: This is not treated directly in this film, but could you explain your attitude toward the current attacks on refugees, on immigrants in Europe?

LL: It's a catastrophic situation. I can speak of the situation in Africa, as a French-Malian.

The political system in France and all over Europe is corrupt. Big corporations run the system.

The responsibility lies entirely with Europe, with the political system. The African governments are marionettes, manipulated for the most part by the West. The French colonial system was in place for more than a century. The African countries achieved independence, but it is not a real independence. You have all the multinationals in Africa, which loot the continent.

It's not astonishing that Africans have to emigrate. If the African countries really controlled their resources, their wealth, there would be few Africans clamoring to come to France by boat, because Africa is one of the most naturally rich continents. The multinationals, the millionaires make their fortunes out of Africa. Ninety percent of uranium in Europe used to generate electricity comes from that continent.

People complain, on the one hand, about all the illegal immigrants, but how many people actually think about why these people have to do what they do?

DW: Also the wars, in Libya, Syria, Afghanistan ...

LL: In the end, these are all economic wars, launched to loot the other countries. There is the talk about terrorism and Al Qaeda. But who created Al Qaeda, who financed and armed it? Those are the real questions that have to be answered.

DW: The film presents a somewhat intimate view of the police. But, in the end, there is little difference between the "good cop" and the "bad cop," they are all at the service of the same system. Is that true?

LL: Everything comes from above. Most of the police are young people badly trained, badly educated. They are thrown into these difficult situations in the neighborhoods, and because of their lack of training, it's very easy for them to panic. A lot of them when they panic, they pull the trigger. It's not their personal fault, it's the system, the way they are "untrained" to end up doing what they are doing.

President Macron announced a plan for these areas six months ago, but on the eve of the meeting, he cancelled it.

If nothing is done, then someone else in 20 years will come along and make a film very much like mine about exactly the same problems.



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