

New production of Les Mis is world-class

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A new take on an old tale creates wide eyes every night in the seats of the Princess of Wales Theatre in Toronto.

The classic Victor Hugo tale of misery, passion and love ? Les Miserables ? continues to draw crowds and high praise.

Expecting a depressing, low-beat tale of the plight of the well trodden French peasants of the 1800s, this new epic is anything but. Cameron Mackintosh's twist on this iconic story is captivating, action-packed and fast-paced, leaving the audience as breathless as the performers themselves.

There is no weak link in this story ??every single performer is tailor-made for their role and shine in certain moments of the story, pulling everything together nicely. There is no lull and the time literally flies.

The orchestra is spot-on, even pausing for extended audience appreciation, and not missing a single note. Their precision not only complements each musical number, but caresses it and enhances its beauty.

Stealing the hearts and winning admiration of the crowds is lead Ramin Karimloo (Jean Valjean), who's a veteran performer of Les Mis and The Phantom of the Opera, among other credits.

His stage presence and command of this role has given him another accolade. Karimloo has been chosen to join the cast of Les Mis when it returns to Broadway next March.

?The success of Les Miserables across America and around the world has been beyond my dreams, so I am thrilled to bring the show back to Broadway 27 years after the original production with some of the finest contemporary talents in the American theatre today,? said Mackintosh. ?Ramin Karimloo first played Jean Valjean for me in London over a year ago and earlier this month opened in the same role to tremendous acclaim in his home city Toronto. As Javert, he is matched by the magnetic Will Swenson who was such a sensation as Berger in Hair alongside our Fantine, the charismatic Caissie Levy. And Tony Award-winning Nikki James will undoubtedly break hearts as Eponine fresh from her triumph in The Book of Mormon. The rest of the company is shaping up to be just as exciting and I can't wait for rehearsals to begin.?

This newly re-imagined Les Mis is breaking box-office records and receiving rave reviews across North America, grossing more than \$160 million. International productions of the new Les Mis have been met with equal success and acclaim in the U.K., France, Spain, Japan and Korea and will open in Spain and Australia. This new version, which premiered in the U.K. in 2009, inspired filmmakers to make last year's immensely successful Oscar/Golden Globe/BAFTA winning movie.

Even more remarkable than Karimloo's grasp of the role is his voice. From powerful blasts to a soft falsetto, he's flawless. His extra-long note in Take Me Home is simply awesome.

The show tells its story through its magnificent score, which includes classics like ?I Dreamed a Dream, On My Own, Stars, Bring Him Home, Do You Hear the People Sing?, One Day More, Empty Chairs at Empty Tables, Master Of The House.?

Equally impressive is Earl Carpenter as Javert, the relentless officer who pursues Valjean throughout the story.?Carpenter's stature, presence and powerful voice make him perfect for the role, as the tenacious yet likeable nemesis. He remains powerful and daunting until his spectacular and well choreographed demise ? one of the neatest departures I've ever seen on stage.

Two of the main, strong female roles ? Cosette (Samantha Hill) and Eponine (Melissa O'Neil) ? were superb. With such high-calibre talent in these leading roles, they have to be careful not to steal the spotlight or overshadow their scene-mates. This takes experience, practise, timing and wisdom. Most knew when to pull back to allow the scenes flow effortlessly. Eponine's emotional plight and her own death scene are definite show-stoppers to be sure. She went from incredible strength to an unbelievable softness.

Thenardier (Cliff?Saunders)?and Madame Thenardier (Lisa Horner) are brilliant in their roles. Regular theatre-goers will know Horner ??she's hot off another recent standout ??playing the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz. Her competence is noticeable ? she knows her way around the stage and her movements (exits and entrances)?are like clockwork.

The couple's demeanor and injection of humour, is not easy to execute in such a bleak story line. They pull off their one-liners with razor-sharp precision, and add some well positioned comic relief. It helps create some smiles and laughs in an otherwise emotionally draining tale.

Perry Sherman (Marius) complements the veterans nicely, as do the student revolutionaries Mark Uhre, David Silvestri, Matt McMahan, Nonathan Winsby, Alan Shawk, John Rapson, Andrew Love and Matt Rosell.

In most theatrical performances, there is a certain amount of spoken dialogue. Not so, in Les Mis ??every line or dialogue, prose, confessions and scorn are sung. One has to admire their strength and stamina ? they're at full power all night long.

Toronto's Les Miserables is definitely one of the better productions to grace the stage in some time. This is a must-see, whether you're familiar with the original or not.