



# Adelaide Theatre Guide

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Supporting live theatre in South Australia

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## LES MISERABLES

### The Gilbert and Sullivan Society of SA

Arts Theatre

Until 7 October

Review by John Wells

Have we reached Les Mis saturation? This unstoppable musical is a wildly successful international brand, with countless professional productions all over the globe, followed by amateur and school shows, plus incessant talent show renditions of "I Dreamed a Dream", and a definitive all-star movie. The ubiquity and inflexibility of "Les Misérables" presents a dilemma to amateur directors and producers: how do you present a fresh production when it has all been done before (with bigger budgets)?

The creative trio – directors David Sinclair and Linda Williams, and musical director Peter Johns – have succeeded by crafting an emotionally compelling, pacy, and beautifully sung amateur version of this ever-popular show.

The success begins with the singing. Johns has worked hard with the ensemble and it shows: the chorus is strong and precise. The singing is rousing and has great emotive momentum. The consistently tuneful ensemble provides a wonderful structure for the perfectly-cast principals, all of whom are vocally superb. Johns' orchestra is uneven initially, but settles quickly. The vocal strengths are matched by the uniformly convincing acting. Sinclair and Williams have focused on emotional credibility and clarity, and the robust and nuanced performances they have drawn from their principal cast are impressive indeed.

It is hard to fault the leading players. Mark Oates (Jean Valjean) and Andrew Crispe (Javert) are a wonderful study in intensity and emotional co-dependence. Oates navigates Valjean's difficult vocal terrain with ease and conveys his haunted humanity with great effect. Crispe's burnished, expressive voice is beautifully appealing, and his understated, righteous zeal is utterly convincing. David MacGillivray brings a steely, muscular focus to Enjolras. There is a stirring, monumental feel to his singing as he leads the students in "Do You Hear the People Sing?" and "The Red and the Black". Casmira Hambleton (Fantine) manages to create a heart-breaking picture of a devastated woman. She sings "I Dreamed a Dream" with a palpable sense of anger and abject ruin; she chews the words in a furious staccato, then calms with ruined bewilderment, like a battered, wounded animal. It is a startling and confronting moment, and a thoughtful and inventive character study. The romantic trio of Marius (Joshua Angeles), Cosette (Emma Haddy) and the doomed Eponine (Jennifer Trijo), sing delightfully. Angeles' gormless charm contrasts well with Trijo's streetwise swagger.

The design elements combine beautifully. Sinclair's complex set uses moving panels, screens and scrim, which allow for scenic projections and rapid, mostly uncluttered set changes. The use of projections (designed by Sinclair and Matthew Berry) adds a professional sheen to the overall aesthetic, and creates many visually arresting playing spaces. Sinclair's set is lit with Jason Groves' warm, unobtrusive and sepia-washed design. The costumes (co-ordinated by Helen Snoswell) are attractive and match the characters. The students look particularly – and raffishly – striking.

There are some minor problems: the otherwise excellent chorus is hesitant at first, the sound is sometimes unbalanced and there are some microphone glitches, there is a bit of clunking as sets are moved, and the projections and lighting sometimes compete with each other. This is really nit-picking in what is an overwhelmingly strong production. The problems are the sort of gremlins that will be overcome as the production settles into its run.



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The combination of gorgeous voices, superior acting and creative design means this production has an engaging sense of originality. It is hard to imagine a better amateur production of this beloved show.