



LAURIE SPARHAM/UNIVERSAL PICTURES/AP PHOTO

This undated publicity photo provided by Universal Pictures shows, center, Helena Bonham Carter as Madame Thénardier in a scene from the film, "Les Misérables."

Tom Hooper's extravaganza, big-screen telling of the beloved musical "Les Miserables" is as relentlessly driven as the ruthless Inspector Javert himself. It simply will not let up until you've Felt Something - powerfully and repeatedly - until you've touched the grime and smelled the squalor and cried a few tears of your own. It is enormous and sprawling and not the slightest bit subtle. But at the same time it's hard not to admire the ambition that drives such an approach, as well as Hooper's efforts to combine a rousing, old-fashioned musical tale with contemporary and immediate aesthetics. There's a lot of hand-held camerawork here, a lot of rushing and swooping through the crowded, volatile slums of Victor Hugo's 19th-century France.

Two years after the release of his inspiring, crowd-pleasing "The King's Speech," winner of four Academy Awards including best picture, Hooper has vastly expanded his scope but also jettisoned all remnants of restraint. But he also does something clever in asking his actors sing live on camera, rather than having them record their vocals in a booth somewhere as is the norm, and for shooting the big numbers in single takes. The intimacy can be uncomfortable at times and that closeness highlights self-indulgent tendencies, but the meaning behind lyrics which have become so well-known shines through anew. You'd probably heard "I Dreamed a Dream," the plaintive ballad of the doomed prostitute Fantine, sung countless times even before Susan Boyle unfortunately popularized it again in 2009. An emaciated and shorn Anne Hathaway finds fresh pain and regret in those words because her rendition is choked with sobs, because it's not perfect. That's definitely part of the fascination of this version of "Les Miserables": seeing how these A-list stars handle the demands of near-constant singing. Hugh Jackman, as the hero and former prisoner Jean Valjean, is a musical theatre veteran and seems totally in command (although the higher part of his register gets a bit nasal and strained).

Amanda Seyfried, as Fantine's daughter, Cosette, whom Jean Valjean adopts, had already proven she can sing in "Mamma Mia!" but hits some freakishly high notes here - which isn't always a good thing. Eddie Redmayne is a lovely surprise as the lovestruck revolutionary Marius.

And of course, Samantha Barks gives an effortless performance as the lonely and doomed Eponine - everyone here is doomed, it's "Les Miserables" - a role she'd performed on the London stage.

And then there's Russell Crowe as the obsessed lawman Javert, who has pursued Jean Valjean for decades for breaking his parole and insists he's still a dangerous man, despite the pious and prosperous life Valjean has forged. Although Crowe has sung in rock bands for years, he's vocally overmatched here, which strips the character of the menace that defines him. Seeing him sing opposite Jackman makes you wish you could watch these same actors having these same conversations with, like, actual words. But again, it's hard not to appreciate the effort, the risk it required to take on the role.

For the uninitiated, Javert hunts for Valjean against the backdrop of the Paris Uprising of 1832. Adorable street urchins, sassy prostitutes and virile subversives band together to build barricades, and to sing on top of them, until they are gunned down by French troops. The adorably smitten Cosette and Marius wonder whether they'll ever see each other again. Thieving innkeepers Monsieur and Madame Thenardier (Sacha Baron Cohen and Helena Bonham Carter, garishly over-the-top even by the characters' standards) wonder when their next unsuspecting victim will come along. And Jean Valjean wonders whether he'll ever truly be free.

How you feel walking out of this film two and a half hours later will depend a great deal on what you brought into it going in. Maybe you listened to the soundtrack fanatically in high school and still know all the words to "On My Own." Perhaps you were thrilled to see the show on stage during a vacation to New York (and there's a nice little cameo from Colm Wilkinson, the original Jean Valjean from the London and Broadway productions). You will probably be in far better shape than someone coming into this cold.

You may even cry when key characters die, even though you know full well what fate awaits them. There's no shame in that - we're all friends here.

## **REVIEW- Hooper's 'Les Miserables' is Relentless**

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*"Les Miserables," a Universal Pictures release, is rated PG-13 for suggestive and sexual material, violence and thematic elements. Running time: 158 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four.*