

Ballads and Barricades

By Jen Poiry-Prough

For the past 5 years, Rich Najuch and Joel Froomkin have produced delightful holiday Supper Club shows at the New Huntington Theatre. But to end the inaugural season of their main stage theatre Different Stages, they decided to do a bit of a 180.

Rather than a lighthearted holiday cabaret show, they are mounting a grand production of the most heart-wrenching, tear-jerking and universally beloved musical in history: *Les Misérables*.

What makes this story – about the oppressed poor and a 19th century French student revolution that ends tragically – so perfect for the holidays?

“The show’s most powerful lyric is ‘to love another person is to see the face of God,’” says Froomkin, who is the artistic director for Different Stages, “and I think it’s such a beautiful message for this time of year. The show touches people in a very profound way and makes us so aware of the power we have for good. There is great joy in the journey of these characters.”

Froomkin sees a connection between the writing of Victor Hugo, who wrote the novel the musical is based on, and Charles Dickens, who wrote the holiday classic *A Christmas Carol*. In fact, he says, the musical’s creators had been inspired to write the show after seeing a West End adaptation of another Dickens novel.

“*Les Misérables* and *A Christmas Carol* are both allegories of redemption,” Froomkin says. “The path of one man to accept love in his heart and embrace his own potential goodness. Scrooge takes his journey in one night and Valjean’s journey takes 40 years, but they are on the same path. Tiny Tim opens the heart of Scrooge, and Valjean is transformed when he meets little Cosette.”

Like the Dickens story, *Les Misérables* certainly appears destined for all-time classic status with universal appeal.

“It’s not easy to pinpoint what makes something the most successful musical in history,” says Froomkin, but he points out that one of the factors is its universal relevance. “The characters are so rich that everyone in the audience can connect and find their own personal way into the story,” he says.

As for Froomkin, his love of the musical began with its orchestration.

“There are passages in the accompani-

ment supporting the melody lines that are some of the most beautiful phrases ever written for the stage,” he says. “Cameron Macintosh called them ‘magic notes.’ This show is filled with themes that support the melody, but are absolutely breathtaking. It’s one of the only shows I know where the audience can hum the accompaniment. That’s extraordinary.”

always felt that American productions of *Les Misérables* had a disadvantage because they didn’t have the versatility of dialect that British actors were able to employ,” he explains. “In British productions, simply by changing regional dialect the actors are not only able to transform their characters, but they can also make clear statements regarding geographic location, social status and class.”

Another enhancement Froomkin is bringing to his production centers on the characters themselves. He has turned to the source material, the Victor Hugo novel, to gain insights. “I’ve really spent time with the novel trying to understand these characters,” he says, “and get back to the root of the show’s origins.”

Froomkin contends that as rabid as *Les Misérables*’ theater fans are, this fandom did not necessarily translate to last year’s film production of the musical. “I think the film was visually a beautiful piece of work,” he admits, “but I felt there were musical choices which lost a great deal of the visceral affect this score can have on its audience.”

Rather than the operatic score that was originally written, he says that the film “shied away from that in an effort to keep things ‘real.’ The orchestration was so quiet that you didn’t feel the music in your gut the way you do when it’s washing over you in a theater. There was no bass, no heartbeat.”

He places the blame on modern cinema’s apparent “fear” of singing. “Film directors feel like they have to apologize for [singing in film],” he says. “You hardly ever hear people sing in the trailers of musicals anymore. They [minimize the singing] so it plays as ‘natural.’ But it really has to be the opposite; the emotion has to be bigger so that the energy justifies bursting into song.”

He also had the same complaint of the film that many moviegoers had: “There were performers in the film that simply didn’t have the musical chops to sing the score the way it should be sung,” he says.

In contrast, Froomkin’s cast members have strong, theatrically trained voices. “We really wanted the score sung,” he says. “Our company are all stellar musicians with incredible voices, and the sound they produce is going to be breathtaking.”

Different Stages audiences are already familiar with three of the production’s stars. Two appeared in this season’s *The Sound of*

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LES MISÉRABLES
Wednesdays-Sundays,
Dec. 4-21 (showtimes vary)
Different Stages Theater
528 N. Jefferson St., Huntington
Tix.: \$44-\$59, 260-454-0603
www.different-stages.com

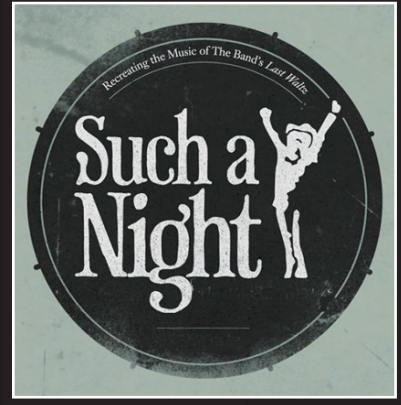
In addition to the “magic” of the music, Different Stages’ space adds another layer of depth to the production. “The intimacy of [our stage] allows a special bond between the audience and the performer,” he says.

The intimacy of the stage will not take away from the grandness of the production. “The set is truly epic,” he says, and it includes the show’s famous barricade. “The production will move in a very cinematic way, but the audience will have the opportunity to feel connected to the show in a way that is unique.”

As in the past, Froomkin will utilize projections against the backdrop of the set for added texture to transform the set in what he calls “a very painterly way.”

He also believes that the cast that he and Najuch have assembled has something special. “In my mind what makes the difference between a good production of this show and a great production is the ensemble,” he says, “and we have cast an extraordinary group of very versatile actors who work together beautifully.”

Froomkin’s expertise in dialects will also play into the production value. “I have



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