

Monmouth Comprehensive School's performance of *Les Misérables* was an absolute triumph! The elaborate and visually stunning set, supported by the intricate lighting and sound effects, transported the audience to 19th-century France, creating a captivating backdrop for the unfolding drama. The students on the backstage and technical crew ran the scene changes meticulously and professionally. The audience were in awe of how seamlessly scenes transitioned, exclaiming how professionally the student backstage crew and cast members timed their set and technical changes. Audiences were even more blown away to discover that our actors were singing against a live 15 piece orchestra led meticulously by Amy Ritter, the Head of Performing and Expressive Arts at MCS, all snugly hidden behind the backing flats of the French streets. The talent and capability of the musicians stunned audiences when they learned that the students were not, in fact, singing against a backing track as they had once thought! Their contribution added a layer of musical magic to an already enchanting evening, and it was only right that they finally came onto stage and took a bow on the closing performance. The vast array of costumes, make-up and wigs added authenticity and visual richness to the production, truly bringing each scene and character to life.

It was wonderful to note that many students, past and present, had opted to support the production and undertook roles in areas such as front of house, the orchestra, backstage crew and the technical team. It was a pleasure to see Milo Kent return from his course at the Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts as the Lead Sound Designer, and Bethany Piper returning from her Acting course in Chester to play viola in the orchestra.

Each student portrayed their character with remarkable talent and dedication. The ensemble of 80 plus students showed commitment, cohesion and teamwork throughout which added an engaging and believable energy to every scene, playing roles from The Chain Gang, The Poor, Factory Workers, Drinkers and Wedding Guests. The PEA Faculty is very lucky to work with a vast team of students willing to support and help each other throughout all aspects of this production - it is clear students had become a "cast family" throughout this process, and it was evident the amount of time and commitment they had dedicated to ensuring scenes ran flawlessly and character portrayals were engaging and believable.

The principal cast were nothing short of flawless and truly rivalled the standard of professionalism and talent that audiences had seen on the West End and touring productions, as staff and students were regularly told throughout the performances!

Sam North's portrayal of Jean Valjean, a man condemned to 19 years of imprisonment for stealing a loaf of bread, was handled with utter professionalism and incredible talent. Valjean's soul-stirring solos had audiences captivated, and Sam portrayed Valjean's constant life challenges and inner turmoil with sensitivity, passion and poise. It was especially engaging to see Valjean convincingly ageing throughout the production, with greying hair and ageing make-up expertly being applied between scenes by fellow student Sophie Allen, whose talents also extended to stage with her playing multiple lead ensemble female roles. Sam North is a talented and very bright student who has been offered a place at Oxford University for September.

Javert, the controversial constable in an unwavering pursuit of justice and inner conflict, was portrayed powerfully by Freddy Potts with depth and nuance. His formidable rendition of Stars had

the audience's listening with baited breath, as well as mourning his loss following his suicide from the bridge. Audiences were treated to a masterful portrayal of a complex character, as well as formidable vocals.

Stanley Kirkaldie's sincerity shone brightly in the performance as The Bishop, as he masterfully conveyed the character's unwavering compassion and grace. From the pivotal act of mercy towards Valjean to the genuine belief in redemption, Kirkaldie brought a sense of profound sincerity to the stage and successfully highlighted the transformative power of kindness and forgiveness within his role.

Fantine's tragic journey, from love to sacrifice, was heartbreakingly conveyed by both Dilys Barrow and Edie Geddes-Bell who shared the role. The emotional depth reached its zenith as Fantine's final moments unfolded, with both Barrow and Geddes-Bell's haunting renditions of "I Dreamed a Dream" echoing the profound tragedy of her life and leaving a lasting impact on the audience. The students' skillful execution of such complex and emotionally charged performances showcased their dedication to delivering a memorable and emotionally resonant performance.

Both Sacha Freeman, who played The Foreman, and Jack Painter, who played Bamatabois, demonstrated a powerful and uncomfortable portrayal of how some men treated women during the rendition of "Lovely Ladies", creating a very unsettling and disturbing scene for the audience. The actors' commitment to portraying the darker aspects of society was evident in their disconcerting performance, bringing to light the harsh realities faced by the female characters, especially Fantine. The discomfort felt by the audience served as a stark reminder of the social injustices depicted in *Les Misérables*, showcasing the students' willingness to confront challenging themes with authenticity and sensitivity.

Young Cosette, played by Florence McGarry, showed audiences Cosette's true innocence, from her delicate rendition of "Castle on a Cloud" to her tender interactions with Jean Valjean. The innocence of Young Cosette added a poignant layer to the production, making Cosette's journey as she grows up even more compelling and endearing.

Thénardier and Madame Thénardier, expertly played by Will Hevicon and Hannah Bradley, provided the perfect balance of comic relief, injecting humour into the intense narrative. Their comedic timing and animated performances showcased a commendable understanding of their scheming and opportunistic characters, as well as an ability to play to the audience's reactions and laughter. Their love of their daughter Young Eponine, played by Holly-Rose Parkin, is demonstrated by their fond interactions and having dressed her beautifully in a straw bonnet and cape. This contrasts greatly to the rags Young Cosette is forced to wear as she sweeps their floors and runs their errands, until she is rescued by a loving Jean Valjean who is on a mission to earn redemption from Fantine's tragic demise.

As a grown up, Cosette is played with innocence and grace by Ruby Jones, demonstrating stunning soprano vocals and tender characterisation. Frankie Minchella playing Marius, a Barricade Student, convinced the audience he had fallen deeply in love with Cosette whilst bumping into her at a chance encounter on the streets through longing eye contact and sensitive vocals and interactions. Jones and Minchella navigated love's first steps throughout "In My Life" and "A Heart Full of Love" with soft and

tentative interactions, evoking joy from the audience, with them longing for his survival from the Barricade attacks and celebrating with them throughout the Wedding scene.

As well as the highs, there are very many lows felt throughout the performance, especially due to the amount of tragic losses throughout the storyline. The barricade scenes were nothing short of gripping, with the students' passionate portrayal of the revolution creating a palpable tension. The intensity of the conflict, coupled with the haunting melodies within "Drink for Me" and "Turning", transported the audience into the heart of the struggle for justice and the tragic loss of lives. One such loss is that of the leader of the Barricade revolution. Played by Rob Riba Fookes, Enjolras, the charismatic leader of the students' revolution, commanded the stage with fervour and passion, embodying the spirit of rebellion. His strong, powerful vocals and passionate characterisation had the audience captivated and ready to raise their own red flags high in support of his fight! Standing around the bodies of his fallen peers, he takes to the top of the barricade to wave his red flag one last time, before taking a shot and falling in slow motion, which had the audience on the edge of their seat.

Gavroche, a split role played by both Bon Farr and Nye Jupp, had the audience on their side from their very first moment on stage due to their confidence and ability to keep up with the older Barricade boys, regardless of the character's age difference. Both Farr and Jupp had audiences smugly laughing along as they blow Javert's cover and save the Barricade students from a major betrayal. This made Gavroche's death all the more painful and poignant, leaving a huge lasting impact upon the audience who were deathly silent as they fell from the very top of the barricade and were caught by the other Barricade students. The room felt chills and a sea of hands raised to eyes to catch their tears throughout the audience as candles rose in place of the fallen students.

Another loss the audience mourned was that of Eponine. Played impeccably by Florence Hills, (a new student at MCS this year), she blew audiences away with her incredibly powerful vocals and her stunningly emotional renditions of "On My Own". Audiences wept when she emotionally sang "A Little Fall of Rain" as Marius cradles her in his arms throughout her final moments. Hills' talent shone in the role of the self-assured and confident Eponine, who had no trouble standing up to her father, the cunning Thernardier and his gang (played by Tomi North, Hamish Sperring, Thomas Fell, Daniel Stevens, Noa Rosier, Oren Beaumont and Daisy Ronicle), and her energy matched that of the barricade boys en masse.

The highly emotional epilogue ending left a lasting imprint, as the students delivered a heartfelt and poignant conclusion to *Les Misérables* with Valjean learning of Cosette and Marius' wedding, before sharing with them the truth of his fight for redemption since his release from prison all those years ago. Fantine's return on stage to take Valjean to Heaven was incredibly sensitive and emotional, and the audience wept with a mixture of emotions. The powerful rendition of "Do You Hear The People Sing?" as the entire cast re-enter the stage left the audience teary-eyed and deeply moved, before rising to their feet to give rapturous applause and a standing ovation, as every performance received throughout the run.

Special mentions are due to Isla Davies and Ben Hartland who supported the production throughout the rehearsal process, playing multiple swing roles in the absence of other actors as well as their assigned roles - a remarkable and highly professional feat for Year 11 actors!

Monmouth Comprehensive School's production of *Les Misérables* was a triumph of talent, teamwork, inclusivity and dedication. From the uncomfortable realities depicted to the heart-wrenching deaths and the ultimately redemptive conclusion, the production was a masterful blend of emotion and artistry, showcasing the students' remarkable theatrical prowess both on and off stage. *Les Misérables*, as performed by these young talents, will undoubtedly be remembered as a poignant and unforgettable theatrical experience that audiences will be talking about for some time to come. We sincerely look forward to what the Lower School Production will bring to the stage in the Summer term!