

Jean Valjean, the Prodigal Son

Review Essay on Regional Productions of *Les Misérables*

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In 2003, *Les Misérables* closed its sixteen-year run as one of the most successful musicals Broadway had ever seen. An eager audience welcomed the show back to New York as a Broadway revival just over three years later. It was expected that the show would be equally successful as it moved into regional theatres around the country, but few expected that the 2007 production of the musical by Pioneer Theatre Company in Salt Lake City, Utah, would run for ten weeks and sell out a record-breaking eighty-two performances. Since then, interest in the musical has not waned, as the three professional productions of *Les Misérables* produced in Utah over the past three years continued to play to packed houses.

The 2012 Utah Shakespeare Festival production in Cedar City, directed by Brad Carroll, garnered thirty-five sold-out performances and added shows to meet demand, and the 2013 Pioneer Theatre Company staging, directed by Charles Morey, added two weeks of performances to its initial run to accommodate audiences desirous to follow the story of Jean Valjean. This success was equaled in the most recent production of *Les Misérables* at the Hale Center Theatre in West Valley City, which sold nearly every seat during its run of over one hundred performances. The stage version of Victor Hugo's masterpiece *Les Misérables* features music by Claude-Michel Schönberg, with original French lyrics by Alain Boublil and Jean-Marc Natel and an English-language libretto by Herbert Kretzmer, has clearly sparked something in American audiences and particularly, it seems, in Latter-day Saint audiences.

The LDS community has not only been entertained by various productions of the musical but has also been reminded of its messages and morals from the pulpit. In September 1991, Elder M. Russell Ballard referenced the musical in his address at the general women's meeting, focusing on Jean Valjean's oft-repeated lyric "Who am I?" Elder Ballard remarked that Valjean, having committed his life to God, had to ask this question before deciding whether to falsify testimony and let an innocent man go to prison in his place, or to admit the truth and face the consequences of his past. President Thomas S. Monson is an admirer of the story and the musical and quoted the lyrics of the song "Bring Him Home" to close his address in the October 2003 priesthood session of general conference. This song was later performed for President Monson at his eighty-fifth birthday celebration in 2012.

The commercial success of the musical, as well its success among Mormon audiences, is a bit surprising because it does not follow popular themes or typical story structure. First of all, anyone who did not study revolutionary France may not understand the antiquated political sparring. Second, the story sprawls across decades, involving possibly too many central characters. Characters' ages and their stories intersect; they take on new identities and relationships. Add to these things the sparse conceptual set and staging that requires quick transitions between scenes as the years pass. The Pioneer Theatre Company used a turntable to help transition between scenes, whereas the Utah Shakespeare Festival had a unit set that remained on stage throughout the show.

And yet, despite this epic scale, the musical's action is internally driven, focusing on the question, What kind of man will Valjean choose to be? No traditional villain opposes Valjean; the chief antagonist, Javert, pursues Valjean, but is often absent from the action, becoming less consequential as the play proceeds. As foes, Valjean and Javert are driven apart rather than driven together into a classic confrontation. Meanwhile, the student revolutionaries fight an unseen militia, and though these forces slay beloved characters, their anonymity renders them easily forgotten. Finally, the Thénardiens contribute as comedic foils and so are never truly seen as a danger.

So what holds this sprawling collection of characters and actions together? We decided to examine *Les Misérables* closely to better understand its particular appeal to LDS audiences. We attended productions at the aforementioned Utah Shakespeare Festival and Pioneer Theatre Company to discover what in this story, beyond the obvious redemptive elements of Valjean's journey, speaks so strongly to the sensibilities of

LDS audiences. We observed that LDS audiences, in lieu of considering the traditional story line of conflict and resolution between hero and villain, contemplated how characters face adversity, accept God, forgive, and repent. They saw how *Les Misérables* demonstrates the grace received through repentance and reinforces the truth that people are ultimately responsible to each other. During our journey, we also examined ourselves and discovered why the musical appeals to us. We suppose our insights will appeal to Latter-day Saints as well.

In the New Testament, Christ expounded on the nature of the gospel using the narrative approach of parables. In reviewing the play, we noticed the story of *Les Misérables* resonating with and echoing these parables. While there are many ways to interpret the musical, we found these parables often mirroring its content and meaning in remarkable ways. How clearly that reflection shines is not as important as the exercise of comparing and intently observing. We are not arguing here whether Victor Hugo intended his story to be a direct reimagining of Christian parables; ours is a comparative exercise, sometimes correlative and sometimes imaginative, intended to bring insight into the play and life itself. Through this exercise, we ask readers not to see things our way but to see things in a deeper way.

Audiences that do not have the desire or ability to look deeply into the thematic elements of the musical could marvel at the quickly passing scenes, listen to the music, and be satisfied. As with parables, audiences might miss essential and profound truths and still be engaged by the surface narrative. They could focus simply on the parts of the story that they comprehend. However, notice how the inspector Javert cannot comprehend the parables, so to speak, before him. In this way, Javert is like the Pharisees of ancient Jerusalem, tied to the letter of the law and unable to see or accept a penitent man. He is like the misguided “natural man” of Mosiah 3:19—the proud hypocrite. He outwardly shows his devotion to what is right but is unable to recognize the divinity in others. As a result, he is burdened by a hidden sorrow. In both productions we attended, the actor playing Javert adopted a melancholy disposition, Brian Vaughn of the Utah Shakespeare Festival especially so, often staged as if an invisible bubble surrounded him, highlighting his isolation and profoundly communicating his lack of joy. Javert finds no comfort in the truth and beauty around him but instead sees misery and evil everywhere he goes. Javert solely expects the law to rule and does not see the meaning of Valjean’s journey. Audiences generally understand that Javert is unyielding and Valjean is merciful; Mormon

audiences have opportunity to see a deeper significance in this part of story because they are familiar with many parables, object lessons, and metaphors relating to justice and mercy.

In the opening moments of the musical, Valjean is seen in an act of theft and deception; he is a criminal. He does, however, return from this path and thus illustrates the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). To connect the musical to this parable, we cast Javert as the faithful son who envies the attention his father gives to his brother. We see Valjean as the prodigal, figuratively eating with swine (see Luke 15:16) as he is turned away from every door he approaches. He learns humility, repents of his past mistakes, and becomes a wealthy, free man, which symbolizes living again in his father's house.

The familiarity of this and other redemptive parables may be a reason why Mormon audiences resonate with the play, so much so that they are willing to negotiate watching the coarse and bawdy scenes in the production. Efforts were not made by either the Utah Shakespeare Festival or the Pioneer Theatre Company to mask the squalor of prison, the abuse of the Thénardiens, or even the working conditions of prostitutes as examined in the song “Lovely Ladies.” It appears that Mormon audiences are prepared to look past the baser elements of the characters and stories to see the enlightened messages, a task they are not always willing to do while considering more secularly themed works. When Mormon audiences read these “sins” through the contextual lens of redemption or parable, the staging moves from prurient to instructive: a necessary evil to establish the need for repentance and forgiveness.

In the parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31–32), Christ taught that small things bring about great things, that the smallest mustard seed can grow to a tree “so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof” (Matt. 13:32). Similarly, the small act of the bishop early in the musical has tremendous impact. It transforms Valjean and, consequently, the many characters that rely on his strength and example, including Fantine, Cosette, and Marius. Many of our favorite moments in both productions were surrounding these characters and their one-on-one interactions with Valjean: his promise to Fantine at her deathbed, staged so beautifully as Fantine reaches in her imagination for her daughter; his fervent demand that he and Cosette must leave Paris in order to be safe; and his plea to heaven to preserve Marius's life all led us to appreciate Valjean's selfless regard and love for others. As theatre practitioners, we could see the artistic choices that led to these powerful moments; as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints, these moments also caused us to reflect on our own lives and the expressions of our Christianity.

The musical also works as a variation on the parable of the sower and the seeds (see Luke 8:4–15). In this story, a sower spreads seeds; some are eaten by birds, some take shallow root to eventually burn in the sun, some fall among thorns and are choked out, and some land in good soil. In our conception, Valjean represents the good soil on which the seed falls. According to the parable, the seed is the word of God, and therefore the sower is ultimately God himself. When Valjean sings in prayer—when he makes covenants, pleads, or asks for guidance—he is delivering his words not to a generalized beyond but directly to God. In both productions, light (spotlights, ambient warm light, or candles) was used in these moments of communion with God. J. Michael Bailey as Valjean consistently focused his eyes on a set point when addressing God. This was especially seen in the signature song “Bring Him Home.” We appreciated these details and assume that Mormon audiences likewise recognized that the God of Victor Hugo is similar to the God they envision.

While these enlightened moments were powerful in Valjean’s story and at Fantine’s deathbed, they were purposely lacking with other characters, notably in the Utah Shakespeare Festival production. Javert’s conversation with Deity is not direct, and the lighting suggested no reciprocation of love and connection. The production’s lighting choices helped attune us to the parable, where some do not receive the word.

For example, the Thénardiens have the chance to be taught by a kind and merciful Valjean, but they reject him. Everything about them suggests they have no inclination toward goodness and are callous in their interactions with others. The design choices, especially for the Pioneer Theater Company production, showed the rough nature of these characters. There, the couple wore earth tones and were coarse in their appearance, while the Utah Shakespeare Festival couple was costumed to be quite garish. Either way, in parable terms, we would say the Thénardiens represent the rocky ground where the seed is devoured by Satan.

To extend this metaphor, Javert also sees the gospel light in Valjean, but the message is choked by his limited vision and his unwillingness to admit any error that would weaken his mantle of power. He is choked by the thorns of his own pride (see Luke 8:7). Javert believes he has taken full root in righteousness, and in the end he is surprised to discover that he is not who he envisioned himself to be. He cannot continue to grow with the weeds that have wrapped around his heart. His pride leads to his ultimate destruction.

Fantine appears at first to be the shallow soil, lacking the strength or depth to sustain roots. However, as the parable and musical suggest to us, some only need a little added nourishing. We were impressed by her performance in the Pioneer Theatre Company production; her final decline and degradation powerfully contrasted with her reminiscence of joy in former days. While she believes that she has failed in life, Fantine's heart is deep and rich, and her final scene is one of light and salvation.

Valjean's journey to help others is by no means a direct or easy path. In addition to the prodigal son, Valjean can also be seen as the unprofitable servant in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14–30). In this parable, Christ tells of three servants who are given talents. Two use their talents to gain additional ones, but the last, in fear, hides his sole talent in the earth. In the musical, once Valjean has decided to reach out to the young Cosette, he takes her and hides for several years. These years pass with merely a supertitle, but we get a glimpse of Valjean's life as we see him fortified in his house and anxious when traversing the streets of Paris. Where once he had joy, now he has fear. To his credit, he is worried only because he knows he will lose Cosette and fail in his promise to Fantine should he be discovered by Javert. However, by taking out our comparative lens, we see that hiding in fear is contrary to Christ's message in the parable. Upon the master's return, the profitable servants, those who went into the world with their gift, are praised as "good and faithful" and told, "Enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matt. 25:21). But the servant who hides his talent is called "slothful" and "wicked" (Matt. 25:26). Of course, our reading is a broad one; Valjean is not intended to be seen as unprofitable or slothful or wicked. However, it is only when he comes out of hiding that he is able to save Marius and find redemption for himself.

In the Utah Shakespeare Festival production, J. Michael Bailey's characterization of Jean Valjean was a bit jarring at first. In the opening moments of the production, he came across as a rock star, with a physicality and vocalization that felt too contemporary and loose. His approach to the character was not what we had expected; wearing passion on his sleeve and filling the house with energy, he was not a broken-down, pious, and humbled Valjean displaying constraint. While it seemed too much at first, he eventually won us over with his vitality. In the end, we considered his performance a vibrant characterization of the energy that comes from living a Christian life. Bailey's acting choices played nicely off the control and stoicism displayed by Brian Vaughn as Javert. We saw the difference between the hypocrite who professes devotion to Christ and the man who truly lives it. Bailey was the hard-living

prodigal son, and his willingness to commit fully to fixing his mistakes meant that he later had the energy to commit fully to God. Future performers in the role would do well to celebrate and emulate the passion and fervor of his interpretation.

We left both of these performances having absorbed a message of Christlike love, not only because it is part of the story but also because we as Mormons come from a tradition of interpreting parables. We learned about selfishness and pride; we learned about forgiveness and repentance; and most of all we learned, through the Bishop, Fantine, Eponine, Marius, and of course Valjean, how to better reach out in love.

We enjoyed both performances of this musical and will seek out others in the future. (In fact, Shawnda was a cast member in the 2014 Hale Center Theatre production.) We are clearly not alone; LDS audiences return again and again to *Les Misérables* on screen, on stage, and even in church talks. We believe they return for the same reason that they continue to search the scriptures: they continually find new truths and deeper understandings in the story. In reading *Les Misérables* as a parable, Mormon audiences will, at different times in their lives, recognize new resonances with Valjean and his journey back to God as the prodigal son.

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