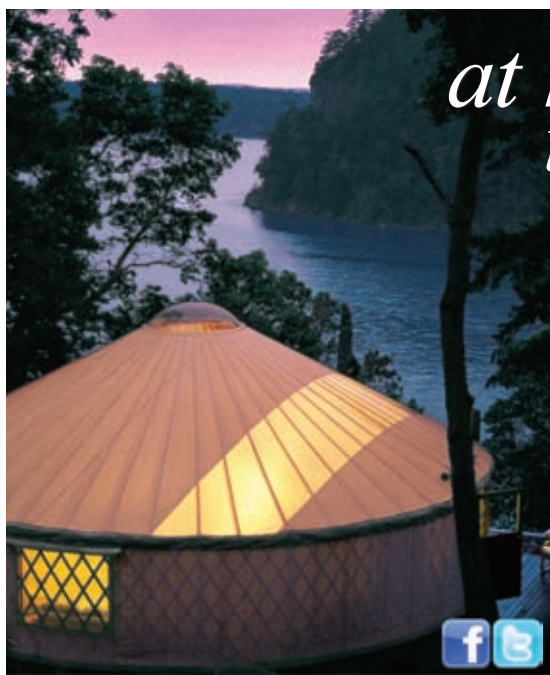




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EW is happy to announce the Next Big Thing semi-finalists
(in no particular order): Caroline Bauer, Michael Conley,
Robert Meade, Sol Seed, The Crescendo Show, Those
Willows, Speaker Wave, Elena Leona, Paris Green,
Dubious, Tita Luisa, Edewaard, Scott Austin, The Great
Hiatum, Steel Wool and Barefoot Leroy. See these
talented warblers duke it out next at the
Lane County Fair (July 24-28).

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THEY DREAMED A DREAM

Les Miz dazzles at the ACE

On its surface, *Les Misérables*, the operatic adaptation of Victor Hugo's classic novel, can come across as a maudlin chain-yanker that nabs every low-hanging fruit it can reach, including issues of abject poverty, human degradation and the tragic death of a good-hearted prostitute. The show seems, in a way, beneath common dignity, if only because it strives so hard to achieve it. And because of this, people of high-aspiring intellect (snobs) tend to avoid *Les Miz*, ranking it on a level with *Cats* and other shitbird musicals by Andrew Lloyd Weber. *En fait*, I once felt this way. *Fou! C'est moi.*

There is nothing good nor bad but production makes it such, and Actors Cabaret of Eugene (ACE) has mounted a seriously good, if not great, production of Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg's epic "sung-through" musical. ACE's *Les Miz* is intimate, engaging and spiritually frank. Also, it seethes with local talent and is propelled by a behind-the-scenes team that manages, by confidently adapting everything to the cozy setting of the ACE theater, to make the show pulse with an uncommon immediacy. The talented cast is practically in your lap during the performance. The dark, gorgeous sets, which have the cobbled simplicity of a lean-to, amplify the sensuous life-and-death struggles of the story as well as the company's beautiful costume work.

Director and designer Joe Zingo does an amazing job putting across this sprawling, multivalent story, which centers on Jean Valjean (Tony Joyner), the convict seeking personal redemption, Valjean's persecutor, the constable Javert (Tom Grimsley), the doomed prostitute Fantine (Cindy Kenny) and the love triangle involving Fantine's daughter, Cosette (played young by Emily Hatcher, grown by Allyson Faber), bedraggled Eponine (Jane Brinkley, Sophie Mitchell) and student revolutionary Marius (Anthony Coslett). Zingo and crew keep the story grounded and tight-knit without losing any of Hugo's epic scope. It's a feat of dramatic engineering, and the actors are fully on board with a vision that can be described as spirited engagement with the material and audience.

All deserve praise here, but a special nod must go out to veteran actor and expert vocal coach Mark Van Beever, whose sure touch is especially felt in the show's continuous vocal excellence; whether it's an actor taking a solo or a rousing ensemble number, the songs are delivered with oomph and a keen emotional balance. Van Beever also teams up with the superb Erica Jean in the roles of the scurrilous couple, innkeepers M. Thénardier and Mme. Thénardier, a pair of scalawags that has never encountered an opportunity too low to pluck. Van Beever and Jean throw themselves headfirst into these roles. They are perfect.

This is not Broadway's *Les Misérables*, nor is it the same production that has run continuously in London since 1985. This is *Les Misérables* with gristle, tears and blood. It is a beautiful and moving production. And what ACE has done is all the more impressive the longer one thinks on it: As with The Red Cane Theatre and its recent run of *Grease*, there is an audaciousness in a small, local outfit tackling a big, glitzy show on its own limited but by no means diminished terms — an audaciousness that has paid off in both instances. This is what community theater is all about, folks.

In the end, ACE has eked an inspiring spiritualism from an opera that could be and has been, in more experienced but not necessarily more talented hands, given over to the cause of tear-jerker and liberal grandeur. *Les Misérables*, as realized by director Zingo and his devoted cast and crew, is at once entertaining and soulfully engaging, and it has the power to open your eyes to the possibilities of art and, by turns, life. Nothing in this world is perfect, but those, like the artists at ACE, who strive for perfection, should be lauded. And rewarded with an audience for their efforts. By all means, *dépêche-toi*, and enjoy this treat. ■

Les Misérables runs Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays through Aug. 10 at Actors Cabaret of Eugene; \$16-\$41.95. See actorscabaret.org for details.



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