

Les Mis

By Marilyn Reeves

In 1986 PBS aired the 'Dream Cast' concert of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. It was performed by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under the direction of David Charles Abell in front of a live audience at the Royal Albert Hall in London. I was so enthralled by it I bought the DVD.

The famous Irish tenor Colm Wilkinson starred as the protagonist Jean Valjean (pron. Jon Val Jon). Prior to the onset of the French Revolution, Valjean spent years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. After he finally escapes, he is set on a new path in life by a Catholic priest who takes pity on him, and eventually works his way up to become the owner of a large factory and Mayor of the town. But the relentless Inspector Javert has made it his life's mission to find Valjean and put him back behind bars. ([Philip Quast](#), with his deep baritone voice, excels as the persistent [Javert](#).)

One of Valjean's employees is a woman named Fantine (played by the lovely blonde contralto [Ruthie Henshall](#)), who is ridiculed by her fellow employees for being a 'fallen woman' because she had a child out of wedlock. When one of the other women attacks her, Valjean fires both of them, leaving Fantine destitute and having to turn to prostitution. When Valjean realizes his mistake and the harm he has caused her, he pays a visit to Fantine. Her dying wish is that he rescue her sweet Cosette from the clutches of the devious innkeeper, [Thénardier](#). Valjean grants her request, adopting the young girl (played by Hannah Chick) and raising her as his own.

The conniving innkeeper, [Thénardier](#), is brilliantly portrayed by [Alun Armstrong](#). [Jenny Galloway](#) plays his wife, the rotund [Madame Thénardier](#), who treated poor little Cosette like a slave. But in a moment of comedy relief she steals the show with her hilariously raunchy performance of 'Master of the House.'

When Cosette becomes a young woman she falls in love with a University student named Marius. But Marius is also loved by another – the little street urchin [Éponine](#), who has loved him all her life. ([Éponine](#) is beautifully portrayed by [Lea Salonga](#), of *Miss Saigon* fame). Marius spends much of his time with his fellow students at a local pub, where they discuss the glories of the upcoming revolution and plan to make a stand at the barricade. But all his friends are killed there, and Marius is wounded. Perhaps Wilkinson's most memorable performance was his interpretation of the song 'Bring Him Home,' referring to the fallen Marius.

Marius is portrayed by the British singer Michael Ball. When he and Cosette first fall in love, he and the lyric soprano Judy Kuhn sing a beautiful duet called 'Every Day,' harmonizing in fifths. It is one of the sweetest sounds I've ever heard.

Later, when Marius returns to the pub and realizes all of his friends are gone, Ball sings a profoundly heart-rending version of the song 'Empty Chairs and Empty Tables.' His rich baritone voice nearly shakes the rafters, and I was shaken to my core!

At the end, he and Cosette are reunited and pay a visit to the dying Jean Valjean, who gives them his blessing. Then the entire cast of 250 singers present a rousing finale of 'Do You Hear

the People Sing?' which has the audience up on their feet with thunderous applause for one of the greatest performances ever presented at the Hall.

*Les Mis* was also the greatest musical I have ever seen.