

Have you seen the new production of *Les Miserables* currently running at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina on Hilton Head?



It's about as close to Broadway as you're likely to get this side of the Mason Dixon line, and you really shouldn't miss it.

Assuming you like this sort of thing, that is. If you are one of those people who doesn't like musicals because you find them unrealistic ("People don't spontaneously burst into song," I've been told), or who feels manipulated by overt displays of sentiment, or embarrassed by naked sincerity, then *Les Miserables* may not be your cup of tea. If, however, you are like me – if you long for a world with *more* sentiment, *more* sincerity, and yes, even more spontaneous singing – then get thee to the Arts Center before this thing closes.

I know what I'm talking about here. You see, I'm a bit of a Les Miz aficionado. (Maybe "groupie" is a better term?) I'm one of those obnoxious fans who's seen the show several times, knows every word to every song, and insists on calling it "Les Miz." For years, this was my dirty little secret — or, at best, a source of minor embarrassment — as I strove to maintain the cool, detached, slightly contemptuous stance expected of an academic-turned-journalist. People like me weren't supposed to like this grandiose, overwrought musical extravaganza. People like me weren't supposed to like musicals, period. Much to my shame at the time, I failed on both counts. Try as I might, I simply couldn't convince myself that musical theatre — done well — was anything less than the most exhilarating soul-buzz ever invented. My close friends knew of my weakness — I made the occasional wisecrack about my "thing for musicals" in a bid to pass it off as pleasantly quirky — but I kept the true depth of my passion hidden. I only let my freak flag fly in my parents' home, among my own tribe, all of whom are Miz Heads from way back. (Who do think took me to my first production?)

Now that I've reached middle age (ahem, EARLY middle age), and have given up any pretense of "cool" (still a daily struggle!), I am finally free to love musical theatre publicly and with reckless abandon. And I do, every chance I get.

A good production of Les Miz is a cathartic experience. And make no mistake — this is a very, very good production of Les Miz. From the sets to the costumes to the cast — most of whom are New York professionals — this Les Miz rivals any I've seen over the years. If you, too, happen to be a Miz Head, you need not worry that you've seen this one before. It is not a traveling show. The Arts Center's director, Casey Colgan, auditioned 850 actors from all over the country to create this original production, which runs through May 24th.

First things first: The show looks fantastic. I wasn't sure how a big production like this would work in a small-ish space like the Elizabeth Wallace Theatre, and it *is* a different — more intimate — Les Miz experience. The play normally appears rather stylized, almost as a series of tableaux. But, here, you're much closer to the stage than usual. As a result, the whole thing feels more personal — like you're not just watching the story, you're living it. Still, the staging is every bit as artful and dazzling as one expects Les Miz to be, with the actors backlit against a dark, gloomy canvas, literally glowing in rich chiaroscuro. Layers of gauzy scrim create a haunting, ethereal effect — rising and falling to move you quickly from scene to scene. (The show's pace is brisk and feels effortless... a sure sign that much effort has gone into it!) The costumes — 150 created just for this production — are beautiful and full of detail. From prisoners to prostitutes, soldiers to school boys, poor street people to opulent aristocrats... the costume shop has risen to every occasion. Bravo!

I cannot say enough about the cast. There's not a weak link in the chain — amazing for a cast of

36 singing actors. I hesitate to single anyone out, since the ensemble is so uniformly strong, but standouts in a cast this good deserve mention. They include: Lindsie Van Winkle as a soulful, heart-breaking Eponine; Doug Jabara as a resolute, tormented Javert; and Meghan Colleen Moroney and Christopher Vettel as the irrepressible Madame & Monsieur Thenardier, possibly the best I've seen to date. But special praise must be reserved for Jason Kraack as Jean Valjean, one of the most demanding roles in musical theatre. Valjean is the sun around which these characters orbit, and Kraack imbues his with all the dignity and moral authority the role requires. He also brings flashes of barely-restrained anger and raw tenderness to the table, making his Valjean more complicated than others I've seen. Most important, of course, is his marvelous, marvelous voice. Whether he's engaged in a stirring production number like "One Day More" or a prayerful supplication like "Bring Him Home," if you have a heart in your chest, this Valjean will make you weep. And if you don't weep at a production of Les Miz, the show hasn't done its job. As I said, it should be a catharsis.

What always makes this show so compelling for me, no matter who's performing it, is the story itself. I am now making a concerted effort – based on the advice of several well-meaning people in my life – to keep my interest in religion and theology out of this column, so let me just say it like this: *Les Miserables*, much like Victor Hugo's 1862 novel on which it's based, explores the Big Themes that I find endlessly fascinating: the nature of good and evil, sin and redemption, the letter of the law versus the spirit, and man's relationship to his Maker. If you are *not*

particularly interested in these themes (and I haven't always been, so I get that), you will nonetheless find much to adore about Les Miz. Convict-turned-hero Jean Valjean is simply one of the great fictional characters of all time. And who can help but love the student revolutionaries, with their romantic dreams of a new world order? Or the plucky street urchin Gavroche (played with great spunk by eleven-year-old Whitaker Gannon, one of a few locals in the cast)? Or good, scrappy Fantine, who gives up everything for her child? Who is not moved, in the end, by the plight of Inspector Javert, who clings tenaciously to justice but cannot accept mercy? Who can fail to weep for brave, lovelorn Eponine, or to cheer for the young sweethearts, Cosette and Marius, or to laugh with the bawdy, uproarious Thenardiers? This is the good stuff. The stuff of life! And it's all in there. Jam-packed. Even set to glorious music. Come to think of it, Les Miz is what they call "an embarrassment of riches." And this may be why some of us moderns, with our fondness for irony and subtly and ambiguity, find it a little.... embarrassing.

Hey, I'm a woman of my era. I perfected the eye roll before I hit puberty. Too much earnest emotion tends to make me squirm. But none of us who live and breathe the popular culture of 21st Century America is in danger of OD'ing on sincerity. Why not take a night away from the TV (you can always TiVo "30 Rock" and "The Office") and reacquaint yourself with the concept, while savoring a truly first rate theatrical production? You won't be sorry you did.

Les Miserable runs through May 24 in the Elizabeth Wallace Theatre. Performances are at 8 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday with Sunday shows at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$54 for adults, \$37 for children ages 4 to 15, and may be purchased at the Arts Center box office or by phone with a credit card by calling 843-842-ARTS (2787).