

ARTS & LEISURE

PHOTO/RON SCHERL



THE SONG OF ANGRY MEN Most of the cast of *Les Misérables* assembles to sing the rousing "One Day More," the first act's closing number. Playing at San Francisco's Curran Theatre through August 5, *Les Mis* is a theatrical experience not to be missed.

Believe The Hype

'Les Misérables' Extends Dazzling San Francisco Run

Having called for *Les Mis* tickets only a week in advance, we were rewarded with seats in the theater's absolute last row, located at a stunning height.

We managed the eight flights leading to the Curran Theatre's rear balcony and, gasping for breath, inquired about the opera glasses typically located in 25-cent boxes next to the seats.

"Ah, the opera glasses. The disaster of the Curran," began Susan the Overly Honest Usher. "They're mostly figments of your imagination. The boxes usually eat your quarter. If you actually get them they're broken, the lenses are missing, or they're monacles."

Our vantage point didn't really matter. There are few superlatives that haven't already been lavished on *Les Misérables*, and with good reason—it's incredible, a simply monumental event. And for those of us who have thus far missed out on the experience, the Curran has extended the musical's San Francisco run through Aug. 5.

Adapted from Victor Hugo's 1,200-page novel about the 19th-century French underclass, the 60-ton musical lasts well over three hours. The three dozen cast members march and sing through an amazing 28 songs (and

that's fewer than appeared in the 1987 Broadway show).

The show's effects are magnificent—the turntable stage rotates to change scenery and cast, sometimes giving the audience a revolving view of settings. Scenes fade in and out with cinematic precision, bordered by smoke and divided by projected title cards. A massive barricade hosts a dramatic battle scene.

Les Mis tells the tale of Jean Valjean (Richard Kinsey), a prisoner freed after 19 years in jail, and his quest for a life of honor, always pursued by nemesis and police chief Javert

(Richard Kinsey). Along the way several subplots and alternate plots emerge, all vaguely related to Valjean's story.

Hebert dominates the proceedings with a versatile Mandy Patinkin voice and strong presence, while the stiff-necked Kinsey's baritone provides a solid counterpoint.

As a pair of bawdy innkeepers, Gary Beach and Gina Ferrall play the show's only major comic characters, and Beach's two humorous numbers—hilarious under normal circumstances—seem even funnier amid the ensemble's tragedy and desperation. In the

show's memorable, catchy series of songs, his stand out, if only for the humor.

The ensemble cast is consistently excellent, even the 20 Bay Area actors, who take some of the show's major roles. Though *Les Mis* falls short of perfection—what show doesn't?—it's about as close as could be hoped for.

In the end the exploration of love versus hate and good versus evil is more lasting than the dazzling mechanics of the show. The themes make *Les Mis* something far more durable than, say, *Starlight Express* or probably—when it arrives here in a couple of years—*Phantom of the Opera*. Don't miss it.

Les Misérables is scheduled to run every Tuesday through Saturday evening at 8 p.m., with 2 p.m. matinees Wednesdays and Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sunday shows. Ticket prices range from \$55 to \$20, with \$16 student tickets available. To charge tickets by phone, call a Ticketron outlet.

The Curran's loge seats are the house's best, and mezzanine and orchestra are terrific as well. Balcony seats are still worthwhile, but take my advice: Bring your own opera glasses.

—MATTHEW BUDMAN

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