

Les Misérables

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### **Introduction**

The 1998 epic film, "Les Misérables" is one of the best films about redemption and revolution that I have ever seen. The novel Les Misérables was written by Victor Hugo a 19th Century French novelist and poet during the 1879-94 French Revolution. There have been several makings of this thriller movie but the one that I will discuss is the 1998 version that was directed by Billie August. Mr. August was born 1948 in Brede Denmark, he became a film and television director winning several awards, a Danish Academy Award, in 1987, a Palme d'Or, Academy Award, and the Golden Globe award. The screenplay writer, Rafael Yglesias. The main characters were Liam Neeson, (Jean Valjean), Uma Thurman (Fantine), Geoffrey Rush (Policeman), and Clair Danes (Cosette). The location of the film, Czech Republic. The movie was produced by James Gorman and Sarah Radclyffe and co-produced by Caroline Hewitt. One line producer Michel Siksik from Paris. It took a casting of 61 to make this movie which was cast by Leo Davis (as Leonova Davis). The music was produced by Basil Poledouris who died in 2006. The directory of cinematography, Jorgen Person. The film was edited by Janua Billeskev-Jansen. The Art direction was done by Peter Grant. The costume worn by all actors was designed by Gabriella Pescucci and the production design was done by Ann Asp. There was a second unit of directors and assistants and others who helped to make Victor Hugo's poetic writing come alive in the 21st Century.

### **Historical Background of Victor Hugo**

Hugo was born on February 26, 1802, in Besancon, Doubs, France. He was the third son of Joseph-Leopold-Sigisbert who was a Major and later during his military career became a general in Napoleon's army. Author Graham Robb, in his book Victor Hugo, gives us the truth about this great 19th Century French writer in his biography of 1997. He mentions that according to Hugo's father Victor-Marie Hugo, Hugo was conceived at 3,000 feet above

sea-level at one of the highest peaks of the Vosges Mountains in France. He had to endure long years of his parents' dismantled marriage and had to endure the death of his mother and reconciliation with his father.

Hugo was not only a novelist but a dramatist of the Romantic Movement. His fascination with reading poems started when he was a child and when he became older, he became one of the leaders of the French Romance and one of the few authors who was allowed to reach popularity during his lifetime. Hugo spent most of his time at the Polytechnic University of Paris, and he dedicated all his work to literature. The historical background of *Les Misérables* was written when the monarch of France was reestablished and when Hugo was in exile on the Island of Guernsey (1851-1870). He was inspired to write this novel from what he had witnessed with his own eyes in 1832. In 1832 a group of Parisians started a riot in the streets that was stopped by government troops. Despite the so-called improved government, Hugo saw the gruesome effect of the revolution and how people were still left starving for food and destitute to survive. This event prompts him to put pen to paper and he birthed one of the most renowned reads of his time and films of today. Hugo died on May 22, 1885, in Paris France.

Author Charles E. Wilbour, translator of *Les Misérables* had something different to say about Victor Hugo's character than his fellow author Graham Robb. He describes Hugo as the "Mr. Toad of French literature: vain, arrogant, pompous, selfish, cold and stingy; windbag, a humbug and a fraud, absurdly puffed up with the immensity of his own greatness." He also mentioned that Hugo was a mythologizer genius that wrote about his own life story making himself the central figure in the drama. Maybe that's why the director made Valjean the center of attention in the movie to somewhat portray Hugo's intent. I don't know.

In comparing the film with the novel that was translated by author Charles E. Wilbour, and

some introduction by Peter Washington, the beginning is different. The story surprisingly begins with Fantine and her encounter with M. Charles Francois-Bienvenu Myriel, the bishop that renounced Jean Valjean crime. I was shocked when I saw that Jean Valjean's life was the last chapter in the book. In the movie, the director puts him at the beginning which made the movie seem to be more about him instead of Fantine. I think this book is an excellent read especially for someone that would be intrigued about the lives of some folks during the French Revolution. Hugo made sure that he painted the true colors of the revolution by mentioning actual events that happened in the lives of normal people, such as the bishop. On page 23, translator Wilbour mentions what the bishop had experience about the guillotine. He translated, "as to the bishop, the sight of the guillotine was a shock to him, from which it was long before he recovered." Those of us that have muddled in World History knows that during this period of the French Revolution millions of people were beheaded by the guillotine. Ironically, in the movie, it doesn't show that grueling event but it does soothe us with Valjean's redemption, compassion, integrity and determination to keep his promise he'd made to the bishop and Fantine.

### **Content**

The content of this movie is about redemption and revolution. Jean Valjean, a Frenchman is imprisoned for stealing bread to feed his sister's family. He serves 19 years experiencing certain cruelties and hard labor. After being released to do his parole time in the city of Dijon, he seeks redemption. He goes to this small town and befriends and robs a saintly bishop who gave him food and shelter for one night. During the night he awakes and steals the silverware and get caught by the bishop and knocks him to the floor. He flees in the night and gets caught the next morning by the government troops. The troop's questions the bishop about what he did

and the bishop denied what Valjean had done and said the "silverware was a gift". Valjean is released from the law again and the bishop makes him swear that he would do only good and forgave him of his wrongdoing and sent him away with the silverware that he had stolen.

After some years go by, Valjean becomes the Mayor of Paris and purchases a factory with the silverware that was given to him by the bishop. After Javert is taken to meet Valjean he becomes suspicious of his identity and way of life. Fantine, a prostitute who works in Valjean's factory had an illegitimate daughter and eventually loses her job because of the talebearers who reported that she had a child out of wedlock. She is fired and begin to prostitute on the street and have a confrontation with one of her eligible who picks up snow and puts it down her dress. Policeman Javert is watching in the dark and interrupts the altercation, slaps her and takes her off to jail and gives her a sentence of six months. Javert's cruelty is reported to the Mayor Valjean. Valjean sets Fantine free and develops a relationship with her and she tells him about her only child Cosette who is being taken care of by another family outside of town. Valjean has compassion for her and when she becomes ill, he finds her a place to stay and takes care of her until she dies. But before she dies, she begs him to take care of her daughter Cosette. He makes the promise to take care of her daughter and assured Fantine that her daughter would be alright with him.

Another course of the movie shows a factory worker who gets pinned under a machine and Valjean is fetched to help unpin the worker from the machine. The policeman, Javert standing in the crowd and who earlier was suspicious of Valjean's identity watches as Valjean intensely become stronger as he helps to unpin the factory worker. Javert quickly has a recollection of him and how strong he was during his prison stay in busting up rocks. Throughout the entire movie, Javert drives hard to destroy Valjean but Valjean flees several times. While he is

assisting Fantine who became ill then dies, he goes to pick up her daughter Cosette and takes her to a convent in Paris to live. Valjean travels back to France, he stops in town to take care of some business and Cosette wanders through the city and stumbles upon a group of students who are holding a rebellion in 1832. She meets this revolutionist Marius who makes a political stance that puts him in danger while Valjean is being relentlessly pursued by Javert the policeman, who recognizes him again and wants to bring him down.

The movie then turns to the young Cosette and militant student, Marius who falls in love with Cosette during the July 1832 Revolution. They secretly meet during the night and Valjean finds out about it and tries to get her to stop seeing her beloved. Javert somehow finds out about Valjean living in the city, pursues him again and Valjean moves out of town, leaving Cosette and her beloved hanging in the balance. Marius, determined to continue with the rebellion gets shot and Valjean saves him from the revolt and takes him through an underground sewer to the other side of town. Javert sniffs them out and catches them as soon as they come out of the tunnel. He approaches Valjean and gives him a final ultimatum to surrender and Valjean does his final act of kindness and asks Javert to let him take his future son-in-law to safety to see the doctor. Javert grants that petition and while Valjean is gone, Javert writes a note to give to his fellow officers and once the officers bring Valjean back, Javert sends the officer off. Then he stares Valjean down and asks why he did not turn him in. Valjean lets him know that he did not have any hatred in his heart towards him and Javert was shocked and instead of putting the handcuffs back on Jean Valjean, he put them on himself and jumps in the river. While Valjean was experiencing some shock over what had just happened, he suddenly realized that the hunt was over and his redemption was truly real. He walks back to meet Cosette and Marius as not only a redeemed man but also a free man from his life-long

adversary Javert.

### **Storyline**

The storyline of this great epic movie was written by Tim Kearns. It is about the main character Jean Valjean, a Frenchman who was imprisoned for stealing bread. He continues to flee in different scenes throughout the movie from a police officer named Javert. Over a period of time, the pursuit consumes both men's lives, and soon Valjean finds himself in the midst of the student revolutions in France.

### **Favorite Scene**

The favorite scene for me was after Valjean had stolen the silverware from the bishop's home and the very next day after he was caught, he was brought back to the bishop's residence by the officers. They asked the bishop did he give Valjean the silverware and the bishop said they were a gift. This scene to me showed the bishop as a type of Christ who forgave humanity of its sins and bought redemption with his own blood when he died on the cross.

### **Favorite Actor**

My favorite actor who gave a brilliant performance was Jean Valjean who had paid 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread and who, just wanted to live a normal life. During Valjean's new life he showed through his acts of kindness that he was a man of integrity, compassion, strength, and determination. During his journey, he helped several that were considered the "wretched" of Paris. I love the strong compassion that he showed to Fantine, in spite of her life as a prostitute and having a child out of wedlock. When he decided to adopt Cosette as his own daughter and paid for her to stay at the convent to receive schooling, that scene drove me to

tears. One other reason he became my favorite actor is during the court scene, he showed that he was a man of integrity and mercy when it came to him not seeing someone else with his same name take the blame for what he had done. The last thing I loved about Valjean's character is how he forgave the one that tried to destroy his career as a mayor and who so desperately tried to return him back to prison for stealing a loaf of bread.

### **Cinematography**

Director Billie August eludes us into the dreadful scene of Jean Valjean walking down a long dreary road with torn clothes and a nap sack. The backdrop is a grayish color close to the dark color of death that shows not much life in the small village of brick homes. Suddenly it turns darker and the scene gets drearier as Valjean sits out on the street hungry, and tired from walking for miles and no place to sleep. Salvation slowly comes to Valjean when an old woman sees him sleeping on the street propels him to knock on doors to ask for help. He brushes the old woman off but rethinks her idea and knocks on the door she had pointed to. The photographer Jorgen Persson scenes are gloomy and dark which matches the gloomy days during the era of the French Revolution. A lot of people became poor, was starving and homeless. Author Hugo captured the ramifications of the French Revolution. The film locations, United Kingdom, Germany, and the USA. Language, English. Studio, Mandalay Entertainment, TriStar Pictures, and others.

### **Ratings**

The Motion Picture Rating (MPAA) PG-13 for some sexual content, and for violence. Even though the movie only received one nomination. During the opening weekend, it made in USA dollars \$5,011,840, May 3, 1998. It grows in USA dollars \$14, 0096.321. The ratings 6.9 proved that it was still a movie worth going to see. I think the movie should have gotten a 10.

It was a thriller with suspense, compassion, and a little romance. To me, the movie had all the characteristics of an epic movie.

### **Conclusion**

After watching this movie four times, I am still inspired when I see Valjean's compassion, acts of kindness, integrity, strength, and determination. If I had the opportunity to give this movie another name it would be "Time Served" why keep punishing me. Valjean's character in this movie moves me to want to do more humanitarian service to those that are starved because of hunger, and poor because they are rejected. Not just because of the wrong choices they may have made but as Victor Hugo saw it during his day, because of the ramifications of the government. I've always been a trooper for the underdogs, why I don't know. I guess I was born to do so.

Even though this novel was written 184 years ago I still can feel Victor Hugo's heartbeat for better treatment for the "wretched" of society. I wonder if he was still alive today, what would he have to say about our society and would he produce another movie.

Well, after viewing the movie and reading snippets of the novel I am most proud to say this was an excellent thriller movie composed of crime, drama, history, romance, revolution and yes, redemption!

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