

Cottage Theatre hits all-time high with *Les Misérables*

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The Cottage Grove Sentinel

Is there any production too big or challenging for the Cottage Theatre?

After a successful opening of the epic Broadway musical "*Les Misérables*" this past weekend, the answer to that question is quite arguably 'no.'

The show represents one of the most ambitious productions in the 33-year history of the theatre, and the excitement has been running high ever since its announcement last September, executive director Susan Goes noted in the program.

The cast of 33, the 16-piece orchestra and the production crew deliver on all of those expectations and make the audience forget they are sitting in a community theater.

"I think this production represents the

very best of all the talent that's available to Cottage Theatre," said director Alan Beck. "From the painters and the builders, to the technical crews and to the cast and voices; it's as good as we are capable of doing at this moment."

Managing that amount of talent was a feat in itself. Beck said that the assistance of music director Larry Kenton and vocal director Mark VanBeever allowed for the cast to break up into groups during rehearsals and work on specific aspects of their roles.

"Casting was the key to everything," Beck said. "Because it's so big, you've got to cast people who are self-directing and self-correcting; people who know their business and can take care of themselves on the stage because there are so many other things to concentrate on."

In the role of Jean Valjean, Beck cast Lanny Mitchell, a veteran of the stage

but a relative newcomer to the Cottage Theatre community. While Valjean could be a bucket-list role for many performers, Mitchell had to convince himself to audition.

"I wasn't a 'Les Mis' fan because I'm a gospel singer," said Mitchell, who first appeared on the Cottage Theatre stage in "Assassins." "But then I started listening to the music, and I wanted to take on the challenge."

In "*Les Misérables*," Mitchell leads a talented cast of varying backgrounds and experiences, including many regular Cottage Theatre performers such as Ward Fairbairn (Javert), Tracy Nygard (Fantine) and Marius (Kory Weimer).

The show also received delightfully impressive performances from young actors Oceana Taylor (Little Cosette), Maia Wilhour (Young Eponine) and Owen Hovet (Gavroche).

"This show could easily be regional

production," said Mitchell. "The only difference between this not being a professional show is we didn't get paid for it. That's it."

The challenging pace of the show — 20 scenes over two acts — required the very best coordination between cast and crew. Beck said that the first tech rehearsal took six hours to complete, but, obviously, they got it down to three hours for the show.

The set, which Beck designed, is a simple yet versatile stone, façade that can be configured for steps, parapets or the barricade.

However, there's more than meets the eye to this production. In several instances, the crew had to get creative with the available space — for example, staging the orchestra backstage in the Rehearsal hall.

Costume designer Rhonda Turnquist produced a marvelous wardrobe, de-

spite the challenge of a large cast with multiple costume changes.

The production cost a bit more than a typical Cottage Theatre show, if only for the greater expense to obtain the rights, Beck explained. But the show has been selling very well, he added.

Which brings us back to the original question: is there any production too big or challenging for the Cottage Theatre?

"I think this is a big break through for us," said Beck. "If we can do this, and do this well, there's very little that we can't consider doing."

"Les Misérables" continues at the Cottage Theatre through May 3 with Thursday, Friday and Saturday shows starting at 8 p.m.; Sunday matinees start at 2:30 p.m.