



It's that time of year when folks like me are expected to offer up an annual reflection . . . a thoughtful retrospective that somehow – through the magic of hindsight? – might lend new *insight*

to the year gone by.

Since I can hardly remember what happened last week, much less last year, I began reading through my old columns to see what I obsessed about most in 2012. Was it the soul-crush of election year politics? The antisocial effects of social media?

Though certain themes began to emerge, my inner self-critic emerged even louder, making the enterprise more painful than helpful. About midway through, I decided to chuck the whole project and write about the new *Les Misérables* movie, instead. (I needed an excuse to see it again.)

I reviewed a fantastic Hilton Head production of *Les Miz* a few years ago, at which time I confessed to being a Mizhead of the first order. (We're like Deadheads, without the tie-dye and patchouli...)

*"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'," I wrote at the time. "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."*

Well, it's been years since I wrote that column, and even more years since I gave up any pretense of cool – such a liberating divestiture! – and anybody who knows me knows how excited I've been about this *Les Miz* movie. I've been posting articles and trailers on Facebook like a preteen girl anticipating a Justin Bieber concert.

And so it was that I found myself beyond giddy in a darkening theater, nestled between two sisters (the other one had to work), at 11 am the day after Christmas, awaiting those familiar strains that never fail to quicken my heart: *DUHN DUHN – duhn duhn duhn . . . DUHN DUHN – duhn duhn duhn . . . Look down . . . Look down . . . Don't look him in the eye . . .*

(I just got chills typing that. Seriously.)

Don't worry; this is not a "movie review." I'm not really qualified to write one, and even if I were, there are about a thousand of them out there already. (I recommend heading over to Rotten Tomatoes, where the movie's currently tracking at 72 % fresh.)

No, these are just the musings of a fan – okay, fanatic – who feels like hashing out a few things. Those reviews, for instance. They're all over the place. Seldom have I seen a movie simultaneously savaged and exalted the way this one has been. Some critics think director Tom Hooper's decision to have the actors sing live on camera – instead of prerecording, as is the norm – was inspired; others think it was sheer folly. (It worked for me.) Lisa Schwarzbaum of *Entertainment Weekly*

was particularly nasty, saying this "fake opulent *Les Miz*" made her "long for guillotines." Dana Stevens at

*Slate*

hated the movie, too, but admitted (as did Schwarzbaum), that she'd never liked the stage production, anyway, or its musical score. (One wonders why these critics were assigned to this movie? It's like sending

*me*

out to review a NASCAR race.)

On the other hand, Roger Moore with the McClatchy-Tribune News Service raved about *Les Miz*, calling it “one of the year’s best films,” and well-known syndicated critic Cameron Cook wrote, “It’s been a long time since I saw something this sincere *and* brilliant.” Perhaps my favorite take on the movie came from Peter Travers at

*Rolling Stone*

, who ended his big-hearted, joyful review saying, “Damn the imperfections; it’s perfectly marvelous!” (I may have given up cool, but it still feels good to have

*Rolling Stone*

on my side.)

Honestly, I didn’t expect the movie to garner much critical acclaim at all, despite its stellar cast. *Les Miz* is a story of “the people,” and it’s always been more beloved *by* the people than the critics, who often use the word “middlebrow” when discussing this worldwide phenomenon. Well, according to box office reports, we middlebrows (call us “the people,” if you prefer), have once again spoken with our wallets. Critics be damned, *Les Miz* is a success!

I purposely equate “middlebrow” with “the people” here, because, despite the varied – and, I think, somewhat desperate – attempts of certain movie critics to lend timely relevance to *Les Miz*, with repeated references to the Occupy Movement, the 99%, etc., the “masses” here in the US are still very much “middle class”... and by Victor Hugo’s standards, we’re downright rich. As I sat watching this sprawling story, set just after the French Revolution, I realized there’s something almost obscene about comparing the poor of 1832 Paris – in their filthy rags, with their rotten teeth and wrecked bodies and hopeless futures – to those we call “poor” today, with their TVs and cell phones, their free, mandatory education and access to healthcare. Yes, times are tough here in the US – as I write this, we’re still perched on the edge of the fiscal cliff – but let’s get some perspective, people. We’re not oppressed by a cruel monarchy and most of us have most of our teeth. Things are better now than they were then. Much better. And much of that improvement is due to our system, however flawed it might be.

(Note that *Les Miz*’s undisputed hero, Jean Valjean, doesn’t become your traditional “saint” -in sackcloth, but instead sets himself up as a respectable businessman, providing a decent wage for an honest day’s work – and the dignity that comes with it – to hundreds of people who would otherwise be on the streets. Today, Valjean might find himself reviled by the chattering classes as one of those dastardly “job creators” who doesn’t pay his “fair share.” A one percenter. An

enemy of the Occupy movement. Hmmm . . .)

But for me, the politics in *Les Miz* – the “revolution” angle – has always been secondary, a mere backdrop to the heart of the story. This time around, it occurred to me that the *real* revolution in this epic tale is Valjean’s conversion – the one that happens early in the story, when a priest shows this wretched ex-con extraordinary kindness. It is this extravagant grace – this unexpected and undeserved act of mercy – that transforms Valjean immediately and forever, setting him on a new course that will elevate not only his life, but the lives of everyone in his path.

Meanwhile, back at the barricade, bullets fly and blood spatters and beautiful young lives are lost in an instant. And nothing changes.

Which revolution is more effective?

Don’t get me wrong: There is something undeniably splendid about those young revolutionaries who give up their lives in the name of freedom. But don’t you think the story seems to be pointing us down a different path? Showing us a better way? *Les Miz* seems to be telling us that the *real* revolution – the one that can truly “change the world” – is the revolution that happens in the human heart, through divine grace. When one heart turns away from hatred and cruelty and selfishness – and toward love – there is a ripple effect, and things start to happen. Good things.

As the movie ends, *Les Miz*’s great call to battle, “Do You Hear the People Sing,” is reprised, with new lyrics that summon this different, better revolution. Suddenly, “the song of angry men” becomes something else entirely, as the full meaning of all we’ve just witnessed washes over us (along with the mascara that’s cascading down our faces):

*Do you hear the people sing, lost in the valley of the night? It is the music of a people, who are*

*climbing to the light. For the wretched of the earth, there is a flame that never dies. Even the darkest night will end, and the sun will rise.*

Note to critics (from one of the wretched of the earth): Don't worry so much about relevance. When a story is this timeless, who cares if it's timely?

Oh, and in case I forgot to mention it: I highly recommend the movie!

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