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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 'This show is all about who has the power'

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2 BUHS presents 'Les Misérables' this weekend

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3 TEXT BODY:

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4 *Les Misérables* High School Edition will grace the
5 Brattleboro Union High School stage Thursday, Feb. 19 through
6 Saturday, Feb. 21.

7 Based on Victor Hugo's epic 1862 novel *Les Misérables*,
8 the musical of the same name by Alain Boublil (librettist) and
9 Claude-Michel Schönberg (composer) spans the period in French
10 history from 1815 to 1833.

11 The story centers on Jean Valjean, an ex-convict who was
12 imprisoned for 19 years after stealing a loaf of bread for his
13 sister's starving children. His nemesis Javert, the police inspector,
14 pursues Valjean relentlessly for breaking parole.

15 "Valjean at first acts from his primal instincts, stealing
16 from the bishop, who has taken him in and fed him," said Alex
17 Aither, a junior, who plays Valjean. "After the bishop protects
18 Valjean by lying to the arresting officers, Valjean seeks to atone
19 for his sins. It's the main reason he strives for goodness.

20 "This powerful show feels very relevant," Aither
21 continued. "It is a reminder that everyone is trying to survive
22 under the conditions they're in. Everyone has a story. It's
23 important to understand all sides, even when it feels impossible."

24 Aither plans on going to school for acting because "it's a
25 form of self-expression that allows you to experience so much. I
26 learn from every show I'm in."

27 Mariam Diallo, a senior, portrays Javert. "His idea of
28 justice is that the law is like God's law, and going against it is
29 irredeemable," she said.

30 "He cannot get past his ideas of right and wrong," Diallo
31 continued. "It's how he justifies his actions. When events cause
32 him to question his faith in the law, he can't handle it. His song,
33 'This I Swear by the Stars,' gives glimpses into his character."

34 Diallo said she decided to try out this year because "it's
35 my last year. I've been 'theater adjacent' because so many of my
36 friends are involved in theater. I decided to seize the chance,
37 dipping my toe into their world."

38 "Now I get to hang out with them more," she said. "It's
39 super fun."

40 Lotte Gannon-Kurowski, a junior, portrays Fantine, the
41 mother of Cosette. "I like this musical and tried out for this part,"
42 Gannon-Kurowski said. "Fantine is a mother working in a factory
43 to provide for her daughter, who is living with an innkeeper and
44 his wife. They keep extorting money from Fantine, money she
45 doesn't have.

46 "The factory foreman harasses Fantine," Gannon-
47 Kurowski continued. "He wants to get something out of her that
48 she doesn't want to give. After she rejects his advances, he fires
49 her. Still the innkeeper demands money."

50 Gannon-Kurowski likes her character.

51 "I wanted to get an understanding of her," she said. "It's a
52 lot emotionally. People, especially women, can relate to the
53 feelings Fantine has."

54 Gannon-Kurowski said that in many ways, "acting is a
55 form of therapy. You get to express big feelings that you can't
56 express otherwise."

57 Preparing for a musical presents some challenges
58 different from preparing for a play, she said. "In musicals, there is
59 much more focus on the blocking and singing and not as much
60 time to work with the director on developing character."

61 Taylor Chase, BUHS French teacher, provided the cast
62 with historical background about the French Revolution (1789)
63 and the June Rebellion in Paris (1832).

64 "It was a time of huge upheaval," Gannon-Kurowski said.
65 "A lot of people in the musical are deeply affected by poverty.
66 The wealth gap is large and still growing."

67 She observed that "young people decide to take the
68 initiative, to stand up for what they believe in."

69 "Just because [their effort] seems to have failed at first
70 doesn't mean it was worthless," Gannon-Kurowski said.
71 "Standing up for people who can't stand up for themselves has a
72 real impact."

73 The comedic villains of the story are the married couple
74 Madame and Monsieur Thénardier, the innkeepers. They
75 constantly demand money from Fantine for the care of her
76 daughter, but they use the money for themselves.

77 "She is a horrible person," said Rei Carpenter-Ranquist,
78 a senior, who plays Madame Thénardier. "She has no good in her
79 and is horrible to everyone involved. She talks loud and acts loud

80 and believes she wears the boots. She and her husband have a
81 game to see who can steal more.”

82 Carpenter-Ranquist said she is as likely to do tech for a
83 show as to act. “Truly, I love all the parts involved [in a
84 production],” she said. “The feeling of trust is the best feeling
85 ever.”

86 Naveen Lalanne, a junior, portrays Monsieur Thénardier.
87 “He’s proud of himself,” Lalanne said. “He believes he is the
88 smartest. He and his wife provide the comedic relief.

89 “We don’t die,” Lalanne said of the couple. “We scam
90 and mock and rob. We love our game, but not each other.”

91 Levi Healey, a junior, plays Marius, a student
92 revolutionary embroiled in the plans for the June Rebellion. “He
93 leads the students,” Healey said. “He’s wealthy, but he tries not to
94 be. I like how he is complicated. He’s all for the revolution. He
95 wants a better world, but he’s also human and wants to be with
96 the girl he loves. The show displays a lot of different ways to be
97 good in a troubling world.”

98 Lila Armour-Jones, a senior, plays the part of Éponine,
99 one of the street urchins, who is the daughter of the Thénardiers.

100 “She lives a tragic life,” Armour-Jones said. “She has
101 grown up in poverty. Her only joy is her best friend Marius, with
102 whom she has been secretly in [unrequited] love for many years.

103 “Because of her closeness to him, she wants to help the
104 students in their revolution. She assists at the barricades, willingly
105 putting herself at risk for his cause.

106 “Seeing Marius fall in love with Cosette, who is
107 everything Éponine is not, is even more heartbreaking,” Armour-
108 Jones continued. “Éponine sees everything slipping away from
109 her. I put myself in her shoes. She does have her moments of joy
110 — any interactions with Marius. Her song, ‘On My Own,’ shows
111 her peace in the solitude, one of the only times she can escape
112 from the tragedy of her life.”

113 Armour-Jones, who played Hodel in the 2023 BUHS
114 production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, sees similarities between that
115 character and Éponine.

116 “They are both sharp, witty, young women who are
117 trying to live in adolescence,” she said. “They deserved a life
118 which gave them freedom and education and space to grow up.
119 There’s a melancholy in stepping into the past for a moment in
120 my day and living the life of these young women who didn’t get
121 these opportunities.”

122 One of the messages of the show is the power of using
123 your voice, Armour-Jones said.

124 “Especially in times of profound darkness,” she said, “it’s
125 even more important to advocate for yourself and others.”

126 Genevieve Schneski, a senior, is a member of the
127 ensemble. “I play a revolutionary, a constable, and an old
128 woman,” she said. “I don’t have many lines, but it’s fun to do all
129 of them. And I’m a chorus member.”

130 Like many of the cast members, Schneski has acted in
131 numerous BUHS productions. “I was in *Oliver!* when I was 11,”
132 she said. “I’ve also acted in *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Radium Girls*,
133 *Mamma Mia!*, and then *Hadestown* last year.”

134 She said she loves “doing the musical, being able to put
135 so much physical expression into the music, wearing costumes.”

136 “Hearing a chord and feeling the emotion that goes with
137 it,” Schneski said. “Thinking of the story and imagining myself in
138 it, seeing what somebody else is going through, and sympathizing
139 with them.”

140 **‘The story that wouldn’t let us** 141 **go’**

142 Director Rebekah Kersten, BUHS teacher of English and
143 theater, is a BUHS graduate herself, class of 2000. She joined the
144 faculty for the 2019-20 school year.

145 "I've wanted to direct this show for quite some time," she
146 said. "Of all the shows we considered for this year, this is the one
147 that we kept coming back to."

148 The musical is known for having excellent male
149 characters, Kersten said, "but we emphasized to actors during
150 auditions that the actors who could sing and act the roles in a
151 way that worked for the character and the score would be
152 considered, regardless of whether the gender of the role matched
153 their gender identity or not."

154 "We wound up having significantly more female-
155 identifying actors audition than expected, so that gave us a
156 unique opportunity to experiment with gender-neutral casting,"
157 she said.

158 This is a sung-through show, meaning there are no
159 scenes without music, Kersten said.

160 "Every moment of the show is sung, either to a
161 recognizable melody or the lyrics are delivered in a 'recitative,'
162 words sung-spoken in a rhythmic manner," she said. "With its
163 sweeping melodies, epic themes, and huge cast, this show feels
164 far more like an opera in English."

165 The set is minimal rather than explicitly realistic, with
166 different locations and time periods being created through
167 lighting, costumes, and easily moveable furniture, such as tables,
168 chairs, benches, and trunks. David Tournoux is vocal director and
169 Alex Brady is pit orchestra director.

170 Kersten described *Les Misérables* as "the story that
171 wouldn't let us go because it's still so relevant to life today."

172 "This show is all about who has the power, who wants it,
173 and the decisions we make to get the power we crave," she said.

174 "The irony is, no matter how much any of the characters
175 seek power, they only truly find it through accepting themselves
176 and loving others," she said.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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177 Performances of *Les Misérables High School Edition* will
178 take place on Thursday and Friday, Feb. 19 and 20 at 7 p.m., and
179 on Saturday Feb. 21 at 2 p.m. General admission is \$10, \$5 for
180 students/seniors. All BUHS students get one free ticket. Tickets
181 can be purchased in advance at bit.ly/853-lesmis. For more
182 information, email mpage@wsesdvt.org.

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