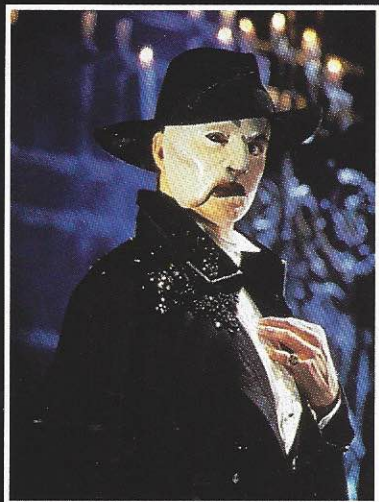


August 28, 1998

In Theater



Davis Gaines
in *Phantom*

**Colm
Wilkinson**
as *Valjean*

**Richard
Dreyfuss**
and
**Marsha
Mason**
Reunited

**Uta
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**Plus: Backstage at
Broadway's *Les Miz***

BRING HIM HOME

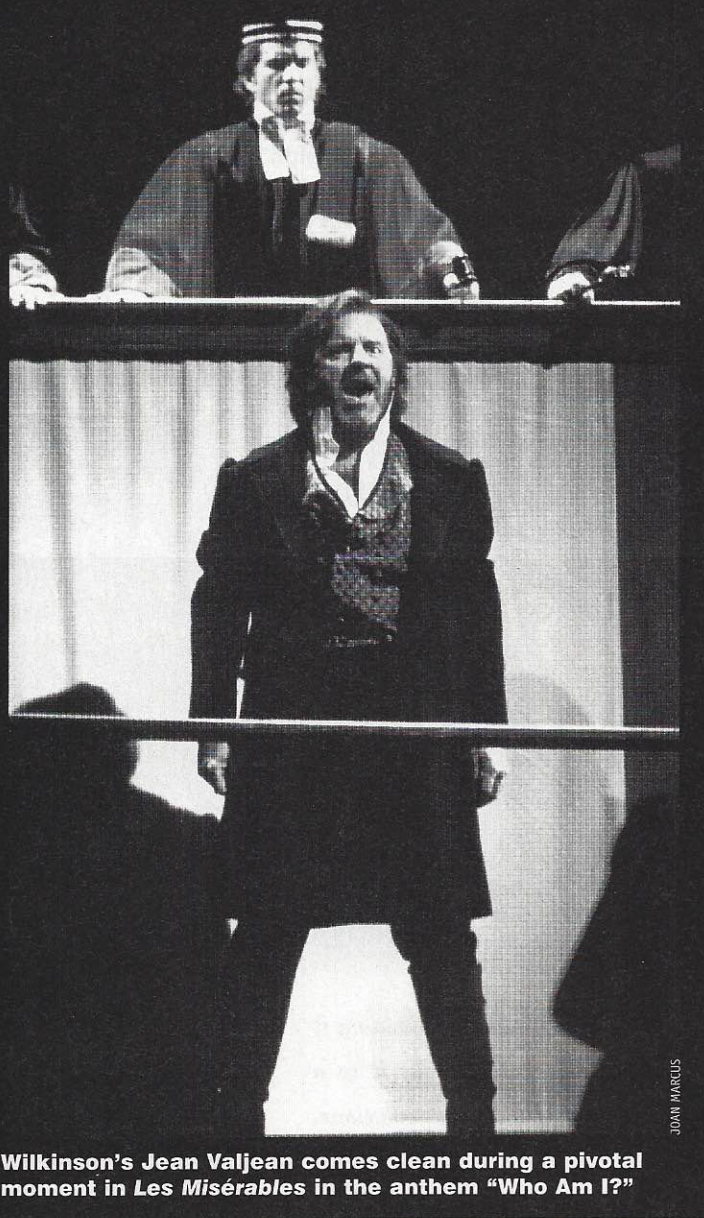
It took a command performance from friends and family to convince Colm Wilkinson to reprise the role of Jean Valjean.

By Sheryl Berk

Colm Wilkinson is seated at a piano in his Manhattan publicist's office, tickling the ivories, and I can't resist asking for a song.

"'Bring Him Home?'" Hmmm, could you hum a few bars?" he jokes, breaking into a dramatic rendition of "Chopsticks." "That's it, isn't it?"

Clearly, he is kidding. The man who originated the role of the repentant convict Jean Valjean in the London and New York productions of *Les Misérables* hasn't forgotten a single note of the score. In fact, after an interview-turned-*Les Miz* 101 lesson, I am convinced Wilkinson could teach a course. He quotes verbatim from the Victor Hugo text, points out pivotal plot discrepancies in the recent movie version of the novel, and analyzes "just what is it about this show that keeps people coming back." Himself included: He's just agreed to play the part in Toronto at the Princess of Wales Theatre through November 29. On



Wilkinson's Jean Valjean comes clean during a pivotal moment in *Les Misérables* in the anthem "Who Am I?"

JUAN MARCUS

February 25 through May, he'll star in *Les Miz* at the Point Theatre in Dublin.

It took quite a bit of convincing to lure him back: "I felt like, 'Done that. Been there. So why do it again?'" In October 1995, he agreed to a single concert performance at Royal Albert Hall in London — the now legendary 10th Anniversary *Les Misérables* that frequently airs on PBS. But he had no desire to return to the show full-time, despite offers and fan urgings.

"Home was now Toronto — I'd been there for nine years, since I did *Phantom*. Broadway seemed too far away." So, in a move that Wilkinson refers to as "bringing the mountain to Mohammad," he was asked if he'd be interested in *Les Miz's* return to the Toronto stage (it premiered at The Royal Alexandra Theatre in 1989). He said yes — with his family egging him on — and agreed to also do the show in his

But I came to the city and I saw the Pantages Theatre, and I fell in love with it — it's my home now. I agreed to do it for six months, and I wound up in it for four and a half years, on and off.

Ironically, that's how Canadian audiences know you.

Yes — not at all for Valjean. To them, I'm the Phantom who's now playing this French guy!

You were reluctant to do *Les Miz* again.

To the say the least. I didn't even want to do the anniversary concert three years ago. I thought "Let's leave well enough alone," but my wife convinced me. She said, "You've got to — you'll regret it for the rest of your life if you don't." And I'm glad I did it. We went back to London where it all began, full-circle. What I wanted to know was, where were the guys that said it was rubbish? Where are those crits now? Eating their words. My family convinced me to do Toronto. It's where my family is, so it's easy. And Dublin — well, that's where I was born, so that's something I owe my people there.

Do you ever think you'll do the show again on Broadway?

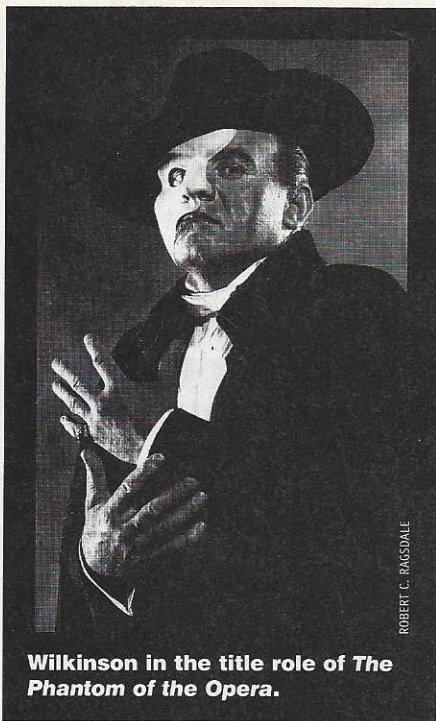
No, I don't think so. So go see it in Canada or Ireland!

Do you ever get tired of singing the songs?

I do. I get weary of it. Everyone asks me to sing "Bring Him Home" and it's become "my" song. It was written for me. The role was originally intended for a baritone, but when I came in they started jumping everything up an octave. I guess it would drive me crazy if that's all I had to define me, but luckily I do other things.

Such as?

I write songs, and I fantasize about writing a musical one day. I am always looking for ideas, always jotting down titles, always strumming a guitar. But I wouldn't know where to begin to put it all together. It's one thing to write a song, but to write a musical? That's a different story completely. Look at Paul Simon. He's a great writer — but there's a lot more skill than just writing involved, which is why *The Capeman* didn't work.



Wilkinson in the title role of *The Phantom of the Opera*.

ROBERT C. RAAGSDALE

Do you have any role models?

Boublil and Schönberg, of course. And Andrew. People tend to trivialize Andrew Lloyd Webber, but he has an amazing gift for seeing the big picture. I cannot for the life of me make sense of critics who consider *Phantom* or *Les Miz* second-class music. Billions of people around the world continue to

Wilkinson on the Web

<http://www.inch.com/~ljlolson/cwas.htm>

The Colm Wilkinson Appreciation Society. Features detailed discography, bio, upcoming projects and endless adoration. "They know more about me than I do," Wilkinson jokes.

<http://www.lesmis.com/>

The official website, featuring facts, figures, tour schedules and the Cosette quiz.

<http://www.arts.uci.edu/kelson/les-mis/>

The complete multilingual lyrics — sing along in French, German, Spanish, Dutch, or Chinese!

be touched by these stories and these songs, yet there is still this snobbery. I have never understood that and, as I continue to sing the roles, I never will. Why do people hate success? Do you have to be starving for people to appreciate you?

Do you ever read your reviews?

After *Les Miz*, I never peeked at the paper again. I never read crits. It's the work and the people's reaction to it that matters. If you believe these geezers and they tell you you're wonderful, well one day they'll tell you you're crap. Sometimes I think they're writing just to show the power of the pen.

How would you critique the *Les Miz* movie this year?

Didn't like it. I think it trivialized the whole thing. I thought Liam Neeson was quite good, but I thought the movie missed the emotion. It was the real Hollywood tacky approach. I thought it was nicely filmed and had a good feel for the period, but it goes off in the wrong directions.

What do you want to do down the road?

I'm not sure. In that way I'm like Valjean, just taking the road where it might lead me. But I know that any decision I make is a six-person decision — [involving] my family.

Are your children interested in theater?

I don't encourage them, but the older son, Aaron, is a singer and songwriter and I think he's incredible. He's very talented, but I know he has a long road ahead of him because he won't compromise, won't do chart stuff. Art is more important to him than success or money. I envy him.

Are you looking forward to Dublin?

Immensely. It's where I started in theater. I did *Superstar* in 1973, and I was a crazy young guy singing jazz, blues and rock-and-roll. I used to be on the Irish charts! I think it's a milestone for me. You see, I'm not interested in profile anymore — I just feel it's time for me to look at what I really want to do and get back to my roots. Maybe I'm just trying to relive my youth — who knows? But it feels right. It feels real. It feels like where I belong. And isn't that all we're ever searching for in life? ■