

LES MISÉRABLES

It's not often, if ever, that actors of the calibre of Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe and Anne Hathaway have to audition for a role. But then, *Les Misérables* is something special.

Tom Hooper – the Oscar winning director of *The King's Speech* – needed to know that his actors would be up to the challenge of singing every note of every song live as his cameras rolled. It's never been attempted before and even major Hollywood stars had to prove they could do it.

So Crowe, Jackman, Ms Hathaway, Amanda Seyfried, Eddie Redmayne, and the rest, trooped into audition rooms from New York to London via Los Angeles and one by one, sang their hearts out.

Jackman arrived for his audition in the Big Apple well prepared, as indeed did they all. "I'd seen the musical three times, I'd listened to the CD a hundred times. I knew those songs. So I went in and there was Stephen Brooker, the musical director, a pianist, the casting director and Tom. And I could see Tom thinking, 'can this guy do it?'

"And we went through the songs again and again. It was like a workshop. And then Tom would say, 'OK, let's go back to the beginning, I want to do all of them again..' I saw him getting enthused.

"And I was really into it. And it went on for about four hours and I said, 'Tom, look mate, I've got to get home to get my kids to bed... I could tell he would have kept going. But luckily it worked out."

Crowe, a fellow Aussie, admits that it's been a long time since he had to sing for his supper, let alone audition for a role. He was happy to do it and gave a pitch perfect rendition of one of *Les Misérables'* many iconic songs, *Stars*.

"It was on 42nd Street and Broadway, which was kind of fitting. And it was this classic Broadway rehearsal room – a piano in the corner and a little bit of space in case there were dance moves involved," he laughs. "Mirrors on the walls and a dance bar along the side and Roberta (Duchak, voice coach) at the piano in the corner. It was absolutely the kind of place where you would audition and rehearse for a musical.

“You have to get yourself in the right sort of Zen place for an audition like that. You have to channel your nerves and your adrenaline and it’s kind of like you have to meditate to the point of clarity. You have to use it. And it had been a long time since I had faced that kind of auditioning process where there was a lot on the line for something that I had really engaged with.”

Ms Hathaway was understandably keen to win the role of Fantine – a part her mother, Kathleen, had played on a national tour of the States when she was just seven years old.

“I found out that they were auditioning for *Les Misérables* and I kept pestering them until I got a time,” says Ms Hathaway. “And because of my Mom I knew the part of Fantine so well and when I met with Tom I sang for him for about three hours. It was like a very intense work session. And then I had to wait a month until I found out that I’d got the part.”

Les Misérables was, then, one of the hottest tickets around with a host of A list actors jostling for a role. “Agents were really, really keen for their actors to be involved in the project because there are so few opportunities for actors who can sing to show their chops,” says Fellner. “And this was a prime opportunity for that; we had a lot of people approaching us.”

But casting the right actors for the two leading male roles, Jean Valjean, the ex prisoner who tries to rebuild his life after serving time in prison, and Inspector Javert, the ruthless policeman who hunts him down the years after he breaks parole, was a deal breaker, says Fellner.

“I think we all agreed that if we couldn’t find a Valjean and a Javert we shouldn’t make the film,” says Fellner. “However great a proposal the whole thing was, however great the screenplay was, however great the director was; Tom, Cameron and myself decided that unless we could find two actors who could deliver on those roles there just wasn’t any point in making it.

“So then you start your list – and that list of great actors who can actually sing in the way that we needed is very, very short. And Hugh (Jackman) was categorically top of our list for Valjean and Russell (Crowe) for Javert.

“And it turns out that both were really interested and we just got lucky. We had incredibly dynamic actors who can sing. And it went from there into every other critical role. We’re blessed with a fantastic cast.”

That stellar cast includes Ms Hathaway as Fantine, Ms Seyfried as Cosette, fast rising British star Eddie Redmayne as Marius alongside Samantha Barks (Eponine), Helena Bonham Carter (Madame Thenardier), Sacha Baron Cohen (Thenardier) and Aaron Tvelt (Enjoras).

They are led by one of the best young directors in the business. Hooper's last film, *The King's Speech*, was nominated for a remarkable 12 Academy Awards, winning four including Best Picture and Best Director. When Hooper first heard about plans to film *Les Misérables*, the world's most successful stage musical, for the big screen, he was immediately intrigued.

"I was working on another script with William Nicholson, it must have been the summer before *King's Speech* came out, and he mentioned that he had been asked to adapt the musical and a bell went off in my head and I just thought, 'that sounds like a really interesting idea. I'm amazed it's never been done.'"

Set against the backdrop of violent political unrest in 19th century France, *Les Misérables*, based on Victor Hugo's classic 1862 novel, is an epic story of broken dreams and unrequited love. And although there have been more than 30 film and television productions based on Hugo's novel, there has never been a film of *Les Misérables*, the musical until now.

"Even though my family took me to lots of musicals growing up I had never seen *Les Misérables*," says Hooper. "So I went to see it in London and the bell rang even louder," says Hooper.

"There are three or four moments in the musical when you just get chills down your spine, which to me is a sure sign that there is something special about it. So I reached out to Working Title around that time and we starting chatting about it."

Working Title Films is the British production company behind a succession of box office hits and co-chairman Eric Fellner had been developing the project with Sir Cameron Mackintosh, the impresario who has produced many of the biggest stage hits of the last quarter of a century, including *Les Misérables*. Hooper was top of their list to direct.

"Working Title is in the movie business and we really wanted to make a great movie and not just put the stage show on film," Fellner explains. "And Cameron agreed. I thought it was critical that *Les Misérables* worked on two levels – it had to deliver for the fans, because the fans are the bedrock of the piece, but it also had to work as a movie in its own right.

"I'd seen *The King's Speech*, and loved it, and I'd seen Tom's other work and met him and talked about *Les Misérables* and just thought, 'this guy would be perfect..'"

With his cast on board, Hooper started planning how he would take *Les Misérables* from the stage and make it cinematic. He decided on a radical approach – every actor would sing every single take live.

“Tom had immediately grasped where the emotional power of the story lay,” says Mackintosh. “At the very core of this story it’s about the survival of the human spirit and the music drives that story. It’s probably the most successful adaptation of any book in the history of music. Tom was excited about how he would film those great ensemble numbers.

“And he said to me, ‘you know, I would really like to do this live..’ Which is what I’d dreamt of doing all of my life, doing it live. I knew then that we had found the right man.

“The music is the main starting point. Why wouldn’t it be? That’s the reason it exists. And those incredible characters - Valjean, Javert, Fantine and the rest - have songs that you couldn’t possibly cut because that’s how you tell the story.”

In the past, actors in a screen musical would record their songs in a studio and mime along to a playback during each take of a scene. Hooper wanted to capture the raw emotion of the actor performing the take live each time.

“Everyone sings live throughout the film and it has made it much more dramatic because the actors are free to make choices in the moment and good acting, generally, comes from being in the moment and being free in the moment,” says Hooper.

“And when you pre-record it you have to follow decisions that you made three or four months earlier. Doing it this way, the actors can change the tempo, change the rhythm, make subtle variations so that they are really inhabiting the role and it’s made it very immediate and very exciting.”

Each of the actors would wear a tiny earpiece – hidden from the camera – and whilst singing they would be accompanied by a pianist, playing live, out of camera shot, that they could hear via the device.

When they were filming in the studio at Pinewood, the pianists, Roger Davison and Douglas Whyte, would be in a room off the main sound stage and only the actors in the scene could hear them. On location, the musicians would be in a canvas tent near where the action was taking place.

It was, then, a huge challenge. And all of the actors, says Ms Hathaway, were a little anxious that they could sustain it. “I think we were all kind of terrified,” she says.

“It was one of those moments where we all bravely said ‘yes’ and then looked at each other and went ‘what?’ But that was one of the things that was so special about this job because not only did you have to open yourself to something that you’d never done before but you’re with a bunch of other actors who’ve never

done this before and a crew that has never shot a movie like this and a director who has never done anything like this.

“So although we were all at different levels of experience within our careers we were all at square one when it came to this. And that was great. It was wonderful to have the same level of vulnerability but also to feel supported and be able to support each other. And yes, I was worried that my voice wouldn’t hold up but there’s something to worry about on every set.”

Crowe has been a singer/ songwriter all of his adult life and has fronted a band, 30 Odd Foot of Grunts, and recorded with Canadian musician Alan Doyle (most recently, in 2011, the Crowe/ Doyle Songbook Vol III, but *Les Misérables* represented a very different challenge.

“The type of singing style was just not in my field of experience. This isn’t at all about being a bloke who sings songs,” he says.

He credits singing coach Roberta Duchak – who also worked with Hugh Jackman – with preparing his voice. “She worked like a Trojan and never complained,” he says. “I was really lucky to find Roberta and she just made it all seem possible.

“I’m not sure any of us really knew how determined Tom was to do this thing where every single take is sung live on set at the standard required. And it’s not like a Broadway show.

“You do a Broadway show and you might sing seven minutes, you might sing 21 minutes if you are a leading character, and you’ll sing your song and you’ll hit your notes once.

“But we’re talking about being on a film set singing a very challenging song 23 times – and that happened – from beginning to end. Or a group of us singing *Fantine’s Arrest* 40 something times.

“It was a rock ‘n roll kind of stamina where you are singing the full concert every day. And sometimes you’d be singing at 7am at the beginning of a day and 2am at the end of the day.

“And then you have to add in clarity, movement, working to the camera, being where the camera needs you to be, and, at the same time, being 100 per cent inside the character you are playing and interpreting every one of those lines in the songs in an almost Shakespearean way so that you can understand the detail of what this person is going through and why he or she is expressing it this way. Every single conversation in this film requires people singing – the dialogue is the music, the songs and the discipline required is positively athletic.”

For Tom Hooper, the decision to abandon the old ways and embrace the new was an essential, exciting part of the challenge of bringing *Les Misérables* to the screen. The full operatic score would be blended with the actors' vocals on much loved songs like *I Dreamed A Dream*, *Bring Him Home* and *On My Own*, in the editing suite.

"We are reinventing the genre and the collective excitement of the team is not just because it's such an iconic, extraordinary piece of work but also because we are getting this opportunity to be pioneers in a technique and that hardly ever happens," says the director.

"I'm not sure it will happen again in my lifetime where I'll do something in a genre where I can say 'we are the first' in the way that we can with *Les Misérables*. And that's a thrill."

The result is musical cinema unlike anything seen before. Making *Les Misérables* was an extraordinary experience, says Fellner, who has produced more than 90 films. It really was special.

"The commitment to this film from everybody has been extraordinary," he says. "And it starts with Cameron. Cameron is an extraordinary man and he has a passion for this material beyond what most producers have and I respect him enormously for that.

"And then you have Tom as our director who lives and breaths 24/7 the project that he is doing and he has lived and breathed this film and he has brought with him cast and crew alike that have done the same. Every one of them has taken this as a labour of love and made it beautiful and as perfect as they possibly can. Everyone, from the floor runners up to the movie stars, has put everything into it."

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