

They've Got Magic To Do

Preparation for the musical theatre gala at the NCPA, featuring excerpts from beloved musicals, is in full swing. We talk to the three stars from the West End – Daniel Bowling, John Owen-Jones and Lucie Jones – who are slated to have their maiden performance in India as part of the SOI Spring 2020 Season.

By Vipasha Aloukik Pai

More than halfway into a story that is rife with grief and injustice, comes 'Bring Him Home', a plea to God to save a life, that has pierced through the hearts of millions to become one of the most heart-wrenching songs of *Les Misérables*, the musical. Written by Herbert Kretzmer, who has said this was the song he struggled with the most, and completed just before the witching hour, 17 days before opening night, it consists of only 112 words, all, one can safely say, uncomplicated; all perhaps part of the average toddler's vocabulary. And yet, this is the song that has become a clarion call for those who are missing or have lost loved ones. To those who wonder why musicals are still a thing: this is why. The stories they tell are all-embracing, the tragedies and triumphs in them are universal, and above it all, are the songs that give voice to the complexities of life in a way nothing else can.

This February, in a first-of-its-kind presentation, the Symphony Orchestra of India (SOI), along with luminaries from the West End, will present 'Bring Him Home' and other songs from some of the greatest American and English musicals ever produced – including *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *West Side Story*, *Wicked*, *Cats*, among others. The concert will be conducted by Daniel Bowling, who is Head of Musical Theatre at the Royal Academy of Music, London, and has over two decades of experience as music director and supervisor, having worked on iconic productions like *The Lion King*, *Mary Poppins*, *Les Misérables*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Miss Saigon*.

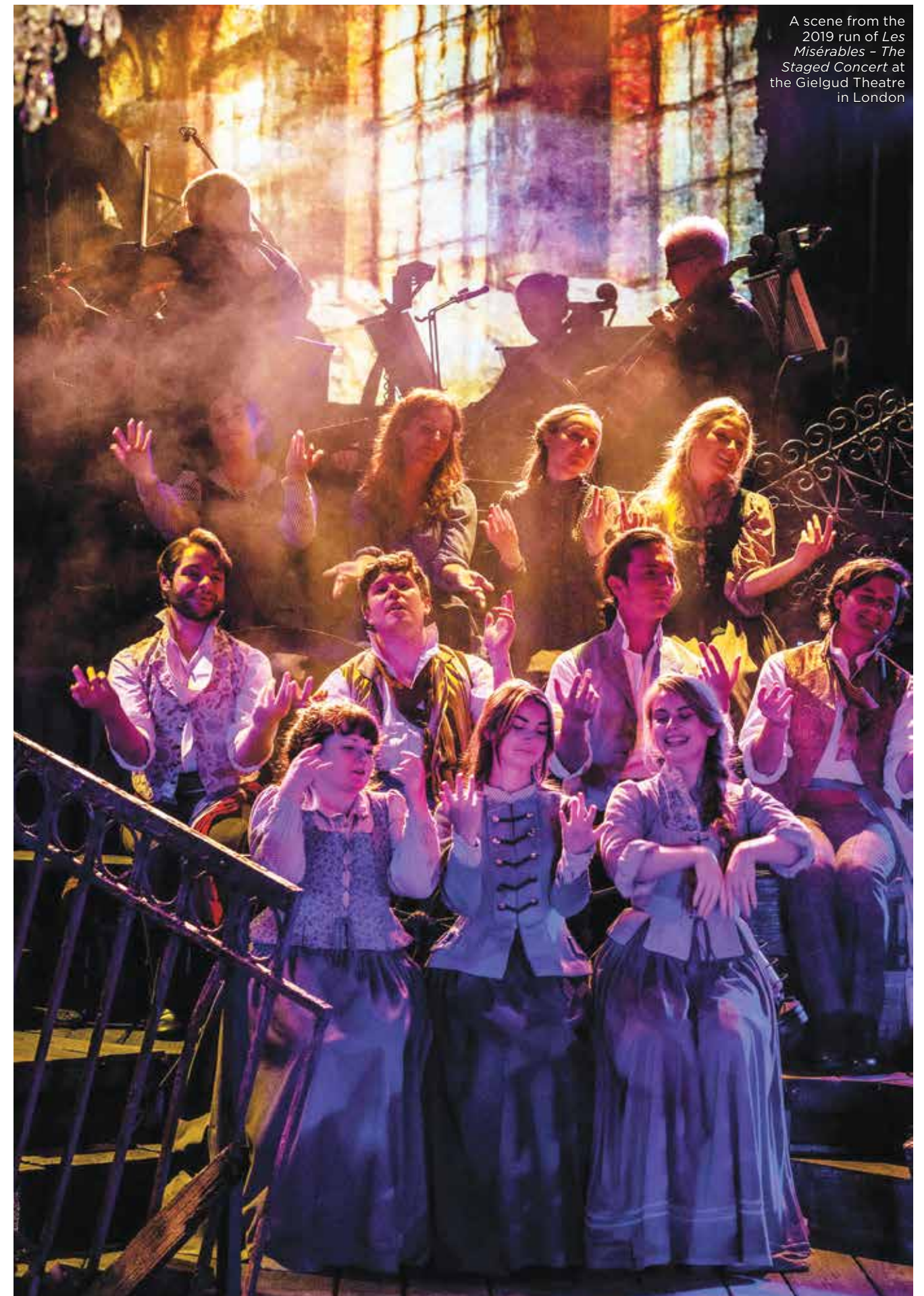
Joining the SOI will be Welsh actor and singer, John Owen-Jones, who has been seen and loved by millions as the Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera*,

a role he has essayed more times than anyone else in the history of the West End, and as Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* on Broadway and the West End. Welsh singer and actress Lucie Jones has delivered pitch-perfect performances as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* (UK tour), as Maureen Johnson in *RENT the Musical* (directed by Head of Theatre at the NCPA, Bruce Guthrie), and is currently leading *Waitress* on the West End in, as one reviewer has said, her 'phenomenal, clear-as-glass voice' in a 'mesmerising' performance. This concert will mark the first visit to India for Bowling, Owen-Jones and Jones.

Aural influences

There is no word or phrase to describe the hunger to work in musical theatre. It is, after all, extremely demanding work, but it must exist, like an original impulse, in those who go on to succeed in it. "I don't think I ever considered any other career than music...except, perhaps in moments of being broke," says Bowling, who is currently busy firming up the repertoire and reviewing orchestrations for the concert at the NCPA. "As a child, I remember doing my homework lying under our piano as my mother played Bach, Chopin or Gershwin," he says. "Music was the constant in my childhood. My three older siblings all played the piano as well as other instruments, danced and sang, and my mother, who is 95, still plays the piano every day, absolutely beautifully."

Jones, who also always knew her career path, has been equally enveloped in music. "My grandmother used to play the piano for many choirs around the valleys of South Wales, where I grew up. No one in my family sings, but we all love music. I was extremely lucky to grow up in a city where the arts



A scene from the 2019 run of *Les Misérables - The Staged Concert* at the Gielgud Theatre in London



John Owen-Jones essaying the role of Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*

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were prominent. From a very young age, I was able to take advantage of many opportunities including going to see productions with my school, my parents and friends,” she says. Owen-Jones offers a slightly different perspective. “There are no musicians in my family really – not professional ones anyway. According to my dear late grandfather, there is a history of keen amateur singers and poets in the family. My parents run a butcher shop (where I worked for a while) and my grandparents were farmers and factory workers – but we are Welsh, so there’s always been music and art somewhere in family life,” he says.

All three of them, however, agree on the powerful impact of musicals they experienced when they were younger. For Owen-Jones, it was the final matinee of the West End production of the musical *Chess* at the Prince Edward Theatre in 1989. “It’s a flawed piece, but I remember being amazed at what I was watching, and that’s when I knew for certain that I wanted to be a professional actor and singer,” he says. Jones remembers being mesmerised by *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. For Bowling, it was the Broadway production of *Dreamgirls* that made an impression. “It wasn’t until many years later I had the courage to pursue musical theatre in earnest, but I’ll always be grateful to that incredible cast of actors for opening up my eyes and heart to how powerful musical theatre could be,” he says.

Rebel creators

There is an oneiric energy to musical theatre that is thrilling and indelible in equal measure. “It’s the combination of storytelling, drama and music that makes it so attractive, I think. Musicals combine aspects of other art forms like opera, ballet and plays, and as a result, have a universal appeal,” says Owen-Jones. Bowling believes a great musical can be a great communicator too. “At its best, musical theatre integrates acting, singing and dance in a way no other medium can or does. For most, musical theatre feels straightforward and immediately fathomable... it ultimately communicates the power of theatre to the widest possible audience in the most direct, digestible way,” he says.

The genre is also incredibly inclusive; pretty much anything can be made into a musical. Many believe that Lin-Manuel Miranda broke new ground by combining American history with rap music and put Broadway on the map again with *Hamilton*, but musical theatre giants like Hal Prince, Stephen Sondheim and Andrew Lloyd Webber, have always found success in making musicals on strange subjects with stranger elements. So while Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil adapted the 19th-century French tome by Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, into one of the longest-running musicals of all time, Webber did the same with a book of whimsical cat poems by Nobel Prize-winning poet,

T.S. Eliot, to create *Cats*, an equally whimsical musical. Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a rock opera, loosely inspired by the Gospels’ account of the last week of the life of Jesus Christ. And these are only some of the most successful examples.

“Musical theatre has [always] been groundbreaking. We sadly lost one of the genre’s greatest directors and innovators this past summer, Hal Prince, someone I was fortunate enough to have worked with on *The Phantom of the Opera*. Hal was always attracted to provocative material that challenged his audiences rather than simply pleasing them – he took on, for example, political prisoners and gay persecution in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and anti-Semitism in *Parade*. Hal was largely responsible for inspiring a new generation of musical theatre creators and directors to take on the big political and sociological issues,” says Bowling.

West Enders unite

Bowling is excited about the upcoming collaboration with the SOI, Jones and Owen-Jones. “Our paths have not crossed professionally until now, but I certainly know Lucie from her brilliant performances in *Waitress*, *Rent* and *Legally Blonde*, and she is undoubtedly one of the West End’s brightest stars,” he says. Having worked with Owen-Jones before, he says, “John, quite simply, has one of the most extraordinary voices I’ve ever encountered. I’m so

looking forward to working with the musicians of the SOI, as well as both the soloists.”

Jones, who will continue to play the lead in *Waitress* on the West End after her performance in Mumbai, will be singing, among others, one of the standout songs from the musical (‘She Used To Be Mine’) at the NCPA. She says, “John and I have worked together many times. He is a brilliant singer and a wonderful person to be around. He has been incredibly supportive of my career and offered me opportunities to sing with him when no one else could. He’s cheeky! We laugh a lot together and I’m looking forward to bringing that to the stage in Mumbai. I am already rehearsing the songs I have, a month in advance of my trip, and I can’t wait to explore the city of Mumbai.”

Meanwhile, Owen-Jones, apart from singing songs of the Phantom and Valjean, will also be busy learning lyrics to some songs he will be performing for the first time at the NCPA. For ‘Bring Him Home’ however, there is nothing to rehearse. “I don’t really prepare for it nowadays as the song has been etched onto my DNA after singing it so many times. Before I sing it though, I do quietly sing the high notes to myself to check they are there,” he says. ■

The Symphony Orchestra of India will present The Musical Theatre Gala on 20th February at the Jamshed Bhabha Theatre.



Lucie Jones during *Magic at the Musicals* at the Royal Albert Hall