

Young stars to shine in 'Les Miz'

By **JOE HENDERSON**
Special to The Olathe News

Director David Hastings can hardly contain his enthusiasm for the talent level of his youthful cast in the school version of "Les Miserables," which opens Friday at Theatre in the Park.

"They're such an incredibly talented group. Their voices are so strong and vibrant," said Hastings, who also teaches drama at Olathe South High School. "You would never know they're all teenagers."

The school version of "Les Miserables," which requires the entire cast to be 19 or younger, is believed to be the theater's first production with an all teenage cast. The show runs this weekend and again June 30-July 3.

"I truly believe that in the next 10 years many in this cast will be performing professionally in this area and across the country. They are that good," Hastings said. "They're serious and they're responsible and respectful."

Hastings knows a thing or two about young actors. He's the



MIKE RANDELL | STAFF

Costumer Ruth Casady prepared wardrobe pieces for "Les Miserables," this weekend's Theatre in the Park production, which features a teen cast.

Olathe School District's theater facilitator. He's been associated with Theatre in the Park as an actor and director for 17 years and his musicals at South have been nominated for numerous Starlight Theatre Blue Star Awards.

More than 300 teens from the

Kansas City area auditioned for "Les Miserables," most of them already veterans of Starlight Theatre, The New Theatre, The Theatre in the Park and other community theater venues. "You can't imagine how difficult it was to narrow down that group, many of whom were

stars in their high school shows, to our cast of 48," Hastings said.

It's been a spring full of surprises for Charlie Meredith, 18, who has the lead role of Jean Valjean. He plays a thief who steals a loaf of bread, spends years in prison and later takes part in an uprising.

For starters, Meredith, a graduate of Shawnee Mission South who lives in Overland Park, was among 18 students selected for the prestigious University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. "I was very surprised. I only started singing a year and a half ago and there were applicants from all over — England, Canada, even New Zealand," he said.

Then came the audition for "Les Miserables," another surprise.

"I'd never been to the Theatre in the Park. A friend talked me into going the day before the auditions. I honestly didn't know anything about 'Les Miserables,'" Meredith said. "I didn't think my audition went too well

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and I couldn't make my callback because I was in Cincinnati to confirm my college admission. To my surprise, they held a private callback for me when I returned and, even more surprising, I got the lead.

"Everything fell into place. I'm just so glad I went to the audition," he said.

Gabriela Delano, 18, an Olathe East graduate, also was surprised how her audition for "Les Miserables" turned out.

"I really wanted to be Fantine; it's my dream role," she said. "I was afraid I wouldn't be considered because mostly I've been in comedies and Fantine is a dramatic role. It was a 360-degree turn for me."

Fantine has a hard life. She loses her job and works as a prostitute to raise money to pay for her daughter's care. "It's a great role; I love doing it," said Delano, who lives in Overland Park. "I just love performing. When I'm on stage I'm happy. After college I want to go to New York and audition for everything."

Showtime

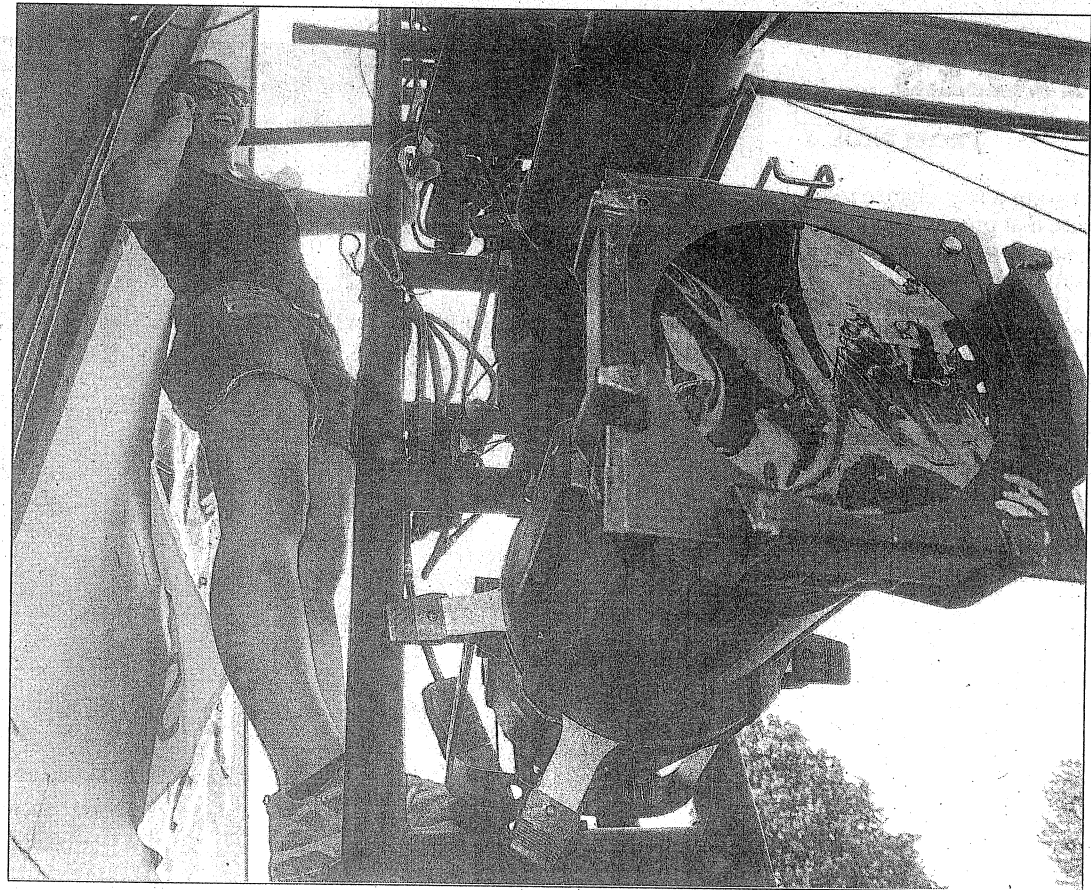
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Katie Martin, 18, a graduate of St. Thomas Aquinas, plays Eponine. "I've watched 'Les Miserables' at other schools and I've always wanted to be Eponine. It's a very emotional role," Martin said. "She's had a bad life, but she fights for what she wants."

"Les Miserables" is based on Victor Hugo's novel of struggles for redemption and revolution in 19th-century France.

"Les Miserables" is a late substitution for "Willy Wonka," which was deemed too expensive by Tim Bair, who was appointed executive producer after the 2011 schedule was set.

The school version of "Les Miserables" runs about 30 minutes shorter than the Broadway production. Bair said at the time the change was made that it provided a "wonderful opportunity for the extraordinary number of young performers in our community to be part of one of the most amazing musicals of all time."



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Anna Ward worked this week on the lighting for "Les Miserables."