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ES MISÉRABLES IS BASED ON THE 1862 VICTOR HUGO NOVEL about a paroled convict, Jean Valjean, and his moral journey in the face of persecution by the cruel policeman Javert. Desperate poverty, the fight for democracy and, of course, the difficult path of true love are all covered in an epic plot as dark as it is dramatic. The original French version of Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg's musical opened in 1980 in Paris. In 1983 Cameron Mackintosh, buoyed by the unprecedented success of Cats, which he produced with Andrew Lloyd Webber, started developing an English version. When it opened in 1985, reviews were mixed but the audience response was resounding and the show has been a fixture in London ever since. A Broadway version opened in March 1987 and, eight months later, on November 27, it premiered in Australia at Sydney's Theatre Royal.

That Sydney production has a special place in Mackintosh's heart. "It was an extraordinary company," he says. "Several of the leads went on to become the backbone of the Australian theatre. It absolutely changed their lives forever." He feels simpatico with the Australian stage. "The finest productions of my shows, the ones that have equalled and sometimes excelled the London originals, are always in Australia. That's why I keep coming back." He hopes to return in 2012 with the new production of *Les Misérables*.

Les Mis clearly connects with audiences in a way other shows don't. "It's a great work of literature," says Marina Prior, who was Australia's original Cosette, the abused but resilient young woman taken under Valjean's wing. "It's so ambitious: there's life, death, revolution, injustice, profound truths about humanity." The depth and breadth of the story grips audiences and performers alike. "I remember the first run in the rehearsal studios at the Wharf [in Sydney], the whole cast and the producers were weeping," she says. "We knew we were involved in something bigger than us."

It changed the face of musical theatre, too. "Les Misérables married acting and singing in a way that hadn't been done before. It ushered in a more naturalistic style of musical," says Prior. She lays much of the credit at the feet of UK director Trevor Nunn, who spent the entire rehearsal period with the cast in Sydney. Nunn had directed the Royal Shakespeare Company for 18 years and applied classical techniques to musical theatre. "He taught us so much about the process of acting and finding truth while you're singing," she says.







Masters of the house: (below left, clockwise m top) the original Australian cast; Normie Rowe as Jean Valjean; Simon Burke as Marius and Jodie Gillies



by the show process. treated like true actors.'

Before he snared the role of the vindictive police-

Philip Quast as Inspector Javert

man Javert, Philip Quast had been a Play School host and TV soap regular. "I hadn't seen or heard Les Misérables when I went to the audition, but everyone was talking about it," he says. "I was 29, quite inexperienced. I sort of sang." But Quast was such a success that in 1989 he was wrested from Sydney to play Javert in the London production. He's also the only member of this Australian ensemble to feature in the 10th anniversary "Dream Cast" concert at the Royal Albert Hall, cementing himself in many eyes as the definitive Javert. "You can say Les Mis launched me, but I don't look at it like that. At the time it was just what comes next."

What did come next were starring roles in more West End musicals, including Sunday in the Park with George, The Fix and South Pacific - Quast won Laurence Olivier Best Actor awards for all three. He also spent two years with the Royal Shakespeare Company, working again with Trevor Nunn. For Les Mis, "All the stuff from the RSC was passed down to us through him," he says. "We all felt rather blessed, not by the show but by the process. We were treated like true actors."

Ouast has lived in London since 1989, but has regularly returned home to work; he's done the television show Corridors of Power and the film Clubland, among many others. Right now Quast has left his family in the UK to play Mr Banks in Mary Poppins, another Cameron Mackintosh hit, alongside fellow Les Mis alumni Marina Prior and Debra Byrne. "[My children] used to travel with me but now they're at uni and school and it's very difficult. To make the choice to do this **felt rather** show is a big sacrifice, but Marina and Deb being **blessed**, **not** in it was an added incentive."

but by the **Simon Burke** as Marius

Simon Burke had been acting for 13 years when **We were** he won the romantic lead role of Marius, but the gig was a huge step up for the 25-year-old. "I was doing a couple of plays, lots of film and television, but I didn't have the slightest inkling that musical theatre would become such a huge part of my life," he says. The intensity of the show and the sheer heft of a 3½-hour production eight times a week was gruelling.

"You do a musical like Chicago or Anything Goes or Sound of Music and you bounce out of the theatre, full of positivity," says Burke. "Les Mis is different. It really wore me out. Come Sunday, I couldn't even speak, like I'd been run over by a bus. It was incredibly exciting but it was like being under siege. It completely ruined my social life and my relationship. I was a nightmare to be with. But I don't think it would be the show that it is if it didn't cost the performers so much to do it."

The show gave Burke's career a huge push – he went on to star in London productions of A Little Night Music, Phantom of the Opera and La Cage aux Folles (in which he replaced Philip Quast as Georges), among many others. He released an album of show tunes and recently starred with Jane Turner in a London production of the Australian play Holding the Man. He's worked consistently in Australia, too, for the Sydney and Melbourne Theatre Companies and on TV shows including Brides of Christ and After the Deluge.

His time as Marius still carries weight in London. "Everyone you meet on the West End has been in Les Mis," he says. "They've played fourth whore or 18th piece of grass or understudy Jean Valjean. When I say I was the third Marius in the world and I was cast by Trevor Nunn ... well, that's special."

Normie Rowe as Jean Valjean

Days before Normie Rowe started rehearsals for Les Misérables, his then wife found him sobbing in a chair, a copy of Victor Hugo's novel in his lap. "She asked what the matter was and I told her I had just died," says Rowe. "I have a vivid imagination and I had really placed myself in the situation of Jean Valjean." Rowe went on to die more than 600 times as the noble hero of Les Mis, staying with the company from opening night until the Sydney season ended on July 15, 1989. Watching his co-stars bloom, especially

Anthony Warlow, was a particular pleasure. "When Enjolras was at the top of the barricades, doing his 'we will fight until we die' thing, you look up at Anthony, who's got this fantastic voice and is handsome as hell, and you think, 'Gee, I don't think there's a bloke or a sheila that wouldn't go and die for this fella." It put his own experience into perspective. "I knew how much work it had taken for him to get there and I started to understand what an indelible and unique experience I was living through myself."

Immediately prior to taking the role of Valjean, Rowe had done two years on TV soap Sons and Daughters but he was best known in the 1960s, when he was a chart-topping pop star. "There would have been five or six gold records in the early days," he says. "That was a highlight, but being in Les Mis was a true highlight of my life

and probably the paramount one. It was a personal triumph for me because I was taking advantage of my potential to the absolute limit. The skills and education and practice of the past 20odd years had all of a sudden converged and there it was right in front of me."

After Les Mis, Rowe developed the Australian version of the Cyrano de Bergerac musical and took lead roles in Annie, Chess and Evita. He participated in the Long Way to the Top Aussie rock legends tour in 2002. He's been a talk-show regular and his many charity performances include a Les Mis concert series in 2004 that raised more than \$1 million for multiple sclerosis.

Rowe, 63, lives on the Gold Coast and is still busy performing: next week he's playing unplugged at the Traralgon Golf Club, in Victoria's Gippsland. "You must keep faith with the people that have supported you, and that's big towns, little towns - it's important to get as close as you can," he says. Next year he will clock up 50 years as a professional artist but he thinks he's still developing.

"I have a new single released on iTunes called Stay with Me, Baby," he says. "The song has been nibbling away at my psyche since the '60s but it's an emotional song; I didn't think I had the emotional loading to do the song properly until recently. After a number of failed relationships you start to get the hang of things. You apply that

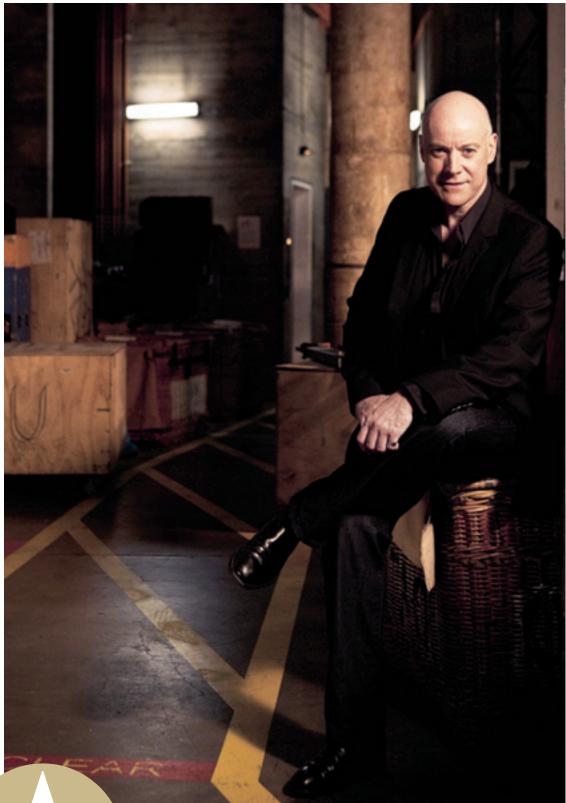


Leading men: (above left) Philip Quast played Inspector Javert and went on to great success in Britain; (right) Simon Burke found Les Mis physically and

emotionally exhausting

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Anthony Warlow as Enjolras

Anthony Warlow had diverted from an opera career and was starring in Guys and Dolls when he heard Les Misérables was coming to Australia. Warlow, then 25, was drawn to the charismatic rabble-rouser Enjolras. "It was the histrionics, the absolute grandeur of the character and his sensibility," he says.

Warlow also relished the large cast. "I learnt about working in an ensemble there," he says. "I met all the wonderful people I've had a theatrical life with over the ensuing years. It was the beginning of a potent theatrical family." Audiences latched on to Warlow during his three years with the show, in Sydney and then in Melbourne, after which he became the Phantom of the Opera.

"Les Mis was the beginning of profile and the start of a major career for me," he says. "It was a special time." A fan club emerged during the period and one night SAWAS (the Secret Anthony Warlow Admiration Society) threw teddy bears onto the stage dressed as the characters from the show. "My little bear, EnjolBear, was perfectly done, with a black wig and vest and tricoleur," says Warlow. "It was a flattering moment."

Actors in long-running shows often set per-

sonal challenges. Warlow's was to die with his eyes open, not an easy thing in the glare of the spotlights. "Enjolras falls backwards and lies upside down with the flag across him," he says. "I wanted to look like I wasn't breathing and keep my eyes open. I tried to make it as real as possible, by palpitating beforehand so I didn't breathe highly. On the odd occasion, the lights or makeup or sweat got into my eyes and I had to do a quick death rattle and close my eyes. Those are the moments you set up for yourself to make for an interesting journey."

Following Phantom, Warlow became ill with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. "I'd been working for 51/2 years, performing eight times a week as best I could. I wouldn't be surprised if the stress of that aided the sickness. The fact is, I had it, I've survived it and it has supplied me with incredible spiritual and artistic resources which I use in my work. I think it's made me a better performer."

Warlow continues to hop between opera and musical theatre, including a two-year reprise of Phantom that finished in May 2009. At the moment, he's midway through an Opera Australia season of The Pirates of Penzance at the Sydney Opera House.



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Different paths: Anthony Warlow (left) had started out in opera

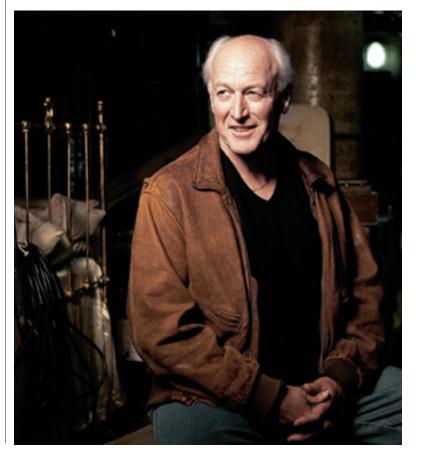
before moving into musical theatre, while Barry Langrishe (below) was a photographer who'd only just decided to become an actor.

Barry Langrishe as Thénardier

When his agent suggested he audition as the villainous Thénardier, Barry Langrishe, a photographer who had recently decided to act, told her no. "I'd only done a small guest thing on A Country Practice and a bit of theatre in schools. I'd never thought of myself as a singer. Les Mis was the biggest show to hit Australia at the time and one of the biggest to hit the world overall. Being in it myself sounded about as realistic as flying to the moon." But he gave it a go, got the role and, three months in, Trevor Nunn walked into his dressing room. "He told me I was the best Thénardier he had seen anywhere. That's an extraordinary thing to say. I'll never forget it."

He learnt a lot from his year with Les Mis but it wasn't the calling card he hoped it might be. "I thought it would launch me into film and TV but it didn't," he says. "Film and TV people rarely go to the theatre, much less musical theatre. It's a different world. I didn't work at all for six months after Les Mis." But then the roles did start to roll in. There have been TV shows (everything from All Saints to Peter Bogdanovich's The Mystery of Natalie Wood), films (Kiss or Kill and the forthcoming *Eye of the Storm*) and more musical theatre, including Titanic in London four years ago. Occasional photographic work fills in the gaps.

"In terms of my own ego and standing, my sense of who I was in the industry, Les Mis was huge," he says. "But it's a double-edged sword because when you come out the other end you're expecting greater things, but they don't always happen in this business. Still, in a life-experience sense, Les Mis was massive. It made me take myself seriously as a performer."







It's an amazing show, so beautifully written, and the music is so well married to the characters. But I always had a sense of doom inside me."



Marina Prior as Cosette

Bourke Street Mall busker and singing student Marina Prior had never been backstage at a theatre when she auditioned for *The Pirates of Penzance* in 1983. She won the lead. Next, she was Guinevere in *Camelot*, played Jellylorum and Griddlebone in *Cats*, then starred in *H.M.S. Pinafore. Les Mis* was different. "Cosette was the ingénue role and yet she isn't a two-dimensional pretty little thing with a sweet little song," she says. "Her melodic lines are soulful and romantic. She's a full-faceted character. She is truthful. It was a joy to play her." She took a spell from *Les Mis* to do *Anything Goes*, then rejoined it in Melbourne, doing two years with the show in total.

Since then, it's been a surprise when Marina Prior hasn't played in any of the major musicals that have come to town. She starred in *Phantom of the Opera*, *West Side Story* and *The Merry Widow* and twice in *Guys and Dolls*. She's done straight theatre and TV roles, too, including a stint as a blind woman on *GP* and a role in the Melbourne Theatre Company's *The Hypocrite* in 2009. In 1994 she accompanied José Carreras on a singing tour of Australia and, of course, it wouldn't be Carols by Candlelight in Melbourne without her.

Prior has frequently worked with *Les Mis* pals over the years, teaming up with Philip Quast and Anthony Warlow in *The Secret Garden* and, soberingly, meeting many of the ensemble to sing at Rob Guest's funeral in 2008 (Guest replaced Rowe as Valjean in 1989). "There's a great connection between people that have done *Les Mis* together, like you've been on a huge journey," she says. "Singing for Rob felt like coming home."

Currently, she's in *Mary Poppins*, being Mrs Banks to Philip Quast's Mister. "It crept up on me, being a veteran," she says. "I feel proud that I'm still working after 25 years and I feel a sort of matriarch responsibility to help young people starting in the industry now." So, 25 years more? "I love it and respect this craft so much," she says. "My ambition is to continue to be better."

Debra Byrne as Fantine

Ex-Young Talent Time star and Queen of Pop Debra Byrne was battling depression and anxiety when she took the role of Fantine, the seamstress who spirals to an early death after Cosette, her illegitimate child, is born. She stayed for 2½ years, well into the Melbourne season, revelling in the experience but struggling, too.

"I enjoyed it, it's such an amazing show, so beautifully written, and the music is so well married to the characters. But I always had a sense of doom inside me," she says. Byrne felt dangerously close to her character. "I merged with Fantine," she says. "She felt worthless, victimised; she felt life had cheated her, and her innocence and youth had been taken." Byrne had been sexually abused as a child; those feelings were very familiar.

At the same time, Byrne relished the meatiness of the part and the musical's heartening message. "Les Mis identifies resilience in people. It shows that the only thing that can totally destroy a human, other than death, is if you take away hope. While you have hope, all things are possible."

Since *Les Mis*, Byrne has starred with Hugh Jackman in *Sunset Boulevard*, developed her own cabaret show, *Girls*, *Girls*, *Girls*, and appeared in TV shows such as *The Secret Life of Us* and *City Homicide*. She's also written her autobiography, undertaken therapy and become a devout Christian, along the way developing the wherewithal to distinguish herself from her characters – a good thing as she's now playing the destitute Bird Woman in *Mary Poppins*. "Now I know my acting is about skill and technique. I can manifest it without my characters coming home with me."







mercials and freelance photography. "Gavroche used to sing, 'You'd better run for cover when the pup grows up.' I'm approaching 40 and I don't think I've grown up yet. I think part of me is still back there. *Les Mis* was an amazing ride. Everybody knew they were involved in something special and it would be a long time before anything comparable came along. I guess I'm still waiting."

Robyn Arthur as Madame Thénardier

Robyn Arthur was one of nine actors in the original company of 38 to stay with *Les Misérables* for its four-year tour around Australia and New Zealand. "I did almost 1300 performances," she says.

"I had three fantastic husbands. The Thénardiers were the baddies ... You knew you'd done your job if you got booed at the end of the night."

Musical theatre has continued to loom large in Arthur's 35-year career, including *Beauty and the Beast* and *The Boy from Oz.* She's also appeared on screen in *Charlotte's Web*, Stephen King's *Nightmares & Dreamscapes* miniseries and *Kath & Kim*, among many other TV shows.

Les Mis still shines brightly. "It was so great to do something so meaty and truthful," she says. "To tell a story based on Victor Hugo's novel, well, we're not talking Mamma Mia!. It had a very solid base and you could always go back to that text for inspiration. And it was great fun to be bad." GW



Jodie Gillies as Éponine

Jodie Gillies was Marina Prior's understudy in *The Pirates of Penzance*, then toured Australia with Glenn Shorrock's stage show *One for the Money* before getting the role of the lovelorn Éponine in *Les Misérables*. Gillies had to lose 20 kilograms to look like the producers' vision of her character. "It wasn't healthy what I did to lose weight," says the 170-centimetre actress of her crash diet to 54 kilograms.

Maintaining the weight was hard; so was her character's arc. "Les Mis is a beautiful show and it says so much about humanity, but to do the show as Éponine is depressing," she says. "She's beaten up her whole life, the boy she loves doesn't see her and then she dies. My eyes would be stinging by the end of the week from crying on stage all the time." After a year she took the less desolate role of Aldonza in Man of La Mancha.

Since then, Gillies has performed in *Chess* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat* and played for laughs in *Menopause the Musical* and *Dumped*. People still remember her Éponine. "If I'm doing a concert, people always ask for *On My Own*," she says, referring to her solo. "Sometimes, if I go to an audition, the bloody people on the panel ask me to do it. What am I, doing requests?" But she doesn't resent it. "It sits nicely in my voice. I almost felt like the part could have been written for me."

Brian Rooney as Gavroche

"The whole thing was a bit of a dream world," says Brian Rooney of his time playing the abandoned urchin Gavroche. "I was 15 but I looked about 10."

Anthony Warlow mentored the teenager. "Looking back, I'm amazed at how patient he was," says Rooney. After 18 months, Rooney's voice broke and he was gently let go. A long-running role on TV show *GP* broke his fall but there hasn't been much time in the limelight since, so he also does voiceovers, com-

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Mixed fortunes: for
Jodie Gillies (above
left) and Robyn
Arthur (above right),
Les Misérables was
another step in long
and successful careers,
but for child star Brian
Rooney (above) it
remains the highlight
of his life as an actor.

