

“Les Misérables” Audio Description Pre-Show Notes

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Show Information

Les Misérables is a sung-through musical theatre show based on Victor Hugo's 1862 novel of the same name. The musical's book & music was written by Claude-Michel Schönberg & Alain Boublil, with English lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer. Les Misérables first premiered in Paris on September 24th, 1980, before opening in London on October 8th, 1985. It has since become the West End's second longest-running show of all time, and Broadway's sixth longest-running show of all time. Packemin Productions first hosted a production of Les Misérables in February 2020.

Set in 19th Century France, the musical tells the story of Jean Valjean and his quest for redemption after serving nineteen years in prison. He breaks his parole and starts life anew after a tremendous act of mercy, but he is constantly pursued by police inspector Javert. Along the way, Valjean and a slew of characters are swept into a revolutionary period in France, where a group of young idealists attempt to overthrow the government at a street barricade in Paris.

Set and Props

The Riverside Theatre is a traditional proscenium arch venue, with 761 seats across three levels: the stalls, the circle and the gallery. The architectural design is based on the common European Opera House concept to provide a warm, intimate and live performance space. The stage is approximately 12 metres wide by 5 metres deep and is raised above the audience floor level.

The set and props are in subdued colours. Stone, wood and canvas all in light and dark browns, shades of all kinds of grey. Worn and used, motley and dirty-looking.

The floor of the playing space is made to look like it's covered in large, cobbled paving stones, wide and unevenly shaped, and with darker filling between. This is done with light and the effect disappears from time to time.

On either side are 3 sturdy looking stone walls, 3m wide and 4.2m high they flank either side of the space. These are dressed as though made from heavy grey stone, cut into bricks. The soot and grime of a crowded city is streaked onto the once-grey stones.

Show opening

The show opens to a scene of hard labour. From above hang hefty, thick, natural fibre ropes. 6 bedraggled men pull on them, straining and heaving, under the watchful gaze of two well dressed- guards. Jean Valjean will leave this sweaty workcamp crossing the stage as our journey through the years begins.

And so from this moment, the bare stage is changed again and again into different locations, inside and outside. The large chorus of performers help with the transitions, carrying and arranging things on and off, they fill up streets and rooms to give us a good sense of place. Larger pieces of scenery, like Jean Valjean's iron gates around his garden glide seamlessly on and off, as though pushed by unseen hands.

From the sweating work camp into an open, brightly lit bustling town square. Montreuil-sur-Mer. A market cart, small and wooden with sacks of flour is wheeled on.

And on to an inn. Wooden, round backed chairs and small square wooden tables dotted about, serve as an inn, a cylindrical orange lantern overhead. A room full of patrons at the inn and instantly we are transported. Dank, steeped in poverty but full of life.

Valjean meets the bishop and is welcomed into his chapel. It's a rectangle shaped table covered in a white cloth to our right. The table dressing is silver candle sticks, serving spoon, plate and bowl. High on a wall above the table a cross formed from light, the cross only fades out slowly when the bishop leaves.

At the End of the Day

The prologue - the story, before the story finishes and Act 1 begins once we hear the song 'At the end of the day'

We meet Fantine at a factory, here are 5 small, dark wood, square tables evenly spaced to create 5 workstations. The women, crowd around them, 5 per table. Most wear blue caps to hide their hair, crowd around the stations. Their hands are busy. On our right a rickety staircase with a platform at the top - 11 steep, narrow stairs lead to a small platform, another set of stairs at the other side. Hung under the stairs is light brown hessian. When this scene ends only the staircase remains, the performers carry everything from the factory away with them.

Lovely Ladies

Lovely Ladies is sung around the Montreuil docks, the light is pinky red, and dim. The docks are filled with walkways, boxes and staircases, apple crates made from wood are stacked haphazardly.

In the following scene there wooden-wheeled, heavy wooden cart is 2m long and as tall as a man high is canvas topped. It has jutting front bearers where the cart can be picked up by man or beast. The whole thing is muddy green. The first time the cart appears there is an accident. Listen out for my co-describer mentioning this cart.

Master of the House

The Thénardier's inn has an arched entranceway towards to the back on our right and dark wood, square tables and wooden round-backed chairs. The inn is full of activity, performers wear white and brown, they are the diners. The diners like to drink.

Some indication of time and place appears in large letters made from light, high above the stage from time to time during the changes. In one instance this reads 1832. We are transported to the *streets*.

Paris Streets

It's nighttime, and a bridge takes up most of the playing space. Its deck is above head height with steps leading up to it at the sides, with the entrance to the stairs facing us, the bridge has decorative, heavy stone detail and wide, flat stone, railing. From the narrow deck rise two Victoria-style street lamps - tall, straight and meters apart. They are lit and glow softly.

The Bridge is able to disappear as it is taken up into the roof of the theatre, this is a traditional way of changing locations quickly. From the bridge we are transported to:

The ABC Café

The ABC Café is a brightly lit student cafe where Enjolras, Marius and Gavroche speak of revolution. An easel with a city map to our right, and the cafe has a jovial air of use and excitement, students mill around small square tables with round-backed wooden chairs. An arched, stone fireplace flanked by a set of stairs leading to a raised section makes a cosy L shape at the rear of the cafe.

It's this clever use of pieces like the narrow, 11 step staircases, the fireplace, an archway, a raised observation platform, 2m high with rope railings. These get made into slightly different configurations throughout, revealing different locations. The action moves swiftly from outside under a bridge in the night with Eponine, to straight into the warm student hub, bubbling with activity.

Jean Valjean's front yard

Jean Valjean's front yard: 2 iron gates flanked by sections of wall made from cobblestones connected by mortar. In Jean Valjean's yard there is a flat, wide stone bench on our left. The gate and its partial walls are connected. The gate sits in the middle of the space, on an angle.

The soldiers use rifles, at the very end of Act 1, when they sing 'One Day More' Enjolras wields a long wooden rifle.

Whilst our audience are making their way into their seats, that's the orchestra we can hear warming up. They are set below the stage; the conductor's baton pops up from time to time with their vigour, but the instruments are hidden below. A piece of dark cloth shades the entire stage from the audience and on it is written 'To Love another person is the see the face of God' - Victor Hugo

Characters & Costumes

Jean Valjean

Jean Valjean is an ex-convict who leaves his criminal past behind so he can become an honest man. He has a short beard and his prisoner number 24601 tattooed on his chest. When we first see Valjean, he has shoulder length black hair, and wears tattered brown prison rags. After the prologue, he has short hair which gets greyer as the show progresses. He wears various suit tops through the rest of the story. They consist of a dark grey or brown jacket, dark grey cravat and brown vest over a white collared shirt. When picking up Cosette, he wears a long brown overcoat over the vest and shirt. On the barricade, he wears a blue & red army jacket with gold buttons. He wears black trousers & black shoes with all of his suits.

Javert

Javert is a police inspector and former prison officer. He has long black hair tied in a ponytail. We first see him as a prison officer wearing a large black hat with a silver emblem on it, a mid-blue jacket with silver buttons with matching blue trousers and black boots.

In Montreuil-sur-Mer, he wears a navy-blue double-breasted jacket with silver buttons running up each side. In Paris, he has greyer hair and wears a long, black, double-breasted overcoat. When disguised as a rebel, he wears a mid-brown overcoat over a matching vest. He has a red and white rosette on his coat. All aforementioned jackets and coats are worn over a white collared shirt. With the exception of the prison officer uniform, he wears black trousers and thigh-high black boots with all his outfits.

Fantine

Fantine is a young grisette. The word grisette refers to French working-class woman from the 17th, 18th & 19th century. We first encounter her as a factory worker before turning to desperate measures to look after her daughter Cosette. She has long brown hair, and wears a long, light blue dress with a mid-blue waistline and sleeves. The top half later changes to a sleeveless off-white bodice with laces on the torso, and a wrinkled and torn skirt.

Cosette

Cosette is Fantine's daughter. We encounter Cosette as a child wearing a white cotton cap, a light brown, tattered shirt & mid brown, shin length skirt. As an adult, she wears four different dresses, all of which have long sleeves and an expanded hemline in the style of the time. On the streets of Paris, it is deep purple with a white embroidered collar. She also wears a matching purple and white bonnet on her head and carries a woven basket. When we first see her at Rue Plumet, her dress is white with a pattern of small blue flowers. When comforting Marius, it is blue-green with thin white stripes in a V shape on the chest, and similar stripes on the sleeves and around the hemline. For her wedding, her dress is white with a lace pattern below the waistline. She also wears a floral crown with a long flowing veil on the back.

Marius Pontmercy

Marius is a handsome young man from a wealthy back who becomes a student and falls in love with Cosette. He has neck-length brown hair, and first wears a blue-grey suit jacket over a white shirt and navy-blue cravat. At the barricade, he wears a tan coloured vest with a red, white and blue rosette over the same white shirt with sleeves rolled up past the elbows. In Empty Chairs, he has his arm in a sling & wears a dark purple coat.

At the wedding, he wears an open black tuxedo jacket over the white shirt. He wears black trousers & black shoes with all tops.

Students

An association of revolutionary students all meet in the ABC Café. They all wear suits of different colours & combinations of jackets, vests, cravats and ties. They are all over white collared shirts, black trousers and black shoes. At the barricade, they all wear different coloured vests over the shirts. The vest worn by their leader Enjolras is red with gold braided inlays and buttons

The Thénardiens

The Thénardiens are sleazy innkeepers, who later live their lives as thieves. Monsieur Thénardier is a man who is sure of his place in the world and is quite often jovial and dishevelled. He has a bald head and carries himself with swaggering movements. At the inn, he wears a military outfit from the battle of Waterloo, that is - a long dark blue cap and mid blue military jacket with gold braided epaulettes and red inlays, over a tan vest with buttons up one side. He wears the same blue jacket when in the sewers.

In Paris, he wears a two-tone brown jacket. All jackets are worn over a white button-up shirt, three-quarter length brown trousers, tall white socks & black shoes.

Madame Thénardier is a larger woman, with fleshy cheeks and exaggerated movements. has messy hair tied in a bun, dirt around her eyes, and browning teeth. In the inn, she wears a white apron over a white & blue dress with dirt on the sleeves. In Paris, she wears a black cardigan with rips and tears in it over the white and blue dress. In One Day More, the cardigan is replaced by a dark brown vest.

At the wedding, they disguise themselves as royalty with heavy white & red makeup on their faces. Monsieur wears a short white wig, a blue and black jacket over white collared shirt and tan trousers. Madame wears a purple bow in her hair, and a matching purple ball gown with a yellow neckline and pink feathers below the hem.

Éponine

Éponine begins life as the pampered daughter of the Thénardiens, later forced to fend for herself on the streets of Paris. Young Éponine wears a blue hat with a white brim and a white dress with a blue ribbon around the torso.

As an adult, she wears a white long sleeve shirt, and long brown skirt. In act 2, she disguises herself as a boy by tying her black hair into a bun and covering it with a brown cap. She wears a large mid-brown overcoat over a matching vest and short sleeved white shirt, mid-brown trousers and dark brown leather shoes.

Gavroche

Gavroche is a young street urchin in Paris with the students. He is approximately 11 years old, and wears a brown cap, a mid-brown vest over a white long sleeve shirt, and dark brown trousers. The top half is covered by a tan jacket at the barricade. Although not mentioned in the show, Gavroche is the son of the Thénardiens and the brother of Éponine.

Bishop Myriel of Digne

Bishop Myriel is only seen at the start of the show. He wears a black cassock with red outline & buttons, matching headwear & black shoes.

The Ensemble

The Ensemble switch rolls depending on the scene and their presence adds colour and movement. Poorer ensemble roles include the factory workers & beggars. In the factory the

women wear scrunched blue cotton caps and blue aprons, this light blue 'pop' gives the resemblance of a uniform. The ensemble represents the working poor, have untidy hair and dirt on their faces, as diner guests and beggars on the streets they wear tattered clothes in muted beige, brown, creams and dirty whites.

Police constables wear black triangular hats, navy-blue jackets with a red inner lining and silver buttons up the middle, black trousers and black boots.

The wealthy guests of the wedding are very well groomed. The men wear black and white suits, while the women wear flowers or bows in their hair, and ball gown dresses of different colours.

Cast List

Jean Valjean – Daniel Belle

Javert – Robert McDougall

Fantine – Courtney Emmas

Cosette – Georgia Burley, young Cosette played in this performance by Chloe Ngadimin

Marius Pontmercy – Brenton Bell

Enjolras – Tom Kelly

Thénardier – Garth Saville

Madame Thénardier – Emily Kimpton

Éponine – Daniella Delfin, young Éponine played in this performance by Isabella Edye

Gavroche – played in this performance by William Steiner

Bishop Myriel of Digne – Jeremy Curtin

Creative Team

Producer – Neil Gooding

Associate Producers – Jordan Vassallo and Courtney Cassar

Director – Luke Joslin

Choreographer – Gelina Enriquez

Musical Director – Peter Hayward

Costume Co-ordinator – Audrey Currie

Head of Makeup, Hair and Wig – Karen Lamont-Barnett

Set Designer – CLOC

Lighting Designer – Tom Wightwick

Stage Manager – Linus Karasi

End of pre-show notes.