



Beyond The Barricade

» This leading man offers to cuddle male co-stars and dreams of being a stay-at-home dad. Matt Myers falls for **Chris Durling**.

DNA: The Australian production of *Les Miserables* has had an incredible run. Is there a special feeling that runs through the cast?

Chris Durling: Absolutely, but it comes down to the people. Simon Gleeson is at the head of our company and we all form a circle every day after warm up, where we connect, hold hands and share things like what inspires us. It really creates a family environment and it's such an ensemble show that it brings everyone onto an even playing field. We're all as important as each other.

When your character comes on stage waving the flag singing *One More Day*, do you share the same adrenaline rush as the audience? I do. It's one of those moments that dreams are made of! As a sports-playing country lad, it's one of those alpha-male moments that we dream about. I love it, and I think the song is a beautiful piece of music. In fact, I don't know of any other song that ties in all the principal character's stories at the end of the first act like it does.

Do you see parallels between *Les Mis* and modern day society? Yes, but on slightly different levels. We're privileged enough to grow up in a democratic society and have wonderful rights as people, but there are these very important issues such as whether or not you believe in equality of marriage... that's the kind of motivation I tap into when I go onstage each night. I haven't been in a revolution but I've had friends and family pass away during my life, and at the same age as the boys on the barricade. So I tap into those memories and feelings and bring that into my work.

What did you think of the movie? I thought the number one positive thing was how visually spectacular it was. I still remember that first scene with the convicts pulling the ship and Russell Crowe singing *Stars*. Scenes like that are so powerful. For me, *Les Mis* speaks to my heart every night. When I'm behind the curtain getting ready, and the lights go down and the orchestra kicks in, that's when I'll smile and think about where I've found myself in life. I think, "This is awesome!" I might even get a bit teary-eyed knowing a certain person is watching me in the audience.

How did it feel to be nominated for a Helpmann Award this year? I was so chuffed to receive my first nomination! I felt that it was not only a celebration of my own hard work, but also for my family and friends who have

supported me on and off stage along the way. **Does it ever feel odd being a straight man in the theater world?** Not really, because I haven't known anything different. I went to drama school and instantly had two or three fantastic gay friends, and that's how it's been in any environment I've been in, and I love it. In fact I live with a gay mate now. A couple of weeks back, my girlfriend Antoniette and I went out for a drink and the bouncer said, "Do you know it's gay night?" We were like "Of course! That's why we're here. Gay people know how to have a good time!"

If you were gay, who would you go for? That's an easy one, because I tell him every day. Simon Gleeson is my show crush, talent crush and man crush. When we were in rehearsals he wasn't sleeping that well and I'd always be

"We were half-way through the scene when I suddenly felt something going into my bum crack!"

offering to come give him a cuddle and help him get to sleep!

Behaviour like that could easily get you mistaken as gay, then? All the time, but usually outside of the theatre, like with fans of the show. I often laugh about it because I've never been great at hitting on girls. As a straight guy, I always found it quite frustrating. But guys can be quite forward and I've actually had more guys give me their telephone numbers than girls!

Is there a future role you have your eye on? A dream role is Jean Valjean, which we see as the pinnacle in our industry. But to be honest, I hope I'm a retired stay-at-home dad by the time I'm old enough to play him. I'd be at home drinking coffee and playing with the kids! What I've realised in the ten years that I've been working is to not waste energy on the things I can't control. I know that our journey never turns out how we expect, and I honestly never thought I'd be playing this role. There are some killer singers in Australia and much better than me. I never thought I'd find myself here, but here I am!

What advice would you give to anyone wanting to enter the performing arts? To objectively figure out who you are as a person, and who you are as an artist. By that I mean things such as strengths and weaknesses. You obviously try and improve on your weaknesses, but you also have to lead with your strengths. And remember that when you walk into an audition room, you're not like any other



Chris takes to the stage in "one of those alpha-male moments" during *Les Misérables*.

person. Don't compare yourself to anyone else. Instead, compare yourself to the person you are today as to the person you were yesterday, and be proud of who you are.

Who is your diva? I've always been a softy for Whitney Houston. I'm a bit of a romantic and I've seen all her movies. This will probably sound quite camp, but I was obsessed with *The Bodyguard* when I was growing up. I'm not a huge fan of sitting at home watching YouTube videos, but one that I'll watch over and over is Whitney singing the American national anthem!

Have you ever had a wardrobe malfunction on stage? I had a good one yesterday! I wear a wig in the show, and we were half-way through the ABC café scene, when I suddenly felt something going into my bum crack! I thought,

"That feels like a wig pin!" Mind you, ever since I saw the Justin Timberlake documentary *FutureSex/LoveSounds*, I took his advice and now wear two pairs of underpants on stage. But the pin went under both pairs and for the next ten minutes I had a metal pin hiding down there. With the running around I have to do, I thought it may all go horribly wrong. But as soon as the scene ended, I got it out and I've pinned it in my dressing room as a memento! **So do you prefer briefs or fitted boxers?** Fitted boxers and, as you now know, two pairs in the show. But that also means I have a lot of washing to do! [Laughs.]

MORE: *Les Misérables* is playing at Brisbane's Lyric Theatre QPAC from November 10. Visit www.lesmis.com.au.