



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN TSIAMIS

POWER BALLADEER

What does a 19th Century bread thief have to say about gay marriage? Matthew Myers asks Simon Gleeson, star of the latest revival of *Les Misérables*.

DNA: Jean Valjean is one of the most sought-after roles in theatre. How does it feel to be in this new production?

Simon Gleeson: *Les Mis* was the first musical I saw, and that's what captured this young kid growing up in country New South Wales. I knew it word for word when I was 12 and it's part of the reason I got into this profession. It was also my first professional show and it's nice to revisit it 15 years later. The fans have strong ownership over the show and there are a lot of expectations, which is all great.

What did you think of the recent movie? I loved the film, but I was nervous watching because I'm very passionate about the show. I thought they did a great job, though. I worked with Sam Barks who played Eponine and she told me about how they recorded it, which is always a difficult thing with movie musicals. Hopefully more movie musicals will record live, like a lot of soundtracks are now recording cast albums live in order to capture the emotion on the day, as opposed to in the studio.

What about Hugh Jackman's performance? Hugh is a hard man to fault, and why would you want to? He's a charming guy. It's amazing how he can jump genres so easily and as Jean Valjean I think he was awesome.

Given the storyline of *Les Misérables*, do you think there are relevant parallels in today's society? Yes I think there are, and I would argue that its longevity proves this. Like most great pieces of art it involves very basic and sound principles about humanity, which are so universal that they touch everyone. Victor Hugo's story, and the musical itself, touches on what it is to be human in a very deep way. It questions which direction our humanity will go, so I think it's absolutely relevant.

Just going back to the past, when we try and put shackles on any type of freedom it tends to end up on the wrong side of history, and

I think at the moment Australia's political agenda on marriage equality will be on the wrong side of history. I can't see how there can be any question against it. I think it's an embarrassment to this country, as are our immigration policies. There are still historical scars that haven't healed in this country. We could have chosen to be forward-thinking and set an ideal for what society could be like. I'd like our politicians to have a think about what legacy they want to leave our community, and marriage equality is such an easy one to push

“I think [marriage inequality] is an embarrassment to this country, as are our immigration policies. There are still historical scars that haven't healed...”

through, especially as most Western countries have already passed it. A gay family member of mine had a ceremony a few weeks back, and as I stood there I couldn't believe that it's still not actually legal. They got married outside quite publicly where many people could see it, and the joy from the general public looking on really made me proud and happy – as you would be at any wedding.

Have you ever played a gay role? Yes, on a

UK television series called *Kombat Opera Presents*. It was written by Richard Thomas who wrote *Jerry Springer: The Opera* and the episodes were set to music. One of the Monty Python guys directed and one episode was based on a true story from *Wife Swap* where a redneck couple swapped with a gay couple. I was one of the gay guys who swapped with the redneck wife. It was very full-on and funny because the redneck guy didn't want the gay guy to go home. However in real life the redneck guy wouldn't let the gay guy sleep in his house, so it was obviously changed around. **You also played Sergievsky in *Chess* and Guy in *Mamma Mia!* Are you an ABBA fan?** I didn't know much about ABBA until *Mamma Mia!* and then I heard it so often that when ABBA came on in a shopping centre I'd think, *oh my god*. After hearing those songs in a show for a year, you kind of need space. When I played Sergievsky in *Chess* I discovered their music and, well, they have a real gift. The music in *Chess* is amazing and ABBA's music is fun and light-hearted, though some songs also pack a punch. My favourite is *The Winner Takes It All*. I'm not so much a fan, but I recognise the genius in what they do.

Who has been the biggest influence on your career? You rarely forget the first person who backed you in the beginning and Gale Edwards [Australian theatre director] did that. She has shaped me in a way that no one else has. I've had a lot of mentors like Philip Quast, Peter Carroll and John McTernan, but Gale has been my driving force and still is. **Are you a jocks, boxer briefs or freeballing man?** Boxer briefs. Valjean, on the other hand, would probably be long johns, but I think the wardrobe change would be a problem!

more: Les Misérables is now playing at Her Majesty's Theatre Melbourne. The exhibition Victor Hugo: Les Misérables: From Page to Stage runs from July to November 2014 at the State Library of Victoria.