



diane vadino finds an ally in éponine, *les misérables*' unloved, unappreciated, unofficial heroine. illustration by carine brancowitz

When I first saw *Les Misérables*, I was a moody sixth-grader, one of a few dozen middle-schoolers ferried into Times Square on a two-bus convoy from a town so rural our principal's office had an installation of antlers from deer he'd killed. I was engulfed in baby fat and incapable of using contact lenses. I remember what I wore the day of our field trip the way you might recall the ensemble of someone who tortured you, every day, over a long period of time: red balloon pants my mother purchased at a local department store called Epstein's, a Banana Republic T-shirt with a giraffe on it, and a purple knit cardigan. I was a mess, literally and figuratively, still ill-at-ease in the new school that had come with our family's new house in the country, still missing the friends I'd grown up with, too many towns away.

We saw *Les Misérables* on a Thursday night. On Saturday morning, my mother drove me to the mall where I bought a two-CD set of the Broadway cast recording. That night, I sat in the darkness and listened to "Do You Hear the People Sing?" over and over until it began to scare my parents. *Les Misérables* was (and likely remains) the best musical an unhappy 12-year-old girl could see, and also quite possibly the worst—if you happened to be trying to fall asleep across the hall from the girl playing "On My Own" on repeat, from morning 'til night, for six months straight. In *Les Misérables* I'd discovered Éponine, and in Éponine I'd discovered a Broadway version of myself: tragic but stalwart, unappreciated in life but celebrated for her sacrifice. Unloved but eminently more worthy than that blank Barbie doll, Cosette.

Written by Victor Hugo and published in 1862, *Les Misérables* is the story of Jean Valjean, a Frenchman who steals a loaf of bread to feed his starving family, then goes to jail, breaks his parole, and spends the rest of his life on the run from Javert, a maniacally single-minded policeman. In Hugo's book, Éponine is less of a star player, and even a bit nightmarish, basically a toothless drunk who bullies Cosette—so it's good news that director Tom Hooper's extravaganza, in theaters Christmas morning, is based instead on Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil's 1980 musical,

adapted for the English stage five years later by Cameron Mackintosh. While news of Hooper's version had some fans alarmed, early footage of Hugh Jackman (Valjean), Russell Crowe (Javert), and Anne Hathaway (Fantine) singing their Hollywood hearts out ushered in the Oscar chatter.

NYLON Young Hollywood alum Samantha Barks, who plays Éponine, is the relatively unknown face in this crowd, and that's appropriate: Éponine is the ultimate 19th-century underdog, so it makes sense that the woman chosen to portray her would be a somewhat obscure 22-year-old from the Isle of Man. Even if Cosette's face graces the musical's poster (and now the film's as well), Éponine provides the adaptation's heart: She's noble, scrappy, and actually much too good for the pudding of a young revolutionary that is Marius Pontmercy, a character whose utter insubstantiality is underlined by the fact that he was played by Nick Jonas in a London concert that marked the musical's 25th anniversary. Still, Éponine is wedded to her crush, and that blind resoluteness is part of her appeal. Of all the songs in *Les Misérables* about lost honor, lost innocence, and lost ideals, her solo, "On My Own," is the one that's squarely about lost love. It's about heartbreak that transcends its origins and gets remade into art. Éponine is Patti Smith, Billie Holliday, Dolly Parton, Nina Simone. She is the It girl as she should be defined: more than just a pretty face.

By contrast, we have Cosette. We all know a Cosette or two, the

gorgeous girl with the perfect hair who is forever waiting to be rescued, and usually is. In this new version, she is played by Amanda Seyfried—inspired casting, chiefly because it allows her to do what she does best: open her eyes widely and be admired. It's Éponine's tragedy (besides, you know, getting killed) that she falls for a guy who would fall for a girl based on that hair and those eyes, and even worse, who would brag about this: "Oh God," Marius sings to Cosette. "For shame, I do not even know your name." Love at first sight isn't incredibly interesting when the object of attraction is so easy on the eyes (or at least it's a move worthy of a Jonas brother). There's a lesson to be learned in a guy falling for a pretty stranger instead of the girl who risks her life to bring the stranger his message. The leader behind the barricades, Enjolras—who, unfortunately, only has eyes for liberty—would have known better.

If sexuality can be drawn on a spectrum, then the Cosette-Éponine graph should be considered as well. A few years ago, I wrote a "fictional" book about a guy who was briefly my boyfriend who then slept with my boss, which, undoubtedly—undoubtedly—makes me an Éponine. My lifelong best friend—on whose middle school modeling go-sees I used to tag along—is a Cosette: All these years later, I still remember us leaving the theater in Times Square, my friend wanting to talk about nothing but Cosette's marriage to Marius—which, obviously, I viewed as a slap in the face to his fallen savior. She would say that people are kind, willing to lend an open hand—or, for example, escape from jail to rescue you from your job fetching water from a well in the woods. Éponines know better. Éponines know—as Marius, of all people, puts it—that "life was cold and dark, yet she was unafraid." *Unafraid* being the key word here. We'll give her a 19th-century pass on all we know now, 150 years after the book was written, 180 years after it was set; take her same decision in 2012—essentially, to kill herself because her crush liked an idiot—and she'd have long before been rushed into therapy. But in the *Les Misérables* universe, she was unafraid: to be wrong, to love well, if not wisely.

In another 150 years, maybe someone else will revamp the book, and Éponine will evolve yet again: from a toothless drunk and wild-hearted victim to Enjolras's partner in revolution. He was always the better catch, anyway.

on my own