Actor's Process: Toby Yatso* and Terey Summers Talk Thénardiers

The Thénardiers are the greedy, conniving innkeepers in *Les Misérables*. We had the opportunity to sit down with the wonderful pair of actors bringing them to life! Phoenix favorites, Toby Yatso* and Terey Summers, share how they developed their roles, what advice has helped their careers, and the memories they've carried on.

Q: "Master of the House" asks you to sing, dance and stay in nearly constant motion. What part of preparing for that number was the most physically demanding?

Yatso: The number requires a full body-mind-voice commitment, yes indeed, but I never imagined it being any less than that. I employed a decent amount of movement in my initial audition tape, and because of that I'm guessing that our director Brendan Stackhouse knew he could keep me in motion, so I'm thrilled that he had such a clear vision for staging it to be action-packed. I keep up with my yoga, I like practicing my material while doing chores around my house, and I'm not typically cast in park-&-bark-type roles, so this is right up my alley! It's a wordy part of the show, so I have to make sure I know

where to take the best breaths so that my mouth can spit everything out clearly enough for everyone to understand and enjoy it all.

Q: What skill have you developed over your career that makes learning a show easier now?

Yatso: A profound strengthening and skill-building experience has been performing in Galas and industrial shows over the years, like the annual Phoenix Theatre Company Applause Gala! They are performance projects that require a great amount of versatility, understanding various styles and knowing extensive rep, memorizing parody lyrics in a brief amount of time and limited timeframe of rehearsals, and you only get one performance to get it right and make a memorable impact to the audience. They feel like fun musical theatre performance boot camp!

Q: Has teaching musical theatre made you more aware of your own actor's process?

Yatso: Absolutely! I am lucky enough to work within a fulfilling accountability loop, one where at night and on weekends I get to immediately apply the concepts and techniques I teach during the school day, and then turn around and teach the experiences I have on stage the next day. My students hold me accountable to practice what I preach, for which I'm truly grateful. And solving so many character puzzles with students over the years certainly helps me feel more brave when tackling my own challenging material.

Q: What is one piece of advice you often give your students that you had to apply to your own work in *Les Misérables*?

Yatso: Bring your characters to life in such a complete way that if your audience is blind or visually impaired, then they will still hear everything they need to know about your scene and imagine what is happening; and if your audience is Deaf or hard of hearing, then what they see is so interesting and truthful that they still get the whole story and fully appreciate the complexities of your character.

Q: From Shakespeare in *Something Rotten* to Thénardier in *Les Misérables*, your recent roles here show very different sides of your range. Is transforming into different characters something that comes naturally to you, or is it a skill you've developed throughout your career?

Yatso: Though so many of the characters I've been fortunate enough to play seem widely different at first glance, when I look again I find they have different paint jobs but share similar engines: they're neurotic! That is my brand, and I love it. Neurotic characters never get old or boring or become predictable. I was drawn to sketch comedy already as a young kid, so that may contribute to it feeling second nature to me; but sketch comedy characters typically don't learn anything new or improve themselves, while characters in

theatre are all about change -- over many years I had to learn how to artfully go on an evolving journey in my acting work and shape how characters change within a story.

Q: You played Madame Thénardier when Les Misérables was last produced at The Phoenix Theatre Company in 2009 and 2014. What has it been like being back in this role?

Summers: Returning to play Madame T in this production has been such a warm welcome for me. I really love this role… I guess I would have to, to play it now as many times as I have. Not to coin a phrase, but it feels like a comfortable pair of shoes. I held and have remembered the essence of her and probably always will. But with the years that have transpired, I'm different as a person, I have changed and evolved. So I find now that I am seeing Madame T with her new nuances and this is just simply delightful.

Q: When rehearsals began this time, did you return to any of the choices you made in past productions, or did you rebuild the role from the beginning?

Summers: I had a compliment paid to me on opening night by someone that had seen me in previous productions, and she said, "You did not phone this in! This is a fresh take on Madame T that you are bringing!" I have loved each experience with Madame T that I have been able to bring to the stage over the years, so I am sure there are facets of her that have carried through. But I really feel there is a curiosity in me as a person, and in my approach as an actress, to twist this kaleidoscope of Madame T and see what else reveals itself. I would definitely say it is my "way" about me, both in life and in play, to look for and mine the humor always- where it may not necessary be evident. I hope I have found that with Madame T, to have struck a balance between humor and the machiavellian nature of the Thenardier's.

Q: What part of the character are you still discovering in this production?

Summers: I have been blessed to have some very wonderful actors to play opposite of with the duo of the Thenardiers. Toby has just been delightful to work with, and I have found new nuances to explore between the two of us- as partners on stage and within the lives of these two characters. I have felt this rhythm arise from within our characters' relationship, and I understand them more as a unit. Who he is to her, and her to him. Brendan, the director, as well as the associate director Alec, downloaded their knowledge of these two people into us, and that really help me excavate and find the niches of Madame T as she relates to her husband.

Q: You've shared in your bio that Madame Thénardier was your late husband's favorite role of yours. What does it mean to return to the role and dedicate this performance to him?

Summers: You know, we are all people first. It is not lost on me that this opportunity came to me in the days of grieving the loss of my husband. It was a second marriage for both of us, having followed the loss of each of our first spouses. It is also not lost on me that Les Mis was the first show I did with Jonathan in my life, and it is now the first show I am doing without him. And yes, this was his favorite role of several, he had ever seen me play. All of that cannot be anything but poignant, and even purposeful. And also painful, to be transparent. But the details tell a story- they aren't random. First, Les Mis clearly has been a woven part of my story. Then most profoundly, my faith in God assures me that my life is in God's hands, and clearly my story is not over. I am so grateful for Les Mis. And for the audiences with whom we share it with. And, this theatre, which has been my theatre home for many, many years.

Details
Dates: July 15 – October 18, 2026
Location: The Phoenix Theatre Company, Dr. Stacie J. and Richard J Stephenson Theatre
Tickets: phoenixtheatre.com | (602) 254-2151
Audio Description and American Sign Language interpretation are available for this production. Performance dates and details can be found at phoenixtheatre.com.

*Courtesy of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers in the U.S.