

# Season 1, Episode 9: Les Miserables X Decoding/ Encoding with Erin Keif

## SPEAKERS

Marcelle Kosman, Erin Keif, Hannah McGregor

[*Material Girls* Theme plays: “Shopping Mall” by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]

**Hannah McGregor** 00:30

Hello and welcome to *Material Girls*, a scholarly podcast about popular culture. I'm Hannah McGregor.

**Marcelle Kosman** 00:36

And I'm Marcelle Kosman. And joining us this week is another thrilling guest. Erin Keif, pronouns (she/her). Erin is a comedian and writer. She co-hosts the podcast *Hey Riddle, Riddle* and *Sitcom D&D*, and guests on the podcast *Hello From the Magic Tavern*. And also most importantly, she's friends with Coach. Welcome, Erin.

**Erin Keif** 01:00

Thank you so much for having me. I feel like this is sort of “take your daughter to work” day. That doesn't make much sense because Hannah is not my mother. Coach brought me in and I sort of feel that kind of thrill of like, this is where she goes? This is amazing.

**Hannah McGregor** 01:16

This is where she goes. She goes here so often. And we're just not gonna let her talk on this episode. [Hannah and Marcelle laugh]

**Erin Keif** 01:27

It's killing her. She's punching the air. Her nose is bleeding, she's so upset. [Hannah laughs]

**Marcelle Kosman** 01:32

Oh my God. Is her nose bleeding just from rage?

**Hannah McGregor** 01:36

Yes, yeah. Something inside of her brain broke, but no time to discuss that. Because we are here to talk about my all time favorite musical, which through my, let's say, healthy and normal listening habits to Erin's podcast, *Hey, Riddle Riddle*, I might have accrued a few fun facts about

Erin by listening to 166 hours of her talking back to back. **[Erin laughs]** Anyway, Erin, I understand that you might also like *Les Mis*.

**Erin Keif** 02:10

I do. I like it a good amount. **[Hannah laughs]** I love it. I can go into my love for it very briefly.

**Hannah McGregor** 02:17

I want to hear. I want to hear about your relationship with this musical.

**Erin Keif** 02:21

So I don't remember hearing it for the first time. It just was on in my house all the time. And I used to on multiple occasions have my mom sit down on our living room couch and I would do it from the best of my memory. Like an hour and a half performance for her and she would sit and endure the entire thing. And I was like, oh God. **[All three laugh]** And then when my sister was a sophomore in high school, and I was like fifth grade or something like that, the high school did *Les Mis*. And it was like the biggest month of my life. I was so excited. And I had my sister come home from her rehearsals where she was a lovely lady. And I had her teach me all of the dances and everything just in case she got sick. I thought they were going to call me up. And-

**Hannah McGregor** 03:07

That's how understudies work. **[All three laugh]**

**Erin Keif** 03:09

My mom would pick me up from school, take me to go watch the rehearsals, and I would army crawl through the back and watch them rehearse and I was like just in case someone gets sick, i'll be here. And no one got sick, so I didn't get to go on. Because I was a kid. But I love it so much.

**Hannah McGregor** 03:27

There's roles for tiny children.

**Erin Keif** 03:29

Yeah, I didn't get any of those.

**Hannah McGregor** 03:30

A sad musical where tiny children die.

**Erin Keif** 03:32

I was so jealous of all the kids. So real kids got to be in the show. But I also just saw it recently, like a month ago at the tour that came through LA at the Hollywood Pantages. And it was excellent. So it was top of mind.

**Marcelle Kosman** 03:44

I just, I think it's really important to establish as we go into this episode, Erin and Hannah, that this is something that's very close and dear to both of your hearts. And I have never seen it. I know of it. Mainly because of Hannah.

**Hannah McGregor** 04:01

I talk about it a lot.

**Marcelle Kosman** 04:03

And also and also because of a lover that I had one time.

**Hannah McGregor** 04:08

[Hannah laughs] Not me.

**Marcelle Kosman** 04:09

Not Hannah. [Erin laughs]

**Hannah McGregor** 04:12

Well, Marcelle, it's very *Les Mis* of you to refer to a lover you had one time. Maybe he came in the night like a tiger. [Sound effect of a cat meowing plays]

**Marcelle Kosman** 04:21

Gross. And none of your business. [Hannah and Erin laugh] Also, yes. [Hannah and Erin laugh]

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

All right, people. It's time for "Why This, Why Now" where we ask the hard hitting materialist question, what were (sometimes what are), what are, (or were the historical), ideological and material conditions for our object of study to become [Marcelle clears her throat] Zeitgeist-y.

**Hannah McGregor** 04:55

Ooooh, Zeitgeist-y. So Erin, you are not the only person who grew up with *Les Mis* surrounding them. So I knew it was popular. But despite being like a lifelong, literally lifelong fan of this

musical, I went into this research with literally zero background on it. Like I just knew, I didn't know who wrote it. Like I kind of vaguely remembered their names from the sheet music that we had when I was a kid, but just no context at all. So I learned a ton. And I'm gonna now make you learn those things that I learned.

**Erin Keif** 05:33

I'm so excited. I've loved it my whole life, but I've never thought about it, if that makes sense. Never thought about it.

**Hannah McGregor** 05:41

Yes! Exactly, exactly the same. So I'm going to start by giving us all a bit of context. And then I'm going to dive into what I think are two really key pieces of context. One is the rise of the mega musical, and the other is Thatcherite, England. Doesn't that sound fun? **[Erin whoops and hollers]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 05:59

Yes, yeah. **[Erin laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 06:04

**[Hannah laughs]** Alright, here's some crucial background. *Les Mis*, as it is commonly known, is in fact, *Les Misérables*, which is a musical adaptation of the 1862 novel by Victor Hugo, which is one of the longest novels ever to be professionally published.

**Marcelle Kosman** 06:21

Oh, really? I didn't know that.

**Hannah McGregor** 06:22

Yeah. Oh, pick it up in a bookstore sometime. I don't mean buy it. I just mean, literally pick it up. Because it is a hilarious brick. **[Erin laughs]** Yeah, so it was very long and I haven't read it. But generally it's like a sort of social cause novel. Like, it's about how the people are downtrodden, and should be treated better.

**Marcelle Kosman** 06:44

Is it a Victorian novel?

**Hannah McGregor** 06:46

I think Victorian novels are only English novels because it was Victorian England because of Queen Victoria.

**Marcelle Kosman** 06:53

That was my subtle way of being like, was Victor Hugo French?

**Hannah McGregor** 06:56

He was French. He was French. This novel was written in French. But like he's a contemporary, kind of, of Dickens. And like the vibes of the same. You know, we've got sort of an *Oliver Twist* energy in Gavroche, for example. So like, this is a very, you know, nice middle class man writing a book about how sad it is when people are poor. A lot of critics have suggested that Marius is the kind of Victor Hugo figure in the novel. And so for those who know the musical, you will know that Marius is the sort of boring romantic lead who doesn't die. Great, a great way to insert yourself into a narrative. Anyway, much more excitingly for our purposes, because I've never read the novel and I won't. Too long, very boring seeming. In 1980 this French duo Claude Michel Schonberg and Alain Boublil turned *Les Mis* into a concept album. **[Marcelle makes a grossed out noise]** Yeah, so they didn't stage it originally, as a musical. They just wrote all the songs and released it as a concept album. So it was a French musical theater concept album adaptation of a 19th century French novel.

**Erin Keif** 08:18

I'm trying to limit the amount of times I say, oh my gosh, I didn't know that.

**Hannah McGregor** 08:22

No, you should say that over and over.

**Erin Keif** 08:24

But it's gonna be scary how many times I say it, so I'm just going to cover my mouth every time I want to say it. **[Hannah laughs]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 08:30

At a certain point Coach will probably turn it into a sound effect. And then just Bing!

**Erin Keif** 08:35

Coach! Love to learn. Love to learn about what you do around here. I love it. **[Hannah laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 08:43

Yeah, so these guys made it into a musical. They eventually staged it in Paris. But it became sort of the major cultural touchstone it is now when in 1985, British theatre owner Cameron Mackintosh launched the English adaptation in London.

**Erin Keif** 09:02

I didn't know that. **[All three laugh]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 09:07

Erin, did you know?

**Erin Keif** 09:08

No, I didn't know.

**Hannah McGregor** 09:09

And then they also had to, because like the French version assumed an audience profoundly familiar with the events of 1832, and like, the student rebellions and so they also for an English audience had to write like a ton more framing material. So it took what had been like maybe, you know, an hour and a half, two hours and turned it into originally a three and a half hour musical that they eventually got down to three hours, but it is still a solid three hours.

**Marcelle Kosman** 09:42

Wow. Wow.

**Erin Keif** 09:44

Not long enough. When you're on that ride, baby. You never want it to end. **[Marcelle laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 09:47

No, when I heard that there was a three and a half hour version, and I was like, Where do I get it? How do I have it? Can I have it now? I want it now. Is there a six hour version? Can I have that one? **[Erin laughs]**

**Erin Keif** 09:56

One hundred percent, I feel the same way.

**Hannah McGregor** 09:58

And because everybody feels the same way that Erin and I do, it is the longest running musical in London's West End. It has been performed since 1985, over 14,000 times, just on the West End, that is not including touring Broadway adaptations, school productions, which we will get into because school productions are actually a really key part of the context.

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:23

Oooo! Erin!

**Erin Keif** 10:28

I didn't know that!

**Hannah McGregor** 10:31

Erin, did you know that?

**Erin Keif** 10:32

I did not know that. I've only been here for 20 minutes of an episode and I already have a catchphrase. **[Hannah laughs]** I'm very proud of myself. I cannot believe.

**Hannah McGregor** 10:42

To ensure that we bring you back.

**Erin Keif** 10:45

Yep, have a catchphrase, part of it. One of us.

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:48

Okay, so this musical, this is huge. This is a huge deal. Okay.

**Hannah McGregor** 10:53

Huge. One of the hugest.

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:55

I feel like there are other musicals that are also really big. Is this like part of a trend? Is there like an emergence?

**Hannah McGregor** 10:59

Oh my god. Marcelle, what a great question. **[Marcelle laughs]** Oh my god. It's like it's part of this trend that happened in the 1980s of the emergence of the mega musical.

**Marcelle Kosman** 11:12

Oh, what's a mega musical?

**Hannah McGregor** 11:14

Erin, I know that you are more generally a musical theater fan. Can you guess what some of the other major-don't read the script- can you guess what some of the other major 1980s mega musicals were?

**Erin Keif** 11:26

Um, let's see. Was *Cats* 70s?

**Hannah McGregor** 11:31

*Cats* falls into this. I'm saying, you know, it's a long 1980s. So like the late 70s, early 90s. So yes, *Cats*. Absolutely.

**Erin Keif** 11:40

I'm trying to think of Cameron Macintosh stuff. Oh, *Phantom of the Opera*.

**Hannah McGregor** 11:43

*Phantom of the Opera*, for sure.

**Marcelle Kosman** 11:45

Wow, you're so good at this, Erin.

**Hannah McGregor** 11:49

Those are the other two really huge ones of the period, *Jesus Christ Superstar* sort of launched the movement. But *Les Mis*, *Cats*, and *Phantom* are usually held up as like the trio of mega musicals. So-

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:06

Good job, Erin.

**Erin Keif** 12:08

Thank you. [Erin laughs]

**Hannah McGregor** 12:10

Oh my God, Erin, great work, you did know that.

**Erin Keif** 12:13

I did know it!

**Hannah McGregor** 12:14



Mhm. So things that characterize the mega musical as a genre; they're huge spectacles. So they usually have quite elaborate staging, elaborate costumes, really big casts, so that it feels like you're going to something huge and over the top and magnificent.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:33

And if it's *Cats*, they have really huge cats. **[Erin laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 12:35

Yeah, huge. Huge.

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:39

Thanks for laughing at my joke, Erin. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Hannah doesn't think I'm funny anymore. She's sick of my shit.

**Erin Keif** 12:46

Oh, I'm not. I'm not. **[Marcelle laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 12:50

I am. **[All three laugh]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 12:54

Okay, I'm sorry. Is the spectacle! Big shit!

**Hannah McGregor** 12:55

It's a spectacle. Big shit, big cats, big cast. They are- this was something I didn't know. And I find so cool. They are fully sung through, is like a characteristic of the mega musical. So they don't have any spoken dialogue. They sing the entire time.

**Erin Keif** 13:13

Oh, that makes sense. Yeah. Oh, it's interesting because operas do the same thing, too. But what is the differentiator between why you call something an opera versus?

**Hannah McGregor** 13:25

Oh, my God. Erin, such a good question. A lot of scholars of the mega musical point out how much it owes to opera. That is basically a modern adaptation of opera, sung through, super melodramatic, big casts with big choruses, a lot of use of recurring musical motifs to like, bring you back like, oh, when this character comes out, we always hear this music. So like, structurally mega musicals owe a lot more to opera than they do to more conventional musical theater.

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:01

Can I ask a question?

**Hannah McGregor** 14:02

No. **[All three laugh and Marcelle makes a strained noise]** Yeah.

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:07

Okay. Is the mega musical like middle class opera?

**Hannah McGregor** 14:10

Yeah.

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:11

Yes! I love class based analysis.

**Hannah McGregor** 14:16

Mega musicals. Our opera is for people who don't want to go and listen to somebody sing Italian for three hours. Because it's hard and you don't understand the Italian.

**Marcelle Kosman** 14:26

That's right. And sometimes they have subtitles and you like can't and when you're watching the subtitles, you can't see what's happening on the stage.

**Hannah McGregor** 14:33

Yeah, yeah. So the fact that made musicals are like huge budgets, melodramatic, and like, directly aimed at people who don't want to go to, like who want something that's entertaining and accessible. They are often derided by musical theater critics, like when *Les Mis* came out it was absolutely panned by the theater review elite. It's referred to sometimes as mic-theatre, because like a big part of the idea of the mega musical is that it can be staged kind of anywhere and staged in the same way. And that's, you know, like McDonald's like, oh, you go to McDonald's anywhere in the world, and it's the same. And it's explicitly a commercial art form, like it exists to, like they cost a lot to put on. So you have to make money doing it. And you know how artists feel about making money.

**Marcelle Kosman** 15:29

Oh, they famously hate making money. They love to be hungry. **[Marcelle and Hannah laugh]**

**Erin Keif** 15:38

We're doing them a favor by not paying them. They love it.

**Marcelle Kosman** 15:39

Exactly.

**Hannah McGregor** 15:40

Exactly. If we give artists money, then they will have sold out and their art won't be good anymore. Yeah. Yeah. So Coach. Coach agrees. Coach, just you guys can't see this because, you know, because Coach is muted, but Coach just nodded enthusiastically and gave two huge thumbs up. **[Marcelle and Erin laugh]** So, right, huge spectacle, needs to make money. So a big part of what characterizes the mega musical is also the investment in marketing strategies. I found somebody was pointing out that like, Cameron Macintosh was really good at finding a single iconic image to associate with his musicals. Because these musicals were the first ones to have widespread merch.

**Marcelle Kosman** 16:36

I can picture the *Phantom* one.

**Hannah McGregor** 16:41

Mhm. What's the Phantom one?

**Marcelle Kosman** 16:42

The *Phantom* mask.

**Hannah McGregor** 16:43

Yeah. Erin, what's the *Cat's* one?

**Erin Keif** 16:46

The cat eyes.

**Hannah McGregor** 16:47

Yep. And for *Les Mis*?

**Erin Keif** 16:50

It's Cosette. Young Cosette. And the flag, the French flag, and she's going like this. You can't see me but I'm doing such a good impression. **[Hannah laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 16:58

Can we see that one more time? Yeah? Oh, my God. Wow. Impeccable.

**Marcelle Kosman** 17:02

Erin, you know!

**Erin Keif** 17:03

I knew. I knew it! **[All three laugh]**

**Hannah McGregor** 17:07

Yeah. Which is actually like adapted from a, like 1860s wood cut, like from Hugo's own time period, like that is, you know, an image of Cosette from illustrated versions of the book, that they just took and then superimpose the colors of a French flag over it more like everybody wants a sweatshirt with a starving child on it, right? **[Erin laughs]**

**Erin Keif** 17:28

We do!

**Erin Keif** 17:29

We did, it turns out, we did. So I've got a quote here from musical theater scholar Jessica Sternfeld that, Erin, I would love it if you would read for us and make sure that you say quote and end quote, around it, otherwise you're gonna get in trouble with Coach.

**Erin Keif** 17:45

Quote, "and perhaps most significantly, the marketing that accompanies a mega musical around the world makes it an easy commodity to sell. The logo, theme song, and slogan seek to assure a foreign audience that it gets exactly what was produced on Broadway." End quote.

**Marcelle Kosman** 18:01

Ih, beautifully done!

**Hannah McGregor** 18:03

Absolutely perfect. Ooh, first try!

**Marcelle Kosman** 18:05

First try, yeah!

**Hannah McGregor** 18:07

So that's a big part of the mega musical is the idea that, no matter where you see it, you're getting like the *Les Mis* experience. But Cameron Mackintosh also came up with this really smart idea where he was like, Okay, I'm gonna be really controlling about the licensing for professional productions. Like professional productions, I will have total control over, they will all look the same, they will all sound the same, they will feel like you're having the *Les Mis* experience, but I'm going to do a lot of licensing for school productions, and at home sheet music. So quite early on, people started being able to play and sing the songs at home and perform them in their schools.

**Marcelle Kosman** 18:55

Erin, did you know?

**Erin Keif** 18:57

Did not know! I did not know that.

**Hannah McGregor** 19:00

Your experience was like exactly the experience he was trying to produce. Which is one where, even if you've never seen it, like actually gotten to go and see the spectacle of the musical, you end up with this intimate domestic relationship to it, because you've sung it at home, maybe seen your older sister perform it in a high school production. So it sort of embeds itself in like the texture of your life.

**Erin Keif** 19:29

Cameron Mackintosh manipulated me again! **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]** God! This guy! Damn it, fell for it again! Making me like 80's musicals.

**Hannah McGregor** 19:41

Yeah, yeah, we listen we've all gotten fucked over by Cameron Mackintosh. Don't feel alone. **[Erin laughs]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 19:49

Personally victimized by Cameron Mackintosh.

**Hannah McGregor** 19:51

New merch. **[Erin laughs]** Okay, very briefly, I want to give you the other context, which is about what was happening in England in 1985. When this musical was first staged.

**Marcelle Kosman** 20:04

Yeah, yeah, Thatcher. Thatcher? Was Thatcher?

**Hannah McGregor** 20:08

Thatcher was happening. Yeah, Marcelle, what do you know about Margaret Thatcher?

**Marcelle Kosman** 20:12

I know that she was described as the Iron Lady. Because she was so immovable. She had no visible feelings and like this iron grip around the necks of the working class in England at the time, so she was all about deregulation, and she was all about people gotta pull their damn selves up by their bootstraps. No social handouts, not for you!

**Hannah McGregor** 20:42

Yeah, no, no, she was like a union busting, working class hating, like pro policing of racialized communities, like real, just a real shitty conservative politician.

**Erin Keif** 20:57

I heard she was also a little afraid of the Queen. **[Hannah laughs]** Which makes me feel happy. **[All three laugh]**

**Hannah McGregor** 21:07

I mean, find me somebody who's not a little afraid of QE two. That lady was unreadable. **[Erin laughs]** So we can link, many people have linked this Thatcherite period to what was actually happening in the theater because she was a huge fan of deregulation. And intriguingly, in 1985 when *Les Mis* was staged in the West End, it was co-produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. And originally staged at the RSC's Theatre, which I think was the Barbican. So, this upset people for a couple of reasons. One, the Royal Shakespeare Company is like, or was a publicly funded arts organization that was about a sort of understanding of theater as being for, like public improvement, which is how we're all fed our daily dose of Shakespeare, right? Like it's good for you to take your Shakespeare medicine, everybody reads it in school, everybody goes to see it, it makes you smarter and better. So there's the sense of like, the Royal Shakespeare Company is producing art that improves people, and absolutely outraged people that the Royal Shakespeare Company was getting in bed with a mega musical. But like, it makes sense when you think about the defunding of public infrastructure, the deregulation of industries at the time.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:28

So the Royal Shakespeare Company was co-producing *Les Mis* as a way of sort of recouping some of the money that Thatcher drained from their coffers.

**Hannah McGregor** 22:41

It seems to be the case. Yeah. And that you're actually used Andrew Lloyd Webber as her excuse for underfunding National Theatre, that whenever people were like, you're destroying British culture, we don't have a National Theatre anymore, because you've gutted all the funding from the arts, and she'd be like, look at Andrew Lloyd Webber.

**Erin Keif** 23:03

And he just swimming in a pool of his money that he paid off of *Cats*. [Erin laughs] He's okay, look at him.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:12

Yeah, he's doing great. So this system works.

**Marcelle Kosman** 23:16

My goodness, okay. Okay.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:19

So what I find really interesting, and this is going to segue us into our next segment, what I found really interesting, as I was trying to think about *Les Mis*, was thinking about a musical that is about the crushing of the working class by the elite. And the way the government like, doesn't give a fuck about poor people and is happy to murder them in the streets, which is, what happens in *Les Mis*. Spoilers. And thinking about that musical being staged as a mega musical, in a deregulated theater landscape, explicitly as a way of making money in a period when there were literally, like the 1980s, were a period of like mass uprisings in England, both huge strikes, like unions were really trying to fight against that. Sure. But also, it was a period of a lot of street based protests by racialized communities against police violence. So like, literally while *Les Mis* was being staged as this huge middle class spectacle, in the theater, like people were building barricades on the streets. So what do we do with that?

**Marcelle Kosman** 24:34

Is what we do with that... Maybe? Okay, no, sorry. You go ahead. You go ahead.

**Hannah McGregor** 24:39

In my research, I just came across endless condemnations of *Les Mis* as like corporate culture at its worst, the paradigmatic musical of Thatcherite Britain, an unregulated free market success with corporate sponsorships and merchandising and bombast and protests being sold to white

people while actual protest was happening on the street, like, this is the way critics talk about *Les Mis*.

**Marcelle Kosman** 25:04

Okay, so there's like a mega disconnect between the people involved in the production who see it one way and then and then the people who are going to see it and review it critically.

**Hannah McGregor** 25:18

No, there's a mega mismatch between the scholars who are talking about this musical and attempting to frame its significance. And nobody has talked about the like, who's left out when we talk about critics of the time, people involved in the production, scholars who are reading it in retrospect, who have we totally left out of that equation?

**Erin Keif** 25:41

The audience?

**Hannah McGregor** 25:43

Yeah, yeah! A+ Erin! **[Erin laughs]** The fucking audience! Literally, hundreds of millions of people who have seen this musical, who probably didn't see it and go, and at the end go, we really like Margaret Thatcher.

**Erin Keif** 26:01

When we picked *Les Mis* to talk about something that I was thinking a lot about is, now that I'm like, actually trying to be critical about the musical rather than just letting my head take over when I listen to it, is that it sort of feels like it's playing both sides sometimes as an audience member, I think like there's a song in the end of the show called "Empty Chairs and Empty Tables". And basically, the thesis of that song is like, I don't know what your sacrifice was for. Protesting, I guess, is actually kind of useless. So it feels like you're playing for blood laughs from people who do think that protesting is useless and doesn't have a space. And then also, you're pulling at the heartstrings of the people who do think it, it definitely doesn't feel when you're watching it or listening to it, that it lands on either side fully.

**Hannah McGregor** 26:47

Yeah, Erin, you're getting at this, like really sort of weird indeterminacy within *Les Mis*, where it's like, okay, it's really corporate, it's really aligned with a lot of conservative values in how it was staged. And also, it is a musical about like, the people, like people not being slaves again. But also all the protesters in the musical do die. And at the end, they are all ghosts singing about how the protest didn't work out great. So it's tricky to really assign a politics to the musical



itself. And in my search to find a critical way of really understanding how, you know, potentially problematic *Les Mis* is and squaring that with my own, like, deep love of it. I found a book, I found a really good book that I would like to tell you about.

**Erin Keif** 27:51

Can't wait.

**[Upbeat interlude music plays]**

**Hannah McGregor** 27:56

It's time for the segment, "The Theory We Need" and you know, sometimes the right piece of scholarly writing just comes along at the right time and gives you exactly the tools you need to understand something better. And lucky for me, I came across Sarah Whitfield's fabulous 2019 book, *Boublil and Schönberg's Les Misérables*, which is, she is a like musical theater scholar. And this is part of a quite cool little series that Rutledge does called the fourth wall, which are like short, lively, engaging scholarly texts about famous plays.

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:36

Great name, great title, great series title.

**Hannah McGregor** 28:37

Great series title. I mean, this book slapped I am, like, maybe I should go read the rest of the books in the series. Who knows? I think I'm gonna write an email to Sarah Whitfield telling her that I really liked her book. But the book basically asked the question, What have critics of musical theater thus far failed to understand about *Les Miserables* and its cultural world? Like if everybody's like, Ugh, a mega musical, and then hundreds of millions of people are like, I love this musical with every part of my heart, it is forever embedded in my DNA. Then how do we square that? How do we square that, particularly, if we're not willing to be like, well, listen, mainstream musical theater goers are just stupid.

**Marcelle Kosman** 29:19

Okay, so Hannah, instead of like recording the rest of this episode, do you want to? Are you going to read the book to us?

**Hannah McGregor** 29:25

I'm just gonna read this entire book out loud to you. No, I wish. I actually don't want to spoil it entirely because it's really good. And I actually think you should all just go read it. It's very short.

**Marcelle Kosman** 29:35

I've never heard of a scholarly text that could be spoiled. That's amazing. **[Hannah and Erin laugh]** There's a real twist ending, you wouldn't believe it!

**Hannah McGregor** 29:45

But like she does, she's got these like, Haha, you think this but in fact, like, it's got twist. It's just really good. And it's like seventy pages. Yeah, yeah. Really, really perfect.

**Marcelle Kosman** 29:57

Fun.

**Hannah McGregor** 29:58

Really fun. Perfect. I'm gonna make you read a couple of quotes from it. But in order to frame it a little bit more, I do want to talk about it as an example of the encoding/ decoding model of communication in practice. Now, Erin, did you know this?

**Erin Keif** 30:17

I didn't know any of those words. And that's okay. I didn't know that.

**Marcelle Kosman** 30:21

It is okay. It is okay.

**Hannah McGregor** 30:24

Yeah, it's actually great, because now I can tell you about it. So Erin, tell me, does *Les Mis* make you feel numb and distracted?

**Erin Keif** 30:33

I hope not. No? Maybe? **[Erin laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 30:38

How do you feel when you listen to the musical, or sing? How do you feel when you sing the musical?

**Erin Keif** 30:43

Honestly, I think I do feel a little numb to some of the overall messages in it. I think that I definitely don't feel numb to like the interpersonal relationships in it and that emotion, but I think overall, my big takeaway is not like, class consciousness.

**Hannah McGregor** 30:59

Ohoho, would you say your big takeaway is emotional?

**Erin Keif** 31:03

Yeah, I think because of how sweeping the music is, and how big it is, I don't feel insulted as an audience member when I watch it, and I just think some of the interpersonal relationships are very sweet and good in it.

**Hannah McGregor** 31:16

Yeah. So there's like a real contradiction there to be like, cool. So, we're feeling deeply when we're engaging with this art. Is feeling deeply the opposite of politics? Does feeling deeply about something distract us from the things that matter? Or is it possible that feeling deeply about things actually primes us to like, engage more seriously with some issues? That's, that's part of what Sarah Whitfield is grappling with, essentially.

**Erin Keif** 31:46

I got to read this book! You're blowing my mind over here!

**Hannah McGregor** 31:50

It's only 70 pages!

**Erin Keif** 31:54

Holy smokes!

**Hannah McGregor** 31:55

So it's that divide between what theorists have told us mass culture does and what we actually viscerally experience when we consume mass culture, that famed Cultural Studies scholar Stuart Hall was attempting to explain in his encoding and decoding theory of communication, so I'm gonna keep this really brief. Essentially, he acknowledged that there are often conservative messages embedded in mass culture by those in power. But he argued that audiences demonstrate our capacity to produce interpretations that are often deeply contrary to what those encoded meanings are, basically, like, we are not these, like, empty receptacles for the meaning of culture imposed on us by the ruling class. Like, we're actually like, smart people engaged in our own complex communities that have their own interpretations that put culture to use in our own ways. So we can't just assume that because something came in with a conservative encoded message, that that means that it's decoded in exactly that same way.

**Marcelle Kosman** 33:09

Right. So it is possible for somebody to watch something with an encoded conservative message, but to decode it in a radical and unexpected way?

**Hannah McGregor** 33:20

Absolutely. Like we see this in the way that minoritized communities embrace cultural icons that were not intended for those communities. But that like people then turn around and are like, ah, Ursula, the sea witch, in fact, queer icon. Hero. The hero we all needed.

**Marcelle Kosman** 33:42

Okay, okay. Dolly Parton, queer icon.

**Hannah McGregor** 33:45

Yeah, like we take things up or, you know, a colleague of mine at SFU, Carmen Cray, is an Indigenous scholar who studies how attached a lot of Indigenous audiences are to *Dances with Wolves*, which is like a straight up kind of terrible pro colonizer movie, but it was like, the only representation of Indigeneity that was available in popular culture and so holds a really important place for a lot of audiences. Like we just can't assume that we know in advance what audiences are going to do with things.

**Erin Keif** 34:24

I did not know that.

**Hannah McGregor** 34:26

But here's something that I didn't know. And I'm gonna guess, Erin, that you didn't know. And I am going to guess even more powerfully, Marcelle, that you didn't know. Which is that there is a significant queer *Les Mis* fandom on Tumblr.

**Marcelle Kosman** 34:43

I didn't know!

**Erin Keif** 34:44

Mmm, love that. Love that. You guys hear me typing manically? **[Erin laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 34:50

Well, I actually am going to need you to look up the ship known as Enjoltaire, which is, so the ship of Enjolras and Grantaire. Enjolras is like the noble, like the leader of the students in the protests, like the noble one who really believes in the cause. And Grantaire is like the funny drunk guy who's like, whoa, protest? Wild, guys, let's have more drinks. And like the youth? The

youth ship them. The youth write alternate universe fanfiction, where they're like both university students in the modern day and meet at a coffee shop and fall in love.

**Erin Keif** 35:35

I'm seeing a lot of good fan art. Yeah, I'm seeing a lot of good stuff on the internet turns out. It's not all bad.

**Marcelle Kosman** 35:44

It's when I see stuff like this that I'm like, hey, the internet's okay. Yeah, yeah, look at these two handsome lads kissing. I love that.

**Hannah McGregor** 35:51

Look at these two handsome lads doing smooches! Not dying. Not dying, just having a little kiss. Yeah, yeah. So Coach is filling the chat with horny fanfiction. It's absolutely out of control in here.

**Marcelle Kosman** 36:06

You kind of got to wonder why it was so readily at her fingertips. Like, is she the producer of some of this fanfic? is what I..

**Erin Keif** 36:14

Yeah, Coach, was that bookmarked? **[Erin laughs]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 36:20

Just a file of art that she's been tinkering with over the last decade.

**Hannah McGregor** 36:23

Yeah, it's taken her time because she's quickly uploading it to Tumblr. **[Erin and Marcelle laugh]** So Sarah Wakefield's book emerges from the premise that if we only think about the context of production, and not about the communities of interpretation for *Les Mis*, then we miss out on something really crucial about it, which is the role that it plays in people's lives, like army crawling through the backstage of a high school production in case maybe they need an extra Cosette.

**Erin Keif** 36:54

You can't prove it. Just in case! **[Hannah laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 37:00

Oh, Erin, I have bad news for you. We've been recording this whole conversation.

**Erin Keif** 37:07

Oh! No! I did not know that. **[Hannah laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 37:10

So Whitfield acknowledges that a lot of the early reviews were just like straight up snobbery. But also that scholars have a tendency to focus on stuff like the history of the mega musical, as you know, like corporate culture. But she decided to talk to people about *Les Mis*, and what it means to them. She talked to 350 fans of *Les Mis*. And she said, basically, none of them were interested in the idea of the mega musical. Erin, actually, could you read this, this quote from Sarah Whitfield about what the fans were not interested in?

**Erin Keif** 37:52

Quote, "In all of the responses I received the spectacular staging of the musical and the experience of seeing it live in the theater was not the main memory that people shared, it often hardly featured. The musical was only described as a mega musical once in all of the responses. Thinking about the musical though through the lens of the mega musical has been the major way in which academics including myself have approached the musical. So what else is going on here?" End quote.

**Hannah McGregor** 38:19

So reading Sarah Whitfield's book was hilariously like reenacting my own research process. So like, I started with, like, learning about the mega musical and being like, oh, fascinating. Oh, Thatcher. Of course, oh, protests in the street. And like, arrived, basically, at the same conclusion of like, oh, shit, I guess this musical is kind of problematic, and it's kind of bad to like it, but like, that's weird, because like, I really love it. And it really matters a lot to me. And none of the things that matter about it to me, as a person who loves it, have shown up in any of the scholarship. What do I do with that?

**Marcelle Kosman** 38:56

Hmm, what do you do Hannah? What do you do?

**Hannah McGregor** 38:59

What do I do? Well, I go to Sarah Whitfield. And I see, you know, some of the themes that emerge. So intriguingly, the first major theme that emerged was people talk about first encountering the musical through family members. Like Erin, your opening of how you encountered this couldn't have been more perfect if it had been scripted.

**Erin Keif** 39:25

It wasn't. It's true.

**Hannah McGregor** 39:28

It was just spontaneous and true. And guess what? Me too. I also listened to this because my mum had the recording and loved it and played it for me.

**Marcelle Kosman** 39:37

So because my mom didn't have the recording and didn't love it herself, that explains why I never even heard about it until I met you, Hannah.

**Hannah McGregor** 39:47

Yeah, we basically all found, like our generation found *Les Mis* through our parents.

**Erin Keif** 39:53

So it's genetic, you're saying.

**Marcelle Kosman** 39:57

It's nurture. No, it's nature.

**Hannah McGregor** 39:59

It's nature. No, I don't believe in nurture. I only believe in nature. **[Marcelle laughs]** You know, that's the case for Erin. It's the case for me. It's the case for a lot of the people that Whitfield interviews.

**Marcelle Kosman** 40:11

Is it the case for Whitfield?

**Hannah McGregor** 40:14

It's the case for Whitfield. So she talks a lot about the fact that she found this musical through how much her dad loved it. And her dad was a prison warden. Which is Marcelle, the, basically the profession of one of the major antagonist in the musical.

**Marcelle Kosman** 40:36

Twist!

**Hannah McGregor** 40:37

Yeah. Yeah.

**Erin Keif** 40:39

That's stranger than fiction. That's crazy.

**Hannah McGregor** 40:42

It's incredible. And part of what makes this book kind of remarkable is that right at the beginning, she's like, Yeah, so like, I was really trying to understand and talk to people who the musical meant a lot to. And then as I was right in the middle of the process of drafting this book, I found out that my dad's cancer had become terminal. And her dad died while she was writing this book about what *Les Mis* means to people.

**Erin Keif** 41:04

Oh, my gosh.

**Hannah McGregor** 41:05

Yeah. Yeah. So Marcelle, I'm gonna ask you to read a really sad quote from this book. And I'm going to give people content warning for listeners, this quote is about parental death. We're not going to spend the rest of the episode talking about parental death. But I think that this quote does an incredible job of getting at the role that seemingly schmaltzy musical theater can play in our own lives. And so if you don't want to hear this, just skip forward to the next segment, it will only be a few more minutes that we're going to hang out in theory land.

**Marcelle Kosman** 41:44

Quote, "The thing is, death isn't really like a musical. And I don't remember what my dad's last words were. I don't think anyone really speaks out dramatic epilogues to their children, or that children beg their father not to die. We just think it. We think it all really, really hard, loudly into the silence and do things that aren't quite that. We think this is too soon, while we field phone calls to distant relatives, and don't speak about all the awful things that are happening. We think, don't die dad as hard as we can. And we don't say anything. We shuffle pillows and arrange blankets instead. Life makes us carry the silences. And something about the musical, especially this musical means we can hear a version where we might have sung."

**Erin Keif** 42:38

Oh my god, I'm crying.

**Marcelle Kosman** 42:39



Oh Coach is out, Coach is done. Hannah's done. Erin is done. I'm the only cold hearted bitch left in this recording.

**Hannah McGregor** 42:47

That's the reason I made you read it.

**Marcelle Kosman** 42:52

That's the reason Coach is crying, because I didn't say "end quote." End quote.

**Erin Keif** 42:58

And oh my god, the fuck is this place? Where am I? Wait a second!

**Marcelle Kosman** 43:06

Welcome, Erin. Now it's time to talk about parental death.

**Erin Keif** 43:10

I'm gonna copy and paste that quote into my little quotes collection, I'll see you guys later. **[Erin sniffs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 43:17

That line, "we can hear a version where we might have sung," My mom was dying. Like, I played, I dreamed a dream so much. That's Fantine's song about how her life that she thought was going to turn out well really turned out to be hard and miserable and to lead to a young death that was going to take her away from her beloved daughter. So you can imagine I would play this song and my mum and I would cry. And the role that that plays in my life and the function it has as a work of art in my life, is just not something that it makes sense to me to then turn around and be like, Oh, but it was corporate. So I guess that deep personal meaning is irrelevant cuz like a capitalism happened.

**Erin Keif** 44:17

The more you talk about it, I just keep having this image in my brain of like, you know, when you buy a kid a toy, and they don't play with the toy, they play with the box. Like I feel like we're playing with the box.

**Hannah McGregor** 44:26

Yes. Yes! That is such a perfect metaphor for the encoding and decoding model of communication is like you've designed a thing to be used in a particular way but then you give it to people and they're like sike. I'm weird.

**Erin Keif** 44:45

Yeah. I'm dying over here.

**Hannah McGregor** 44:50

I love Whitfield's reading of *Les Mis* and I also don't want to lose sight of those crucial contexts of production. I think knowing what audiences think of a musical is really important. And also the point of the encoding and decoding model of communication as Hall theorized it, is that we have to pay attention to both parts.

**Marcelle Kosman** 45:12

Do you have a thesis cooking?

**Hannah McGregor** 45:15

I just might!

**Erin Keif** 45:16

I can smell it in the oven. I feel like it's almost done.

**Marcelle Kosman** 45:20

Mmmm. It's bacon. Not bacon, baking.

**[Upbeat interlude music plays]**

All right, people. It's time. This is the segment, "In This Essay, I Will." Hannah, we are ready to hear what you've cooked up.

**Hannah McGregor** 45:35

Okay, here we go. The mass popularity of the musical *Les Misérables* provides us with an ideal case study for thinking through Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication. As a paradigmatic example of the mega musical, *Les Mis* encourages us to think about contexts of production, including the runaway free market capitalism of Thatcherite England. But its enormous commercial success means that literally hundreds of millions of people have seen or heard it, resulting in multiple communities of interpretation. Further, Cameron Mackintosh's innovative approach to merchandising, and licensing the musical led to it being embedded in the domestic and familial lives of many fans, meaning our experiences of it are often deeply personal. In this essay, I will argue that it-

**Erin Keif** 46:33

Does that mean that we get to talk about the musical? Can we talk about the musical?

**Hannah McGregor** 46:38

Yeah. Yeah, that's exactly what it means. Erin, I want to go back to your point about, like, you feel engaged in the personal relationships. And you don't feel like the musical engages us that much in the politics. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

**Erin Keif** 46:54

Yeah, I think a few things. I think that musical theater for way longer than maybe any other artistic medium has been writing well for women for a long time, and showing a lot of different kinds of interpersonal relationships and women taking up space and women being villains. They were just ahead of the curve in that way. And I think the amount of complex women in it and relationships between the women, and romantic relationships that they're involved in, felt so refreshing and I felt very seen in it. Like Epinine feeling sort of left behind in her life and being lonely. I felt like I really loved and I also loved how funny Madame Thenardier was growing up, like that struck something in me.

**Hannah McGregor** 47:45

Honestly, "Master of the House" is like the ultimate diss track.

**Erin Keif** 47:50

It's awesome. It's incredible. She has one part at the end and she steals it. It's the best.

**Hannah McGregor** 47:55

Marcelle, it's a song where the Thenardier's are innkeepers. They're the ones who are raising Cosette, the little waif child and treating her very very badly. They're like, they're like shitty shitty guys, and Thenardier has this big bombastic number called "Master of the House" about how he runs his inn and then Madame Thenardier comes in at the end with the final verse. And like does basically like a diss track against him. "Comforter, philosopher and lifelong shit. The tiny little brain, regular Voltaire, thinks he's quite a lover, but there's not much there."

**Erin Keif** 48:30

There's a part in the musical that I always joked that I could teach a college class on, like this 15 second part of the song, "Red and Black," which is like sort of at the end of the first act, where Marius who has just experienced love at first sight with someone, is walking into this like, protester meeting, organizing meeting. And it drives me crazy when people like, say they're

having fun, or say they're funny, and that there's an intimacy and some musicals fall into the trap of just doing that. But there's this one moment where all these men are being super mischievous and jokey with each other. And you sense the like boyhood and the intimacy between them.

And that's the part of the musical that maybe makes me cry the most. And it's not like the cracked open "I Dreamed to Dream." It's like these boys being so playful and teasing each other, knowing you're careening towards all of them being gone soon, and it's like it's so brutal and the music there is so wistful and lovely. And then by the end of the song it's very sobering that like that part of their lives is over. But it's choices like that that they're not like, and we're good friends and we love each other. They're actually teasing like how humans tease and that's what makes you feel cracked open to these boys.

**Hannah McGregor** 49:51

Yeah, that you watch them be silly. "I am agog, I am aghast, is Marius in love at last?"

**Erin Keif** 49:56

That's the part. Oh!

**Hannah McGregor** 49:57

Yeah, I know. I know. "We've never seen him Ooh. And ah!"

**Erin Keif** 50:04

It's so good. It's so good.

**[Excerpt of "Red and Black" from *Les Mis* plays:**

**"I am agog!**

**I am aghast!**

**Is Marius in love at last?**

**I've never heard him ooh and aah**

**You talk of battles to be won**

**And here he comes like Don Juan**

**It is better than an opera!"]**

**Hannah McGregor** 50:34

I think that piece of like, there's really great roles for women really like one of the points that sort of one of the themes that Whitfield found in her interviews was that people will have particular characters in the musical who they really, really identify with, at different stages in

their lives. And that that will shift over time because the characters are like, powerful types, who are also accompanied by like really, really powerful emotionally evocative melodies, like people have their own sort of recurring melodic themes. And it's like, oh, like, this is the Fantine theme. This is the Eponine theme. And so there will be these like figures, like there's a lot of capacity for, like powerful emotional identification. So like for a lot of young women Eponine, for sure, who is the one who Marius doesn't choose because he falls in love with Cosette. And she has that classic song, *On My Own*, about walking the streets of Paris alone, imagining that he loves her. And he doesn't. And spoiler alert, she also dies. **[Marcelle gasps]**

**Erin Keif** 51:55

That's a very sad song. The thing in musical theater that I fall for every time is when people reuse a theme that was happy before in a sad context. And *Les Mis* does this so beautifully. I think this, um, I can't believe I'm saying this. I'm gonna say it. I think my favorite character is Gavroche, who plays such a small role. He's like *Oliver Twist*, spunky little boy. And spoiler alert, he dies. But- **[Marcelle gasps]**

**Hannah McGregor** 52:30

You've gotta understand, almost everybody dies!

**Erin Keif** 52:31

Yeah. It's horrible. But the he it's not in every production. But he has a song, where it's my favorite kind of musical theater song where someone's like, even though I'm small, I can stick up to the big guy. I can help even though I'm little, there's actually a shit ton of songs and musical theater where that is the lyrics. But he, it's such a fun and happy melody. And instead of when he's dying, picking a sad, wistful melody from the show, they just have him use the exact same lyrics and melody of when he's collecting bullets and getting shot that he did when he talked about how much he wanted to be helpful. And happy. So it's just this horrible feeling. And that's like, how a kid would be, they would still be a kid, they wouldn't have as complex of a theme of grief. And like, knowing how much they're missing as like, "I Dreamed a Dream" would have. And that's even more tragic to go like, aw, he's singing like a little kid ear worm while he's dying is brutal.

**[Excerpt of "Little People" from *Les Mis*:**

**"And little people know**

**When little people fight**

**We may look easy pickings but we got some bite!**

**So never kick a dog because he's just a pup**

**You better run for cover when the pup grows up!**

**And we'll fight like twenty armies  
And we won't give up"]**

**Hannah McGregor** 53:50

Absolutely brutal. And a lot of the power of the musical is the way that it reuses those same melodies in different ways. And I've been thinking about the final scene. So the act one ends with "Red and Black," right?

**Erin Keif** 54:10

It ends with "Do You Hear the People Sing." Or "One Day More?" No, yeah, it's one of those.

**Hannah McGregor** 54:14

Yeah, but like there's a major, one of the major songs is "Do you hear the people sing? Singing those songs of angry men, it is the music of a people who will not be slaves again." It's like the rallying cry for the sort of protests like we've been watching how people are crushed by these systems. Through the whole first half of the musical we watched Fantine die, we watched like all of these terrible things happen. And then we've got these students being like, No, we are not going to allow this to be the case. We are going to stand together and it's musically so powerful. There's a lot of singing in sync, like people are just all singing the melody together. And it's a really sort of almost militaristic, rhythmic song that really gets you like ugh!

**[Excerpt of "Do You Hear the People Sing?" from *Les Mis* plays:**

**Do you hear the people sing?**

**Singing those songs of angry men,**

**it is the music of a people who will not be slaves again."**

And then that song reprises at the end, but it's been sung by all of these characters who are dead now. And they sing the same melody, but in a sort of slower, softer way. They sing, "do you hear the people sing? Lost in the valley of the night, it is the music of a people who are climbing for the light."

**[Excerpt of "Do You Hear the People Sing Reprise" from *Les Mis* plays:**

**"Do you hear the people sing?**

**Lost in the valley of the night,**

**it is the music of a people who are climbing for the light."]**

Like if we literally interpreted the message, it would be like, cool, there's no justice to be found while we're alive. The only redemption is in death when you get to go to heaven. But what it

actually does to you, the listener, for me, at least, I mean, we're talking about reader response and decoding. Like, I will say what it does for me, what it did for me, as a listener, was leave me with that idea of people needing to work together to become free, as the final message of the musical. That like, you watched everybody die, the protest failed. But that message is what endures. This sense that like, we will try again, we will keep trying, tomorrow will come and we will keep doing this.

**Erin Keif** 56:40

Are either of you familiar with the musical *Hadestown*?

**Hannah McGregor** 56:43

I'm going to see it in vain in Vancouver in a couple of months. I'm really excited.

**Erin Keif** 56:47

I can't really spoil a myth that's been around for 2000 years. But the way that they structure it, it reminded me so much of *Les Mis* when I first saw it, like, Yes, this is so sad and so bad. But we're actually going to tell it again, like they reset for the beginning of the musical at the end of the musical knowing that he's going to turn around again, of like, but you know what, that's what this is, is we know that there is no justice and we know that people dying, it's unfair, but actually, we're going to do it again. Begin Again. And it's so hopeful. And yeah, I thought I was like that feels like a direct stealing and being inspired by *Les Mis*. Because at the end of that you're like, yeah, like in "Empty Chairs and Empty Tables" when he goes, "my friends, don't ask me what your sacrifice was for" it-

**Hannah McGregor** 57:37

Marius can't answer it.

**Erin Keif** 57:39

He can't answer it. And it feels so sour. But that last bit is like, we'll roll it back again. Start it again.

**Marcelle Kosman** 57:46

So how do we reconcile this politically disappointing conclusion with the way that the two of you are describing the feeling and the emotional resonance that you have with these characters? What do we do? Is it possible that politics is more complicated?

**Hannah McGregor** 58:11

It's possible, here's the wild thing. It's possible feelings have a role in our politics. **[Marcelle fake gasps]** It's possible that like, say, look at a whole generation, who like grew up hearing this musical in our homes, singing it for our parents, putting on productions at home, you know, just familiar with this vocabulary of feeling and affect and politics, that like, maybe it played a role in our sense of the world as a place that is unjust, that we need to do something about, like maybe just that basic understanding of like, the world is full of crushing and overwhelming injustices and you don't get to sit down.

You don't do what the Thenardiere's do and say, you know, it's a world where the dog eats the dog and rips fillings out of dead students' teeth and then go dance at the ball. Sorry, that's how things end for the Thenardiere's. They're fine. They do great. But like maybe you watch that and are like, no, no. Our job is to move through the world with love and care and do our best to shift the scale a little bit. And like, is it possible for that to be something that a lot of us got out of a musical that was simultaneously like a pretty massive corporate undertaking.

**Erin Keif** 59:43

I live by an outdoor mall and I earnestly love it. It is obviously meant for shopping and taking people's money, but it is like a walking area with a fountain that there's a lot of people gathering in. So I'm going like, I can't really control this. This is where like American gathering places are. But there's something accidentally human that you've done here. And I think I can enjoy the accident. Because it's all like we get.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:00:19

Yeah, yeah, that's so beautiful. Something accidentally human.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:00:25

It's almost like it takes more than one go at a revolution, you know?

**Hannah McGregor** 1:00:33

Yeah, I keep thinking of that image Michel de Certeau has in his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, where he talks about, like, the field that has the path that they built, but then there's that, that path that's cut horizontally across the field by the places that people have walked. And it's like, that's kind of what we're all doing, right? Like, we don't get to build the world that we want. We're just born into the world as it is. But we've got this ability to like, cut these horizontal paths across the way things are. And, you know, at the end of the day, this is probably why I'm a cultural critic as my job. At the end of the day, I have this wild belief that engaging with art gives us a tool set to do that field crossing.



**Marcelle Kosman** 1:01:26

Yeah. And engaging with art without a limited parameters around what counts as art, right? So like, to describe musical theater to describe a mega musical as art is already itself, kind of a kind of a radical act.

**Erin Keif** 1:01:43

Because like, the core of its relationship with me is like me pretending to be a French cop in my living room to my mom. Like that's what my relationship to it is. And I because I wasn't in the context when it was created, and when it had an agenda. I just found it on the side of the road and made it mine.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:02:07

Yeah, yeah. And pretending to be a French cop somehow didn't turn you into a person who loves cops.

**Erin Keif** 1:02:11

Yeah, the opposite. Hmm. **[Marcelle and Hannah laugh]** I played the character and I got in there and I realized he wasn't great.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:02:20

Something does not compute. **[Hannah laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 1:02:23

Yeah, now you hate the French.

**Erin Keif** 1:02:25

That is true. Tell everyone.

**[Material Girls Theme plays briefly: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:02:34

*Material Girls* is a *Witch, Please* Production, and is distributed by Acast. You can find the rest of our episodes and our other podcasts on Acast or at [ohwitchplease.ca](http://ohwitchplease.ca) Also on the website, you can find our newsletter. Also, you might notice that we are doing some behind the scenes, behind the episode research deep dives. Those are part of our newsletter. You can sign up for that on our website. You can also find transcripts, you can find merch. We have so much good merch and there's always new stuff in the works. We have reading lists, and most importantly,

you can join our Patreon @patreon.com/ohwitchplease. We have so much good, good, good, solid gold content on there. And your financial support means everything to us. So those are my plugs. Erin, do you have some plugs? Where can people find you?

**Erin Keif** 1:03:34

I have two podcasts that I'm a main cast member of, *Hey Riddle, Riddle*. They're both Headgum podcasts so you can find it Headgum or anywhere you find podcasts. *Hey, Riddle Riddle*, which is a riddle podcast. Vaguely. Where me and two other comedians, talk about riddles, solve riddles, do some improv. And then my newer podcast is called *Sitcom D&D*, and its standalone episodes of D&D set in a sitcom world and those are both on Headgum. And I'm very proud of both. So if you want to check them out, we'd love to have you.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:04:05

I'm really excited to listen to *Ditcom D&D*, I am just busy listening to every episode of *Hey Riddle, Riddle*.

**Erin Keif** 1:04:11

And I told you I'm gonna get you out of there. I'm not letting you get lost in there.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:04:15

Leave me behind! Save yourself! I am going to plug *Hey Riddle, Riddle*, which I love and also our social media. We're on Instagram and other platforms @ohwitchplease and tiktok @ohwitchpleasepod and you should come hang out with us there. Gabby is making cool content for the youth. I also want to plug our theme song, "Shopping Mall," which is by Auto Syndicate— you can find them on band camp, and you should listen to the other songs on that album! It's called Bongo Dance. It's got a music video. It rules. And I want to plug by which I mean *thank* everyone on the *Witch, Please Productions* team, including our digital content coordinator Gaby Iori **[Sound effect of BOING]**, our social media manager and marketing designer Zoe Mix **[Sound effect of record player rewinding]**, our sound engineer Erik Magnus **[Sound effect of chimes]**, and our executive producer Hannah Rehak, aka COACH! **[Sound effect of a sports whistle blowing]**

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:05:31

At the end of every episode we will thank everyone who has joined our Patreon OR boosted their tier to help make our work possible. Our enormous gratitude goes out to:

Geneva L
Emma L
Anna J
Laura V
Jenni L
Veronica
Kimberley
Ruthanne P
Micheline M
Jane S

**Hannah McGregor** 1:05:59

Great names.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:06:01

All great names.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:06:02

All great names, really into Ruthanne, just powerful. We'll be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens. But until then...

**Erin Keif** 1:06:13

Later Javert-haters!

**[*Material Girls* Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]**