

The beginning of

A TALE OF TWO MISERABLES (from **RADIO RIDICULOUS**)

a comedy in one act

by Rich Orloff

Note: A TALE OF TWO MISERABLES is designed to be performed as a theater piece – but in the style of those radio plays which were broadcast in front of an audience, preferably with live sound effects and musical accompaniment.

The play can be performed with a cast of five (3 m., 2 w.) or more; there are over 40 roles. Women can play male roles (and vice versa), as long as the audience can always ascertain the proper gender of the characters.

Prologue

MUSIC: CLASSY CLASSICAL THEME

ANNOUNCER

Callalilie's Condensed Milk, the milk that comes from efficient cows, presents THE CONDENSED CLASSICS HOUR, bringing you the greatest works of literature in a form you don't have to read. Tonight, a thrilling tale of tyranny, courage, heartbreak and cheese, A TALE OF TWO MISERABLES, based on the novel by Hugo Dickens. Tonight's special program is brought to you without commercial interruption, more or less.

MUSIC: BRIDGE

JEAN

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. It was the worst of times; it was the best of times. At times it was both the best and worst of times, and other times it was neither the best nor worst of times. Sometimes the town clock stopped, and I couldn't tell if it was the best of times, the worst of times, or an hour past the best or the worst of times. My name is Jean Bleujean*. This is my story, and this is my life.

(*pronounced Jahn Bleuhahn.)

MUSIC: BRIDGE

Scene 1: The Bastille Prison in Paris

JEAN

The Bastille prison in Paris, France, sometime in the mid-1700's. I'd be more specific, but I was too poor to own a calendar... or anything else.

SOUND: UNWASHED MEN MILLING AROUND

SFX: A CELL DOOR OPENING

PRISON GUARD

Here's your new home, you rancid clump of second-hand yogurt. May you rot in it forever.

SFX: A CELL DOOR SLAMMING SHUT

JEAN

As I looked around my cell, three prisoners approached me. They were the filthiest, smelliest, most wretched-looking men I'd ever seen, and that was with the benefit of dim lighting.

MAURICE

What's your name, prisoner?

JEAN

My name is Jean Bluejean.

PIERRE

What are you in for?

JEAN

My sister's family was starving, and to feed them, I stole a loaf of bread.

CLAUDE

What kind of bread?

JEAN

Pumpernickel.

PIERRE, MAURICE and CLAUDE

Ohhhh.

JEAN

And what are you all in for?

PIERRE

Whole wheat.

MAURICE

Rye bread.

CLAUDE

Eight-to-ten for dinner rolls.

JEAN

They throw men in prison for stealing bread?!

MAURICE

I know. They make it like we are attacking the soul of France. It's just bread.

CLAUDE

It's not like we stole *cheese*.

SOUND: MAURICE AND PIERRE MUMBLE AGREEMENT

SFX: FOOTSTEPS

PIERRE

Shhh, footsteps. It's the guard and another prisoner.

SFX: A CELL DOOR OPENING

PRISON GUARD

Here's your new home, you pus-filled pile of putrid whipped cream. May you rot in it forever.

SFX: A CELL DOOR SLAMMING SHUT

MAURICE

What is your name, prisoner?

MARCEL

My name is Marcel Duval.

PIERRE

What are you in for?

MARCEL

I, I, I stole some cheese.

CLAUDE

What kind of cheese?

Roquefort. MARCEL

Infidel! MAURICE

Traitor! PIERRE

Let's kill him! CLAUDE

SOUND: CRAZED PRISONERS ATTACKING SOMEONE

SFX: A BODY THUMPS TO THE GROUND

MUSIC: BRIDGE

Scene 2: A new beginning

JEAN
Time passed slowly with these fellows. I learned to keep my thoughts to myself, especially on the topic of cheese. Finally, after several years – I think it was five, but without a calendar, it was hard to tell – I was released. But was I free? Forced to wear a yellow identification tag, it was clear who I was: an ex-convict. The fact that I hadn't showered or shaved for five years probably didn't help, either.

SFX: KNOCK ON A DOOR; THEN A DOOR OPENING

Who is it? TAVERN OWNER

JEAN
Please let me in. I just need shelter for the night.

TAVERN OWNER
And risk losing my corn bread – never!

SFX: DOOR SLAM

JEAN
I was turned away over and over, until I considered killing myself, or at least bathing. Finally:

SFX: KNOCK ON A DOOR, THEN A DOOR OPENING

BISHOP

May I help you, you poor, wretched, filthy creature.

JEAN

Oh, I – Forgive me, Reverend.

BISHOP

Actually, I'm a bishop. I wear finer outfits and eat better cheese. Come in, my boy, come in.

JEAN

Are you sure? My shoes are muddy and –

BISHOP

Come in. I can tell you are good.

JEAN

You can?

BISHOP

I have been in the Church 53 years; I have lost all touch with reality. Come inside. Let us dine together, and we shall discuss what an obnoxious twit Martin Luther was.

SFX: DOOR SHUTTING

JEAN

He gave me food and wine and a sponge bath. I would've preferred bathing myself, but I didn't want to seem inhospitable. When he fell asleep, I repaid his gratitude by stealing all his silver and running away. The next morning:

SFX: KNOCK ON A DOOR, THEN A DOOR OPENING

BISHOP

Good morning, Inspector Javerte.*
Ah, I see you have a guest with you.

(*pronounced with a very strong "t")

JAVERTE

I'm sorry to bother you, Bishop, but this wretched but well-bathed creature *claims* you gave him this silver.

BISHOP

Thank you so much for bringing him back.

JAVERTE

I'm just doing my –

BISHOP

I wanted to give him my candlesticks, too.

JEAN and JAVERTE

What?!

BISHOP

Come in, friend.

JAVERTE

But –

BISHOP

I'd invite you in, Inspector, but your shoes are muddy. Goodbye.

SFX: DOOR SLAM

JEAN

I do not know how to thank you.

BISHOP

You could make a banana cream pie, using Callalilie's Condensed Milk. Callalilie's makes every dessert tasty and delicious. It's the milk that comes from efficient cows.

JEAN

I don't know how to cook.

BISHOP

Too bad. Oh, well; have a seat, and we'll make rude comments about the Archbishop of Canterbury. Would you like a cashew?

JEAN

No, thank you.

BISHOP

They're very good.

JEAN

Your holiness, I cannot tell you how moved I am by how you've treated me. I swear to you, and I swear to the Lord, I shall steal no more... unless absolutely necessary.

BISHOP
(CLEARS HIS THROAT)

JEAN
– and even then, only what I need to survive,
plus an additional ten per cent.

BISHOP
(CLEARS HIS THROAT)

JEAN
– which I shall give directly to the Church.

BISHOP
(CLEARS HIS THROAT)

JEAN
Okay, I won't steal at all. I vow to spend the
rest of my life doing good. Are you satisfied?

BISHOP
(CLEARS HIS THROAT)

JEAN
What do you want from me?!

BISHOP
The cashews. I'm choking.

JEAN
Oh, let me tap you on the back to dislodge them.

SFX: TAP TAP – THEN A BODY THUMPS TO THE GROUND

JEAN
Apparently I gained some strength in prison.
Oh Lord, what have I done?! I will dedicate
the rest of my life to doing good if you bring
this holy man back to life... Hmm, no pulse...
Lord, did you hear my prayer? I vow to do
good from now on; let this holy man live...
(into the mike:)
Testing, testing... Lord?
(sighs)

MUSIC: BRIDGE

Scene 3: The Mayor of Sur-la-Flemme

JEAN

As I knew nobody would believe my story,
I buried the bishop in his backyard and wrote
a note, "Gone to Lourdes. Be back soon."
I took the silver and disappeared into the
woods, still vowing to help humankind
while avoiding nuts. Through a series of
contrivances which make for great literature
but which won't fit in a one-hour radio show,
I ended up in the town of Sur-la-Flemme,
where I became a prosperous factory owner
and mayor. One day in the town square...

CROWD

HUB-BUB*

(*There are several instances of hub-bub in the play. In the first workshop, everyone in the cast mumbled "hub-bub, hub-bub, hub-bub", except for one actor who, this time, muttered "peanut butter, peanut butter, peanut butter", a phrase commonly used in classic radio shows for making crowd sounds. The script notes what this actor said during the other hub-bubs.)

JEAN

What is all the commotion about?

JAVERTE

Excuse me, I'm the new police chief,
Inspector Javerte. And you are –

JEAN

I'm the mayor of this town.

JAVERTE

You look familiar.

JEAN

Perhaps you've seen my campaign posters.

JAVERTE

Did you ever use cashews as a murder weapon?

VILLAGER #1*

Hey, watch what you say! This is our mayor!

(*Although the scene is written for two villagers, the number can be increased to create more of a sense of crowd.)

JAVERTE

And what do you know of his past?

VILLAGER #1

Who cares, he lowered taxes.

JEAN

Inspector, I assure you we've never met, and that any resemblance I have to actual persons living or dead is strictly a coincidence. Now what is this commotion about?

JAVERTE

I caught this lowly peasant girl selling her body.

JEAN

Is that true?

CANTINE

Have pity on me, kind sir. I couldn't get a job! I was desperate. I sold my hair so I could eat, and when I ran out of money, I sold my body.

JEAN

You poor, pathetic, and bald creature.

CANTINE

Hey, some men like that.

JEAN

Wait a second. Aren't you the honest but oversexed peasant girl, Cantine? Don't you work at my factory?

CANTINE

I did, until I was fired for having a child out-of-wedlock.

JEAN

What does that have to do with your ability to work?

VILLAGER #1

It's not just about her. If we let some wench with an illegitimate child work at the factory, then *all* the factory girls will want illegitimate children.

VILLAGER #2

And if all the factory girls have illegitimate children, then all the farm girls will want illegitimate children. Then all the dairy maids, and all the seamstresses –

VILLAGER #1

Soon we'll have bastards coming out of our ears.

JEAN

There's only one fair solution to this.

VILLAGER #2

Does it involve stoning?

SFX: A STONE HITTING SOMEONE

CANTINE

Ouch!

JEAN

No! I was thinking of... a scarlet letter.

CROWD

Oooo.

VILLAGER #1

Why not puce? The puce A for adultery.

VILLAGER #2

How about indigo? The indigo W for whore.

VILLAGER #1

No, no. Mauve! The mauve B.U.T.
for Bald Unemployed Tramp.

JEAN

Psst, Cantine.

CANTINE

Yes?

JEAN

While the villagers are distracted, come with me.

CANTINE

I'm sorry, Mayor, but I'm closed for the night.

JEAN

You're bleeding; I'm taking you to the hospital.

CANTINE

Oh, Mayor. This is the kindest deed
anyone has ever done for me.

JEAN

Don't get too excited. It's a public hospital;
they'll probably kill you.

MUSIC: SHORT BRIDGE

CANTINE

(coughs, then:)

I'm dying, Mayor, I'm dying.

JEAN

I'm sorry, Cantine.

CANTINE

And to think I came in with just a bad cut.

JEAN

I told the surgeon-barber there was no
need to operate. But since he couldn't
make any money cutting your hair...

CANTINE

Oh, Mayor, I ask but one favor before I die.

JEAN

Anything, Cantine, anything. Years ago I vowed
to do good, and so far I haven't been very good
at it. Tell me what you wish, and it will be done.

CANTINE

All I ask is: Look after my little girl.

JEAN

Um, I'm really not good with children.

CANTINE

She's a good girl, and she's horribly mistreated
by the woman in whose custody I left her.

JEAN

But I'm *really* not good with children.

CANTINE

Thirty seconds ago, you said "anything".

JEAN

I'm a politician; I make promises.

CANTINE

(a long wheeze:)

Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeezzzzz.

JEAN

I cannot refuse a plea so desperate,
so innocent, and so wheezy. I shall do it.

CANTINE

Thank you. And now I can die in peace.
(Cantine makes all sorts of
complicated dying sounds.)

JEAN

May your soul be in heaven, Cantine.

CANTINE

I'm not done yet.
(Cantine makes all sorts of
complicated dying sounds.)

JEAN

Anything else you'd like to add?

CANTINE

Just this –
(quick dying sound)

JEAN

Cantine?... Cantine?

JAVERTE

I think she's dead.

JEAN

Inspector! What are you doing here?

JAVERTE

I came to apologize. In the town square,
I mistakenly thought you were a former convict
named Jean Bleu-*gene*.

JEAN

Bleu-*jahn*! Um, at least that's what I've heard.

JAVERTE

Either way, I now know I was mistaken.

JEAN

I accept your apology.

JAVERTE

The real *Bleu-jahn* was just apprehended,
and he will soon face trial for violating parole
and killing a bishop.

JEAN

And what is the penalty for that?

JAVERTE

It is always... death by guillotine.

MUSIC: BRIDGE

Scene 4: The trial of the wrong Jean Bleu-jean

JEAN

What was I to do? On one hand, I couldn't
let an honest man die for what I had done.
On the other hand, *I* didn't want to die over
it, either. It was moments like this that I
realized I had a complicated soul, which
made life difficult but which was essential
for a good novel. Oh, what to do?

CROWD

HUB-BUB ("peas and carrots, peas and carrots,
peas and carrots")

SFX: GAVEL POUNDING

FRENCH JUDGE*

Order in the court. Bailiff, hand me the evidence.

(*The judge should have a distinct French accent.)

BAILIFF

Here it is, your honor, a ten year-old loaf
of pumpnickel.

FRENCH JUDGE

Oh my God, it's covered with mold.
Get that moldy thing away from me!

MAN IN BACK OF COURT

I'll take it.

BAILIFF

Here you go, Pasteur.

MAN IN BACK OF COURT

Thank you.

FRENCH JUDGE

And now, Jean Bluejeans, for violating parole,
and for killing a bishop –

SFX: HORSE-HOOVES

ORSE

(whinnies)

JEAN

Wait!

CROWD

HUB-BUB (“rhubarb, rhubarb, rhubarb”)

SFX: GAVEL POUNDING

FRENCH JUDGE

Order in the court!

JEAN

Your honor, do not kill an innocent man.

FRENCH JUDGE

And why should we make an exception in this case?