

Australian Musical Theatre: Coming of Age Internationally

By Trevor Jones

The year 2018 could be seen as a watershed for Australian musical theatre. *Muriel's Wedding*, the greatly anticipated musical adaptation of P.J. Hogan's 1994 movie, opened in Sydney in January to great critical acclaim, sold-out audiences and the announcement of further performances in 2019 (Gans). *Strictly Ballroom*, the adaptation of Baz Luhrmann's 1992 film, opened on the West End in the spring of 2018 after runs in Australia and Canada, and *King Kong*, with a score by Marius de Vries and songs by Australian composer Eddie Perfect opened on Broadway in November. All three productions were produced and developed by the Australian production company Global Creatures, which is also responsible for the adaptation of *Moulin Rouge* heading towards Broadway in 2019.

Australian musical theatre composers are also having their day. *King Kong's* Perfect wrote the score for the adaptation of Tim Burton's film *Beetlejuice* which is slated to open on Broadway in April 2019. Matthew Lee Robinson's *The Magic School Bus* toured the US and his musical *Atlantis* will premiere at the Virginia Repertory Theatre in April 2019. Carmel Dean's *Renascence* with book by Dick Scanlan and lyrics based on the poetry of Edna St Vincent Millay opened for a limited run Off-Broadway in October 2018.



MURIEL'S WEDDING | 2017
Maggie McKenna and Madeleine Jones in
Muriel's Wedding – The Musical
Co-produced by STC and Global Creatures
Photo by Prudence Upton
Courtesy of Sydney Theatre Company

Despite these international successes, however, there is still significant discussion in Australia around the problems of developing "the great Australian musical" and whether these ventures will be commercially viable for producers. In a 2015 platform paper titled "The Time Is Ripe For the Great Australian Musical," John Senczuk points out that producers frequently find "it's easier, more cost effective, to present standard, tested repertoire; to buy up Broadway and West End hits." This disillusionment with a lack of local product is far from new, with Peter Fitzpatrick describing "the tale of mostly unrealized hopes that is the Australian musical" as far back as 2001 (17). More recently, John Frost, one of the biggest producers of musical theatre in Australia, stated "I don't think there will be a great Australian musical," suggesting that Australian writers needed to move to London or New York for their works to be developed (Tongue). In 2017, in response to the nominations for Australia's national Helpmann Awards, composer Eddie Perfect tweeted that "original Australian music theatre is in real crisis" (Perfect 9:34) and commented on the lack of mainstream investment and interest in local productions (Perfect 9:35).

Although there have been regular discussions of the problems surrounding Australian musicals in online articles and social media forums, there is minimal academic discourse on this topic. Peter Wyllie Johnston observes that the neglect of Australian musicals in studies of our performing arts is curious: "In the twentieth century not a single book was published devoted entirely to the subject, even though a substantial number of musicals was [sic] created" (2004, 157). Fitzpatrick feels that "the extraordinary neglect of the musical in Australian theatre studies of the last two decades is not simply a cultural peculiarity, but reflects a wider failure of attention" (25).

This article will trace the development of original Australian Musical Theatre and highlight some recent shows and composers to increase international awareness. It will also discuss some of the wider issues facing the development of new Australian works.

HISTORY

One of the early musicals written by an Australian was *Chu Chin Chow* (1916), written and directed by Australian actor Oscar Asche. The musical ran for 2,238 performances in London, setting a record lasting over 40 years (Thomson). In 1920, an Australian musical comedy titled *FFF* emerged on the Tivoli Circuit, created by Clement John de Garis with music by Melbourne composer Reginald A.A. Stoneham (Van Straten). *Lola Montez*, with book by Alan Burke, lyrics by Peter Benjamin and music by Peter Stannard, was produced by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust in 1958. Inspired by the American Golden Age Musicals, the plot focuses on the true story of the scandalous dancer's visit to the goldfields of Ballarat in 1855. The musical was adapted for television in 1962 and was recently revised and presented in concert in the hopes of a revival.

Other musicals celebrating parochially Australian stories include the 1961 musical *The*

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Sentimental Bloke, Manning Clark's *History of Australia* (1988) and *7 Little Australians: The Musical* (1988). The story of famous Australian Bush Ranger Ned Kelly has been told on the musical stage twice: *Ned Kelly*, a rock opera by Patrick Flynn and legendary Australian performer Reg Livermore was produced in 1978 and *Ned—A New Australian Musical*, with music and lyrics by Adam Lyon and book by Anna Lyon and Marc McIntyre, which premiered in Bendigo in 2015. The Eureka Rebellion of 1854, a revolt against the colonial authority of the United Kingdom during the Ballarat Gold Rush, was musicalized in the 2004 production *Eureka* with music by Michael Maurice Harvey, book and lyrics by Gale Edwards and John Senczuk and original book and lyrics by Maggie May Gordon. The Australian obsession with sporting celebrities was parodied in Eddie Perfect's 2008 *Shane Warne: The Musical*. Even Australian politicians were celebrated in the 2005 satirical musical *Keating!* by Casey Bennetto. Some critics, however, suggest that the "Australian-ness" of these works may limit their potential interest for international audiences. John Frost states that "the minute you use the word Australian it makes it sound very parochial" (Tongue).

From 1990, Australia produced some notable works with Australian stories from composers including David King (*Mary Bryant, The Good Fight*), Anthony Crowley (*The Villain of Flowers, Nathaniel Storm*), Alan John (*Jonah, Snugglepote and Cuddlepote*) and Peter Pinne (*Caroline, Prisoner: Cell Block H*). A number of composers, including King and John collaborated with the remarkable Australian writer Nick Enright, considered "the most experienced professional Australian lyricist of his generation and the most influential" (Johnston, 2014, xvii).

During this period, Australian composers and lyricists began to explore how to capture the Australian voice in musical theatre and to develop original stories:

The tacit 'rule' for Broadway writers since the 1920s has been to adapt musicals from other sources, usually books, plays or films. Enright followed this principle with *The Venetian Twins, The Betrothed and The Boy from Oz*, but in many other works—*On The Wallaby, Buckley's!, Summer Rain, Orlando Rourke* and *Miracle City*, he created the story himself.

(Johnston, 2004, xix)

The first indigenous Australian musical to gain mainstream success was Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Dae* which toured Australia in the early 1990s. It was adapted into a 2010 feature film with an all-star Australian cast including Academy Award winning actor



SWEET CHARITY | 2018
Columbia College Chicago
Directed by Ashton Byrum
Choreographed by Amy Uhl
Music Directed by Jermaine Hill
Photo by Sarah Nandola

Geoffrey Rush and extraordinary indigenous Australian actors Ernie Dingo, Jessica Mauboy and Deborah Mailman. It was one of the most successful Australian films of all time, grossing over \$7 million. Other indigenous musicals followed including *Corrugation Road* (1996), also by Jimmy Chi, and *The Sunshine Club* (1999) by Wesley Enoch and John Rodgers.

The significance of the Aboriginal Australian musicals must also be understood in the broader historical context since they reflect fundamental changes in the wider society.
(Johnston, 2004, 169)

Probably the most successful Australian musicals internationally, though, have been jukebox musicals—notably *The Boy From Oz* and *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*. Both musicals ran on Broadway, with *The Boy From Oz* garnering a 2004 Tony Award for Hugh Jackman in the lead role and *Priscilla* winning a 2011 Tony Award for Best Costume Design as well as receiving a nomination for Tony Sheldon as Best Leading Actor in a Musical. *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* now features on Norwegian Cruise Lines.

AUSTRALIAN MUSICALS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In defining an Australian musical, Senczuk says:

by 'homegrown,' or 'indigenous' musical I mean works that are conceived, written, composed or *auteured* by Australian creative artists. Australian musicals do not necessarily demand Australian subject matter, but the very act of bringing the work before an audience, providing it with an Australian sensibility, a unique view of the world, or an Australian style or idiom, qualifies its inclusion in the canon.

Peter Wyllie Johnston explores "Australian-ness" in musical theatre in great detail in his 2004 article by discussing six different categories of musicals ranging from works with no Australian music or lyrics to "All-Australian" works including Indigenous Australians. He says:

Examining these works through the filter of their 'Australian-ness,' it becomes clear that the history of Australian musical theatre has much to tell us about our own culture since colonization and the changing nature of 'Australian-ness' itself: from expatriates seeking fame and validation overseas, to our embrace and imitation of foreign forms, to more fundamental questions of how we tell our own history and stories (and what indeed these might be) – and finally to our very late inclusion of Indigenous Australians in all aspects of our society.
(2004, 162)

In recent times, adaptation has been a successful venture, as shown by the successes of *Muriel's Wedding*, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Strictly Ballroom* and, more recently,

Ladies In Black and *The Dressmaker*. One of the benefits of developing our own local musicals, however, is the opportunity to tell Australian stories on a global stage. There have been a handful of original Australian Musicals that have resonated with audiences internationally in the 21st Century.

The Hatpin by James Millar and Peter Rutherford is the chilling true story of Amber Martin, who gave up her son in Sydney in 1892, later discovering that he has been murdered by the Makin family. The musical then recounts the arrest and trial of the family who murdered several infants and continued to take regular support payments from desperate parents. The musical has received productions in Sydney, Melbourne, Perth, New York (as part of the New York Musical Theatre Festival) and London with growing interest around Australia from community musical theatre companies. A cast recording featuring Tony-nominated Caroline O'Connor (*Anastasia*) was released in 2008. Notable songs that stand alone for auditions and performances include "Puddles" and "The Hand of Courage."

WHILE WE ARE PROUD TO BE CELEBRATING SOME SUCCESSES IN AUSTRALIAN MUSICAL THEATRE, THE QUESTION OF HOW AUSTRALIA WILL ENCOURAGE THE CREATION OF ORIGINAL, EXPORTABLE AUSTRALIAN MUSICAL THEATRE LINGERS.

Dean Bryant and Mathew Frank have written several chamber musicals with universal themes that have had some international success. *Prodigal*, inspired by The Prodigal Son bible story, focuses on gay, 18-year-old Luke and his journey of self-discovery. It was staged by the York Theatre Company in 2002 featuring Christian Borle and Kerry Butler in leading roles. Some notable stand-alone songs include "When I Was A Kid" and "Brand New Eyes." Another of their shows, *Once We Lived Here*, tells the story of Amy, who runs the family sheep station in rural Australia. As the family gathers, Amy has to decide if she's holding on to tradition or if she's stuck in a place built on lies and myths. The musical premiered in Melbourne in 2009 and an original cast recording is available. It premiered in New York in 2013 and in London in 2014. "As Far As The Eye Can See" is a stunning example of Bryant and Frank's unique musical voice.

Of course, one of the most significant Australian musical theatre composers to emerge in recent years is Tim Minchin, who was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Original Score for *Matilda the Musical* and *Groundhog Day The Musical*, though both shows were developed in the United Kingdom and source material is British and American, respectively.

DEVELOPING NEW MUSICALS

In Australia, there are only a few avenues for composers and writers to develop new musical theatre works, and there is limited support for larger, more ambitious undertakings. New Musicals Australia, which receives funding from the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, has a number of programs to support the development and performance of new Australian works. Their First Look program enables writers and composers to present a 10-minute showcase of a new piece in progress and receive feedback from industry professionals. Their core program chooses up to 10 musicals from an annual, national submission process to present 20 minutes of a completed work. Four shows are then selected to be read in full with a company of actors, and two of those works are then chosen for a developmental workshop with a closed presentation for an Advisory Panel. A finalist from among these musicals is then staged in a full season at the Hayes Theatre in Sydney. Shows developed through this process to date are *The Detective's Handbook* (2016), *Melba* (2017), and *Evie May—A Tivoli Story* (2018).

Home Grown is a Melbourne-based, not-for-profit company that produces regular concerts dedicated to Australian repertoire. Many of these performances are filmed and made available via YouTube. Their website, which also sells sheet music, has been instrumental in promoting Australian songs and composers. In 2016, they launched The Grassroots Initiative—a long-term development project to provide opportunities for writers to hone their craft and skill, as well as develop a work through readings for an industry panel. Six musicals per year have been featured in this project. In 2018, the first of the Australian Musical Theatre Playlists was launched online to publicize these writers and make their songs available to all.

As in the US, schools play a part in the writing, development and performance of new Australian musicals. Monash University recently established a Musical Theatre Artists in Residence Program in partnership with The Pratt Foundation and The Production Company. The Arts Academy at Federation University, Ballarat has recently staged a number of Australian musicals. The Victorian College of the Arts incorporated the development of new works into their Musical Theatre Curriculum. The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) has a long history of developing Australian musicals, including David King and Nick Enright's works *Mary Bryant and The Good Fight*, and new work is currently in development at the Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University.

At present, there is no college degree for musical theatre writers in Australia. Some writers have completed graduate degrees in other areas of writing and steered their studies towards musical theatre. Others come to the US, such as emerging composer Alanya Bridge and lyricist Cal Silberstein, who have enrolled in the Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program at New York University. Close mentorship is essential to the development of composers and writers. The establishment of a degree program, a version of the UK's Mercury Musical Development program, or an iteration of the New York BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop would be instrumental in developing and training new Australian writers.



Another issue that bears discussing is whether we need to develop our own, uniquely Australian musical voice for our musical theatre works. Composers and writers currently active in Australia have naturally been influenced by American composers such as Stephen Sondheim, Jason Robert Brown, and Pasek and Paul. But Kate Miller-Heidke and Keir Nuttall's score for *Muriel's Wedding* incorporated stylistic elements from Miller-Heidke's own alternative pop career (exemplified in the hilarious songs "Can't Hang" and "Shared, Viral, Linked, Liked"). And Yve Blake's recently workshopped musical *Fangirls*, supported by Australian Theatre for Young People, is a unique use of electronic dance music in a score the writer has described as "Beyonce concert meets Rave meets Church."

Although "Australia's commercial producers have generally avoided involvement with Australian musicals" (Johnston, 2004, 166), the recent, internationally successful musicals discussed at the beginning of this article were primarily developed by commercial producers like Global Creatures, or through collaborations between commercial producers and government-funded theatre companies. "The relative shortage and timidity in Australia of the kind of private investors on whose money both Broadway and off-Broadway have been built is a major part of the problem, obviously" (Fitzpatrick 23).

John Senczuk offered a solution in his Platform Paper:

We need a new, constituted national funding agency to be inaugurated—let's call it, the Australian Music Theatre Foundation (AMTF)—with a primary goal of providing financial support at crucial developmental stages of new 'book' musical or opera collaborations.

Another possible solution was offered by David Yazbeck, the acclaimed Broadway composer, in response to Eddie Perfect's tweet about Australian musical theatre in crisis (Perfect 9:34). Yazbeck proposed a "bank" funded by a ticketing surcharge that could only be accessed for developing Australian shows.

Finally, the issue of diversity must be included in this discussion, with a specific focus on how we can encourage a range of voices in our homegrown musical theatre works, encompassing Australia's broad multicultural heritage as well as achieving even gender representation in our casts and creative teams.

CONCLUSION

While we are proud to be celebrating some successes in Australian musical theatre, the question of how Australia will encourage the creation of original, exportable Australian musical theatre lingers. In 2001, Peter Fitzpatrick suggested that we need to be

proclaiming the value and significance of the form, the achievements that have been made sporadically and against the odds in Australia, the quality of some of the writing which is being done for it here and now, and the crisis in which it remains for the want of decent funding and serious attention.

(27)

Seventeen years later, we are still crying for these things and it is only through continued advocacy and academic discourse that we can start to address these issues. Perhaps Global Creatures' recent successes with *King Kong*, *Strictly Ballroom* and *Moulin Rouge* will pave the way for that company to develop more original Australian content like *Muriel's Wedding* or even an entirely original work. This could, then, lay down the challenge to other Australian producers so that we may start to enter our own golden age of Australian musical theatre.

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RESOURCES

Sheet music for songs from *The Hatpin* is available at <http://www.homegrownaus.com/millar-rutherford/>

Recordings and sheet music from *Prodigal* and *Once We Lived Here* are available through the writers' website: www.bryantandfrank.com

New Musicals Australia <https://newmusicalsaustralia.com.au/>

Home Grown <http://www.homegrownaus.com/>

Australian Musical Theatre Playlist: <https://aussietheatre.com.au/features/australian-musical-theatre-playlist-may-2018>

