

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Margaret Marshall on the quest for an Australian musical exhibition

This exhibition began with a simple question: *The Boy From Oz* is a household name, but what about other Australian musicals? Imported musicals may dominate our theatres, but for decades our composers and writers have created remarkable home grown shows. Raising the curtain on this little known side of our performing arts history was the mission and what evolved was an 18-month journey that revealed a host of stories.

As curators of the exhibition, Simon Plant and I faced several challenges. Not only did we need to identify and research Australian musicals, we also had to make sense of what we found. Our subject matter spanned 100 years and had to be confined to a relatively small exhibition space.

The breadth of the topic was made plain by Canberra researcher John Thomson. In May 2003, he reported to the Performing Arts Special Interest Group of Museums Australia on his continuing project to document Australian musicals. Attending this presentation in Perth, we learnt that hundreds of musicals have been conceived, written and produced by Australians, covering a vast range of subjects. (At last count, Thomson's tally had grown to 735!)

An exhibition clearly could not cover such a large number of productions. This led to our first major curatorial decision: to focus on musicals that tell uniquely Australian stories. While we acknowledge the contribution of productions by Australians that tackle other topics, this structure enabled us to explore how home grown musicals reflect our own culture.

Our second important choice in shaping the exhibition was to arrange productions thematically, rather than chronologically. This more complex approach revealed trends in Australian musical theatre and set up interesting comparisons between shows written decades apart. 'Gumnuts and Gold' looks at musicals inspired by the Australian landscape and gold rush, 'Wild Colonials' examines shows about convicts and bushrangers, while 'Larrikin Streak' highlights productions based on knockabout Aussie heroes. Musical about show business feature in 'Show and Tell' and 'Thanks for the Melody' brings together productions that have drawn on existing music. The contribution of Reg Livermore to the genre is honoured in 'Our Reg' and finally, expressions of contemporary life are explored in 'Reality Check'.

Productions were not always easy to categorise, often falling within more than one theme area. Much discussion and re-working was involved in devising the themes and reaching a solution to this puzzle. Similarly, the choice of which shows to include in the exhibition was not always straightforward. As in any exhibition, available material was a considerable factor. The notion of a 'successful' production was also problematic. Should this be based on box office earnings, the length of a show's run, critical acclaim or audience reception? And are these factors the only way of measuring the cultural value of a production?

Our answer has been to represent approximately 50 musicals that shaped the chosen themes. Highlighted within this group are eight shows that have made a significant impact on the Australian musical theatre scene: *Collits' Inn* (1932), *Reedy*

River (1953), *Lola Montez* (1958), *The Sentimental Bloke* (1961), *Ned Kelly* (1977), *Manning Clark's History of Australia – The Musical* (1988), *Bran Nue Dae* (1990) and *The Boy From Oz* (1998). The behind-the-scenes journey of these productions summarise the trials faced by many creators of home grown musicals.

In the end, *Making a Song and Dance* is one interpretation of the history of Australian musicals. It was developed through a research process that took us across Australia – both literally and via interstate contacts – and which demonstrates many of the challenges of studying performing arts history. Developing the exhibition from a concept, rather than starting with a specific collection of objects, ensured that much curatorial detective work was needed.

With no dedicated texts available about Australian musicals and only a limited number of published articles exploring the subject, our research drew largely on primary sources. Programs, reviews, annotated scripts and scores, photographs, correspondence, cast recordings, and the creators and performers themselves, conveyed information about particular productions, as well as the craft of making musicals. It was from these fragments that we developed our story.

The research material that we used is widely dispersed between libraries, museums, specialist performing arts collections, theatre companies and individuals. Much of this was not documented in detail and required patient searching that both uncovered gems and led to frustrating dead-ends. For some shows a wealth of material exists, while for others it proved difficult to locate suitable items. Photographs of on-stage action were often limited and images of the rehearsal process were particularly hard to find.

The Arts Centre's Performing Arts Collection, the nation's premier specialist collection documenting the performing arts in Australia, was our starting point and forms the basis of the exhibition. Here our research began with general program, poster and photographic collections and then moved onto specific collections relating to personalities and companies.

The Frank Thring Collection and Gladys Moncrieff Collection contain items relating to Varney Monk's *Collits' Inn*, including rare production photographs. The collection covering the career of choreographer Betty Pounder, revealed her work not only for J.C. Williamson's *The Sentimental Bloke*, but also for Peter Scriven's *Nex' Town* (1957) and the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT) version of *Lola Montez* (1958). Draft scripts for the gold rush musical *Strike It Rich* (1957) are among many in the Cid Ellwood Collection.

The prolific creative partnership of Don Battye and Peter Pinne is also represented in the Performing Arts Collection, including material on *All Saint's Day* (1960), *A Bunch of Ratbags* (1966) and *Caroline* (1971). Collections relating to the careers of Barry Humphries and Peter O'Shaughnessy also record their collaborative work on *The Bunyip and the Satellite* (1957) and *Mumba Jumba and the Bunyip* (1959).

Out of hundreds of productions staged by the mighty theatrical empire J.C. Williamson Theatres Ltd over almost a century, only two were Australian musicals: *Blue Mountain Melody* (1934) and *The Sentimental Bloke*. This disproportion was reflected in the relatively small amount of material on the subject located in the Performing Arts Collection's vast Williamson Archive. Within the New Theatre Collection, files on the frequently re-staged *Reedy River*, and the productions *Song*

of '54 (1954) and *Under the Coolibah Tree* (1956), show the contribution of this Left-wing theatre company in developing and promoting Australian musicals.

The National Library of Australia in Canberra proved to be a valuable resource for our topic, particularly the manuscript collection. The Papers of Varney Monk reveal details of the productions *Collits' Inn* and *The Cedar Tree* (1934), as well as Monk's frustration at the lack of opportunity for her work in Australia and overseas. Correspondence between the creators of *The Sentimental Bloke* and Australian producers, held in the Papers of Albert Arlen and Nancy Brown, record the struggle of over a decade to confirm a commercial staging of the musical. The Papers of Manning Clark and Don Watson respectively, provide insights into the complex creative process behind Manning Clark's *History of Australia – The Musical*.

The State Library of Victoria also holds material on *History of Australia* in files that form part of the Papers of John Timlin including live footage of the production. The extensive archives of the Australian Performing Group are also in this institution, including documents on *The Hills Family Show* (1975), *Back to Bourke Street* (1977) and *Mickey's Moomba* (1979). Detailed company collections are also held in the Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales, notably those relating to the Nimrod Theatre Company and the New Theatre, Sydney.

Selected paper-based loan items from the National Library of Australia and the State Library of New South Wales form part of the exhibition. Two original Tintookie puppets from *Little Fella Bindi* (1958) have been borrowed from the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney and colleagues at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre Museum in Brisbane have lent material representing Queensland Theatre Company productions of *A Rum Do!* (1970) and *Summer Rain* (1997).

Photographic archives, including those of Sydney Theatre Company, Melbourne Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company and the Herald and Weekly Times, were important sources for images. Sitting on the dusty floor of an old Masonic hall, now the Black Swan Theatre Company's (BSTC) headquarters, trawling through boxes of correspondence, newspaper cuttings, programs and photos, was a memorable beginning to our hands-on research.

We also made contact with several producers and publicity firms in order to locate items relating to recent or current musicals such as *Shout!* (2001) and *Eureka* (2004). In particular, Bruce Pollack supplied photos and footage of the New York production of *The Boy From Oz*, which supplemented material on the show brought back to Australia for us by Peter Pinne.

Sourcing audiovisual material was part of the research process. Our listening was guided by theatre historian Frank Van Straten who shared his extensive knowledge of Australian musicals, as well as his vast collection of original cast recordings. Footage of productions proved more difficult to locate and access, and often does not exist. Television versions of musicals and documentary reports provided a solution in a number of cases with the assistance of ScreenSound Australia and ABC TV Archives.

This exhibition has been enhanced by many individuals who generously lent material from their private collections. Treasures from Reg Livermore's personal archive arrived from the Blue Mountains in a wicker theatre trunk. Peter Benjamin in Sydney, lent documents relating to *Lola Montez*, including a costume design by

Hermia Boyd for the AETT production. Tony Sheldon and Tony Taylor also gathered material from Sydney, helping us to represent many productions. Peg Cherry lent a scrapbook documenting the late Wal Cherry's work with the Emerald Hill Theatre. Producer John Timlin provided further objects from *History of Australia*, including costume designs by Annie Marshall, and Tim Robertson also supplemented our research material on the production with papers retrieved from a tea chest in a country shearing shed.

Interviews with these and many other individuals were also central to our research. A rare visit to Australia by former Melbourne Theatre Company chief, John Sumner, provided an opportunity to record a conversation regarding the staging of *Lola Montez*. Nancye Hayes was articulate on the subject of Australian musicals, as was Geraldine Turner. Frank Ward, the larrikin Ginger Mick in *The Sentimental Bloke*, provided lively details about being in the show, and Robert Faggetter spoke of his experience touring in the BSTC production of *Bran Nue Dae*.

Discussions with the creators of Australian musicals, both past and present, were also important. Bruce George and Peter Clarke gave an insight into the broad context of musical theatre in Australia, and Peter Pinne provided both a personal and an international perspective. David King (Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts) and Terence Clarke (National Institute of Dramatic Art) discussed their own work and the importance of tertiary institutions as a training ground for new musical talent.

Contemporary writers John Romeril, Anthony Crowley, Dean Bryant and Mathew Frank, and Paul Keelan and Gary Young lent material to represent their productions and spoke of challenges that echo those of 50 years ago. While they embrace opportunities to demonstrate their work, such chances are scarce in proportion to the number of musicals being created by Australians.

During our work on the exhibition, several exciting developments in Australian musical theatre unfolded. As we watched the progress of Broadway's *The Boy From Oz* from afar, we observed with interest as Australians reacted to this much-loved show being modified for American audiences. Opportunities to attend local Australian musical performances also provided us with firsthand knowledge of the strength of our contemporary scene.

In August 2003, we were among the audience at the workshop version of Keelan and Young's *Sideshow Alley*. The 2004 annual Australia Day OzMade Musicals event staged by production group Magnormos, featured songs from new shows including *Joe Starts Again*, *All Het Up* and *Metro Street*. In June 2004, along with representatives of the performing arts community, we attended a reading of Bryant and Frank's new musical *Once We Lived Here*, commissioned by Playbox Theatre. As *Making a Song and Dance* opens, rehearsals for the musical *Eureka* begin in Melbourne.

The quest to create Australian musicals continues with force and this exhibition shows that there is much scope to make a song and dance about them. We hope that it may provide a starting point for others to undertake research in this field. The subject is vast and there are many more stories to be told.

