

John Senczuk's paper *The Time is Ripe for The Great Australian Musical* is a welcome opening to a much-needed debate on the development of new Australian musicals. The elucidation of the challenges Senczuk has personally faced in developing and presenting his own work will no doubt be familiar to many writers and composers. But in the spirit of joining Senczuk in finding a creative approach to solving an old problem we would like to expand on the 'Perth Solution' and open discussion around the notion of collaboration and leveraging our efforts. We would need, like Senczuk to draw from experience that is immediately relevant – and for us, it is necessarily predicated on what we've been doing at VCA.

While relatively new in the training sector, VCA Music Theatre has had a continuous commitment to the development of new work and the presentation of Australian music theatre writing. Of course, within the tertiary sector we have not been alone in this endeavour: WAAPA and Federation University in particular have also made inroads in the development of new musical theatre. Interestingly, archived discussion papers around developing a new music theatre course at the VCA (as far back as 2003) refer to the importance of providing creative development opportunities for new works alongside performer training. This aim has been vigorously pursued by all who have led music theatre programs at the VCA since (Tim Smith, Martin Croft and Margot Fenley). During our eleven year history we have presented works by Anthony Crowley (*Tribe* and *Superfreaks*, commissioned by VCA), and Eddie Perfect (*Up*), all of which we toured to regional Victoria, as well as *Summer Rain* by Nick Enright and Terence Clarke (2013). Creative development programs for new works were written into our bachelor course and in those programs we've supported the craft of new writing by Anthony Costanzo and Scott Hendry, Gary Young and Paul Keelan, Theresa Borg and Greg Mason, and David Young. In addition, we have had wonderful experiences with taking creative development through to full productions with James Millar and Peter Rutherford's *A Little Touch of Chaos* between 2012 and 2014 and of Hugo Chiarella and Robert Tripolino's *DreamSong* between 2009 and 2011.

Our commitment to this support for new musicals into the future is absolute. Later this month our third year students will engage in creative development of two projects selected from 45 submissions throughout Australia: *The New Lonely Planet* (Tobias Manderson-Galvin, Ben Ely and Liam Barton) and *Stealing Picasso* (Joel Paszkowski and Tom Reed). This is part of a new annual program to support not only the development of music theatre writing but the 'craft' itself (more on this program later).

Senczuk, in his paper, suggests that the tertiary sector has an important role to play and it is clear from the above that we at VCA agree. We also count it fortuitous that our creative development program sits within the BFA (Music Theatre) and this juxtaposition creates security of continuity as well as essential feedback and useful synergies between performers and writers. However, Senczuk's call for tertiary institutions to commission new works is problematic. The Commonwealth funding we have must be spent on training music theatre *performers*. Moreover, the production of new work from scratch requires writers and/or composers who demand market rates and therefore forces us to seek separate funding streams.

It is worth mentioning that development of both *DreamSong* and *A Little Touch of Chaos*, as mentioned above, were enabled by significant external financial support. *DreamSong* was done on the smell of an oily rag - but the oil and rag were provided by some wonderful private sponsors who believed in that particular project. *A Little Touch of Chaos*

was supported with a very generous grant from the Victorian State Government through Arts Victoria. Without extra funding neither project would have been able to receive the support we were so delighted to give them.

Reflecting over that process, the crucial element for both projects was the sequence of workshop periods that had *no public outcomes* hanging over them. Learning from that experience, we have shaped the annual creative developments so that if the creatives end the week with their works pulled to pieces on a sheaf of butcher's paper but with a clear sense of where the piece needs to go next, we would count that as an invaluable step towards the musical's 'ripening'. There is no showing at the end of the week. John Bailey's comment in this regard, as cited in Senczuk's article is accurate (pp28-29). We endanger the process of creative development with premature exposure of the new work. Having spent their week with us (which begins in February), we give the project creatives a further three months before we invite them to submit the next draft of their work. At this point we select one of those works to receive a rehearsed sung reading for the public four months after the second submission date. Overall, that's almost a year between when we call for submissions and the work-in-progress showing. Perhaps at this stage, the work might be ready to then submit for the NAMT Hayes Theatre program¹.

This brings us to a proposed alternative 'solution' – more a join-the-dots approach of what already exists than the instigation of a whole new program, whether in Perth or anywhere else. Is there not a logical pathway whereby work might undergo incubation in a tertiary setting (such as has been described in the VCA new works program), then progress to the NAMT program and on to a season at the Alex? This presents a more pragmatic and realistic trajectory of creative development to 'off-Broadway' scope presentation, before a work might then be pitched for a regional tour at Long Paddock or even picked up by a commercial presenter.

What is currently missing is the collaboration between us to help make such progressive steps a reality and moreover that might have us advocate for each other when a work is presented that isn't right for our program, but might be perfect in another that has a different scope. In working together we share the responsibility as a community, rather than load it all onto one organisation or region and watch it collapse under the weight of great expectation. We collaborate as organisations, just as the writer and composer (and perhaps dramaturg) are doing to make the work. Early portions of the 'staged development' model Senczuk proposes are in fact already in place at VCA and The Hayes Theatre and should continue to be supported or built upon as integral to the early development of new works. As these or other programs are further developed, the networking remains vital.

Partnering between a number of existing organisations with a demonstrated interest in the area makes good sense and linking them with each other even more so. Funding bodies tethered with training institutes brings practical benefits as well, as we have recently found with the Arts Victoria funded work on *A Little Touch of Chaos*. The Australia Council's past and current funding of new musical writing development through already-established organisations such as the Victorian Arts Centre and now Hayes Theatre demonstrates a similar practical wisdom.

¹ Unlike Carnegie 18 or even the new NAMT endeavour, our focus in this annual program is mainly on the process of writing rather than the stage-ready outcome.

Significantly less funding is required to offer a creative development with the graduating students of VCA's BFA (Music Theatre) because we have the space and actors already available as well as an existing administrative and research structure.

On the latter point, there is further good news from VCA in response to a further challenge Senczuk makes to the tertiary sector:

Encourage post-graduate enquiry into the many facets of the music theatre sector to provide a discourse on the art form. (p 40)

This indeed is an issue and one that we at VCA are currently exploring, for it goes hand in hand with the creative impulses of a practice-led research community in which VCA is firmly located. Our new MFA program for instance is designed for practising professionals who wish to expand their knowledge (such as the kind generated through development work) and upon this rich source material, develop new theoretical discourses, innovative practices, and perhaps further develop the form. The graduate program at large offers advanced training in writing for performance, directing and dramaturgy and indeed students of Masters students in both directing and dramaturgy will be observers of the creative developments in February.

Currently in Australia, aspiring music theatre writers and composers have no opportunity for bespoke training. As we explore this problem at VCA, we look at paradigms of learning similar to the ethos of careful, methodical and supported sequences such as those found in the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop responsible for having developed such shows as the *Book of Mormon*, *Avenue Q* and *Ragtime*. In the first year alone of that program, their creatives are immersed in the basics of writing for the musical theatre that eventuates in the creation of a ten-minute musical showcased at the conclusion of the year. It is not until the second year that time is devoted to attempting a full-book musical. That is two years worth of training to secure the basic nuts and bolts of the craft! Their industry mentorship reads like a Who's Who of the business: Lynn Ahrens, Richard Maltby, and Maury Yeston².

Developing relationships between existing, relatively modest programs, without injection of additional funds or a commitment to maintaining support into the future of course won't be enough. And we certainly don't refute the point that music theatre has been badly affected by falling between the scope of the Theatre and Music Boards of the Australia Council in the past. That said, the networking 'solution' is absolutely necessary. Moreover, it requires professional bodies acting as complementary forces. If we look internationally, since its inception in the early 1990's the Mercury Musicals Development³ program in the UK has developed industry schemes and workshops to educate and inculcate book-writing principles and general musical theatre development. They are part of the UK Arts Council National Portfolio Organisations (along with Perfect Pitch⁴ and

² http://www.bmi.com/genres/entry/musical_theatre_workshop_application

³ <http://mercurymusicals.com/>

⁴ <http://www.perfectpitchmusicals.com/>

Musical Theatre Network⁵) which have promoted mentorships, masterclasses, and placements for emerging writing teams and composers. Such models are worth looking into as we forge alliances and nurture our homegrown talent.

On the plus side, there are lots of reasons from an industry standpoint to think that the time is indeed ripe to take the development of new musical theatre writing to a new level of excellence. Currently in Melbourne we're seeing truly wonderful music theatre work in the independent theatre scene, produced by young producers like Glenn Ferguson (*Loving Repeating*), Joshua Robson (*Guilty Pleasures* –an original work with book by Robson, lyrics by Hugo Chiarella and music by Robert Tripolino) and Watch This (*Assassins* and *Pacific Overtures*). Clearly evident in these productions is a wealth of local talent in direction, musical direction, choreography, design and performance. The spirit of passionate collaboration that all of these producers and artists exemplify should be an example to organisations large and small about the benefits of bringing to the table what each of us can, especially in how we nurture and teach the craft of musical theatre writing. And sitting back and waiting for one funding body to resolve all of our needs in one fell swoop is a step backwards. Perhaps we might even find that one organisation partnered with another can offer an opportunity we couldn't alone.

So VCA Music Theatre would hereby declares an interest in partnership and alliance with companies, organisation and funding bodies that share a common interest in supporting new work. We cannot expect great Australian musicals to ripen unless we ourselves change the climate in order that such greatness may emerge.

If you are a writer or composer and would like to be notified when submissions open for our 2016 creative development program, please email

newwork-musictheatre@unimelb.edu.au

If you are an organisation who would like to discuss forging a partnership with VCA Music Theatre in developing new work, please email Margot Fenley at mfenley@unimelb.edu.au.

If you are interested in Music Theatre research activities at the VCA, please email Dr. Zachary Dunbar at zdunbar@unimelb.edu.au

Margot Fenley and Dr. Zachary Dunbar

Margot Fenley is Head of Music Theatre at the VCA. Trained as an actor, Margot has balanced her work as a professional actor with training actors for nearly 25 years, the last 10 of which have been in music theatre at the VCA. She is currently undertaking a Masters in the relationship between acting Shakespeare and acting for music theatre. Dr. Zachary Dunbar is a Senior Lecturer in Music Theatre at the VCA, working largely in the research and graduate studies area. Originally trained as a concert pianist, Zachary has worked extensively as a theatre director and MD and has scholarly publications in the areas of music theatre and Greek tragedy. Before moving to the VCA Zachary was Senior Lecturer at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, where he also taught and directed in the MA Acting program.

⁵ <http://www.musicaltheatrenetwork.com/>