The VCA force in new Australian music theatre

How can the Australian musical theatre industry better develop, produce and present new Australian musicals? The answer may be closer than you think.

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WELCOME PROFESSOR BARRY CONYNGHAM
DEAN, FACULTY OF THE VICTORIAN COLLEGE OF THE ARTS AND MELBOURNE CONSERVATORIUM OF MUSIC

It’s a pleasure to present this VCA & MCM update for our alumni and supporters. While this publication does not have room to update you on every one of our alumni successes, I can proudly say that their creative work has been celebrated at the Helpmann Awards, Australian Academy of Cinema Awards, Green Room Awards, Emmy Awards, Sundance, Berlin and Venice Film Festivals, through the Freedman Jazz Fellowship, Fulbright scholarships and the Rob Guest Endowment.

Our Southbank campus continues to be the hub of much new development. Over the next few years we hope to consolidate the full music program south of the river. As part of this move, plans for a new Conservatorium building are gaining momentum. We’re currently working on invigorating the music curriculum, ready to launch an enhanced Bachelor of Music for the 2016 student intake, enabling a more integrated approach to the current music offering at the VCA & MCM – you can read further information about this on page 3.

In late March, the newly upgraded Brian Brown Recording Studio was launched, named in honour of the brilliant Australian jazz musician Brian Brown AO who established the jazz and improvisation course at the VCA. The upgrades will allow for a bigger recording space, high-end technology and a range of new teaching, research and community engagement activities. By June the renovation of the Old Police Hospital, built in 1913-14 on the corner of St Kilda Rd and Southbank Blvd, will be completed as a new headquarters for Faculty professional staff including the Dean’s Office.

Grant Street Theatre has also undergone a radical revamp, redeveloped into a multi-purpose performance space with a bar – Lionel’s Lounge, thanks to the extraordinary generosity of Lionel Gell – playing host to a mix of local and student performance art, jazz and contemporary music.

Finally, we launched the VCA & MCM Channel online in February where we are excited to tell the stories behind the creative and academic endeavours of our staff, students and alumni. I invite you to contact us with your story and hope to see you at our performances, screenings and exhibitions throughout the year.
New Australian musical development was ignited as a topic of debate in February of this year when theatre director and academic John Senczuk released The Time is Ripe for the Great Australian Musical, a Currency House Platform Paper. The central proposition of Senczuk’s paper was the “Perth Solution” – to create a hub for the development and presentation of new musicals, destined for touring Australia and overseas markets, in Perth rather than the major cultural capitals Melbourne and Sydney.

But Margot Fenley (VCA’s Head of Music Theatre) and Dr Zachary Dunbar (VCA’s Senior Lecturer in Music Theatre), in their response to Senczuk’s paper, point out that while relatively new in the training sector, VCA Music Theatre has had a continuous commitment to the development and presentation of new and existing Australian music theatre writing.

During VCA’s 11-year Music Theatre history they have presented works by Anthony Crowley (Tribe (2004) and Superfreaks (2005)), Eddie Perfect’s Up (2006) and Summer Rain (2013) by Nick Enright and Terence Clarke.

By writing creative development of new works into the Bachelor of Fine Arts (Music Theatre) curriculum, the institution has supported new writing by Anthony Costanzo and Scott Hendry, David Young, Gary Young and Paul Keelan, Theresa Borg and Greg Mason and will continue to do so on an annual basis.

In 2011, the VCA steered Hugo Chiarella and Robert Tripolino’s DreamSong (2011) through creative development to full production, supported by the Ron and Margaret Dobell Foundation. Then last year, after two years of script and performance workshops, James Millar and Peter Rutherford’s A Little Touch of Chaos (2014) was presented as part of the New Australian Music Theatre Project, generously supported by the State Government through Creative Victoria.

Now let’s look to two of the VCA’s music theatre graduates who have been forging their own paths in this competitive industry. 24-year-old Phoebe Panaretos (Bachelor of Music Theatre, 2011) grew up in Sydney and went to Newtown School of Performing Arts. She was dancing in the ensemble of Singin’ in the Rain in 2013 when, after eight months of auditions, she was chosen for the role of Fran in Baz Luhrmann’s Strictly Ballroom: The Musical. Panaretos says she would have really floundered during the creative development process with Luhrmann without her VCA training, which taught her to harness her individuality.

“VCA is really good at stretching you out, making you flexible and opening your eyes to the different possibilities within your creative range,” Panaretos says.

After mixed reviews in Sydney, Strictly Ballroom was reduced by 30 minutes. After further workshops and changes, the Melbourne season is going well and it opens in Brisbane on September 10.

In discussion about the Australian industry, Panaretos says: “We don’t have the freedom, like they do in America, to change the cast, cut songs and try it out for a year off-Broadway.

“We need to remember that show such as Miss Saigon, Cats and Wicked didn’t start out on the West End or Broadway as the final product. Memory wasn’t even in Cats when it first opened! If we’re going to get to that level, producers need to be more flexible with time.”

On opening night of Strictly Ballroom, Panaretos remembers what production designer Catherine Martin said: “In Australia we just need to stop being scared; we need to be unafraid to embrace individuality on a large scale, on big stage.”

Panaretos agrees. “Who wants to see Grease again for the 150th time?! Wouldn’t you love to see Muriel’s Wedding on stage?”

Twenty-five-year-old Josh Robson (Bachelor of Music Theatre, 2011) is another VCA alum committed to new Australian musicals.
Currently performing in the ensemble of Les Miserables in Sydney, Robson was also part of the ensemble in the world premiere production of King Kong Live on Stage (2013). After co-producing a successful charity concert for Mission Australia with the ensemble cast by King Kong last year, Robson started a production company with Damien Bermingham called Blue Saint Productions.

They opened their first show, Guilty Pleasures starring Angelique Cassimatis, at Chapel off Chapel in early October, written by Josh Robson with original music by Hugo Chiarella (lyrics) and Robert Tripolino (music) of DreamSong fame. After a second run in Sydney there are plans for more seasons this year.

Last year Robson was also awarded the Rob Guest Endowment. He plans to travel across America with the funds, study in New York and gain writing inspiration for another production.

Back at the VCA in late February, the developments of new music theatre continued. Third year students were engaged in creative development with industry professionals of two projects selected from 45 submissions: The New Lonely Planet by Tobias Manderson-Galvin, Ben Ely and Liam Barton and Stealing Picasso by Joel Paszkowski and Tom Reed.

Margot Fenley believes we need to create a better musical theatre culture in Australia. One that links up existing programs, however small, and then address gaps in funding to support sustainable longevity for new writers, composers and presenters to fully develop and exercise their artistic potential.

Fenley sees the VCA as having a significant part to play in this network of organisations, for a range of reasons. “Significantly less funding is required to offer a creative development at the VCA because we have the space and actors already available as well as an existing administrative and research structure.”

It makes a lot of sense for funding bodies to be tethered to training institutes.

For the first time this year, students of the Master of Directing and Master of Dramaturgy are sitting in on developments, observing the fine art of getting a new musical off the ground.

“It’s all part of our master plan,” says Zachary Dunbar, “to establish a preeminent new musical theatre program in Australia whose focus is strictly on consolidating the collaborative training of book writing, lyric writing and composition, in a space where directors, writers and performers get stuck in, and the industry’s very best come in from the outside for lift off.”

It seems the time is ripe to embrace our own stories and make them sing.

Working towards an enhanced music curriculum

This year the music curriculum at the VCA & MCM is undergoing some exciting changes.

We are currently working towards invigorating the curriculum following a review from the leading US music education expert Professor Robert Cutietta, Dean at the University of California’s Thornton School of Music, to launch an enhanced Bachelor of Music (BMus) ready for the 2016 student intake.

The current BMus course, which offers a wide range of opportunities in performance, composition, musicology, ethnomusicology and music management, will be enhanced from 2016 to allow students more choice as they tailor their options and begin to specialise in their chosen area of interest. In addition, longer individual lessons and greater opportunities will be made available for elite performers so that they are even better prepared to embark on a career as a performing musician.

The majors of Jazz & Improvisation and Interactive Composition will be added within the umbrella of the existing Bachelor of Music as separate areas of specialisation. The focus of these two areas will continue to be on intensive studio-based and ensemble teaching, delivered by the same talented and committed staff. All of these developments will result in no changes to the core curriculum of the Jazz & Improvisation and Interactive Composition majors, previously offered within the Bachelor of Fine Arts.

Jazz & Improvisation and Interactive Composition will continue to be taught on our Southbank campus but over the next few years we hope to consolidate the full music program south of the river with plans for a new Conservatorium building gaining momentum.

This new mode of delivery will enable a more integrated and complimentary learning approach to the current music offering at the VCA & MCM, offering greater opportunities for cross-collaboration across all forms of music.

This bold new direction for music at the VCA & MCM will ensure the best model for delivering a world-class tertiary music program and an enhanced student experience at the University of Melbourne.
COMING EVENTS

More details about all VCA & MCM events:

vca-mcm.unimelb.edu.au/events

FRISK FESTIVAL OF NEW WORKS

A festival of new theatre works created by the VCA Acting Company 15 and presented as part of the Melbourne Fringe Festival.
24 – 27 September, various venues

42ND STREET

Based on the novel by Bradford Ropes and the subsequent 1933 film adaption, the VCA Music Theatre Company 15 presents the Tony Award-winning musical 42nd Street. Book by Michael Stewart and Mark Bramble, lyrics by Al Dubin and music by Harry Warren.
17 – 26 September, Space 28, 28 Dodds St, Southbank

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE ORCHESTRA

The University of Melbourne Orchestra presents Mahler’s Symphony 5, one of the most popular and seminal works in the orchestral repertoire. This is the Orchestra’s premiere performance of the fifth symphony under the baton of Principal Guest Conductor Fabian Russell.
28 August, Hamer Hall

DANCE ON

Featuring new works by Melbourne-based choreographers Lee Serle, Feng Feng Wang and undergraduate dance and production students.
11 – 18 June, Space 28

ART GRADUATE EXHIBITION

Graduating students from the School of Art present the highlights from their year of study – a feast of drawing, prints, photography, sculpture, painting, screen-based and digital media.
24 – 29 November, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 40 Dodds St, Southbank

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VCA & MCM CHANNEL

channel.vca-mcm.unimelb.edu.au

Reaching out to regional Victoria

BY SUSAN BIRD

In 2014, alumni from the VCA & MCM travelled to every corner of Victoria to present art projects in regional communities.

Supported by the Faculty’s Regional Engagement and Training Fund, which is an outcome of a partnership with Creative Victoria and Regional Arts Victoria, the initiative’s aim is to offer arts training and engagement projects to communities around Victoria.

Since the program began in 2012, 31 arts projects have been created by VCA & MCM alumni, staff and students for different communities with a total audience of over 13,000 Victorians.

Regional Arts Development Officer Lorraine Little works with alumni, communities and partners to develop the projects. She is proud of the project’s successes over the past three years.

“One of the very real and consistent outcomes of the program has been in the number of our students and alumni who have, as a direct result of participating in a regional project, been successful in attaining further work in regional communities. For the communities, it has been a huge fillip, to their arts development, to have such a vast array of artists from VCA & MCM living and working with them,” said Little.

Ruby Hughes, a 2014 graduate from the Bachelor of Fine Arts (Theatre Practice), performed her theatre piece Ophelia Sol in Natimuk in November as part of the FRISK Festival project.

“Ophelia Sol was received with such joy and enthusiasm from both the school groups and other audience members of the Wimmera region,” said Hughes. “I was particularly inspired by the artists living in Natimuk and how generous they were in sharing their town and work with us. They lead as an example of how one can live in a country town and still have a successful career in the arts. One of the direct benefits to me is that I’ve been invited to perform Ophelia Sol again at the 2015 Nati Frinj.”

Alumnus Fred Fowler (Master of Contemporary Art, 2012) travelled to the Mallee region in September as part of the TWIG Residency initiative which was developed in partnership with Regional Arts Victoria and delivered with the Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery.