



Carnegie 18: Musicals in the Raw.

Stage Whispers

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Arts Centre Melbourne doesn't just workshop new musicals. It puts them on. This year the venue is producing a three-week season of the most successful new work tried out at the venue last year.

It's part of the program called *Carnegie 18*. That's a medical term used to describe the stage of development when an embryo's inner-ear is formed.

This year's program takes place from February 1 to 7, showcasing three new Australian musicals.

The first new work is *The New Black*.

It's about a young indigenous lawyer cutting his own groove in a corporate law firm. It traverses soul, country, pop, jazz and sounds from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tradition.

Originally developed and conceived by Stephen Helper with the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts, this is a story-based music theatre work boasting an entirely original score by Marcus Cowora. Co-written by Tony Briggs (*The Sapphires*).

Next is a satirical cabaret called *Cautionary Tales for Children* by Mark Jones and Claudia O'Doherty, based on the verse by Hilaire Belloc.

This mock moralistic show-within-a-show is told by a dysfunctional family troupe of four, aided by their time-machine.

Director Chris Cohn explained the inspiration for *Cautionary Tales for Children*.

"I was at my best friend's house, and found it on his parent's bookshelf when I was about 9 (1982ish). I loved the poems, and it has taken me 30 years to turn it into a show.

How has the musical developed through the Carnegie 18 workshop?

"A large focus has been on the musical arrangements - Mark has been working hard with the performers to shape the music. Claudia has focussed on sharpening the characters, with the aid of the performers, and working in response to the music. I have been working mostly as a dramaturg; the actual "directing" of actors on the stage will be the last piece of the puzzle and may still be quite ragged, as we are really keen on working the script and music, more than the staging."



What significant change has been made during the Carnegie 18 period?

“We have gone from having very simple arrangements to much more complex. There may now be a moment of Celine Dion in there somewhere.”

What are you hoping to learn from the workshop performances?

“I really want to find out if the language of the poems is clear and that the meta-story of the travelling troupe is working well as a way of telling the stories. I am also interested to see how children of different ages respond to the material.”

Also being tried out is *Dreamsong*. It’s described as an irreverent musical satire of faith, fortune and the mega-church. The style is Christian pop and American power ballads with a touch of gospel, Yiddish folk and the occasional Broadway-styled show tune.

Dreamsong has a book and lyrics by Hugo Chiarella with music by long-time collaborator Robert Tripolino.

Writer Hugo Chiarelli’s found his inspiration for *Dreamsong* while playing the Rabbi's Son in *Fiddler on The Roof*.

“I had a line in it that was ‘Rabbi we have been waiting for the Messiah all our lives. Wouldn't this be a good time for him to come?’ I started thinking, if 'the Messiah' was to return, would the evangelical, prosperity preaching churches of today really be able to identify with the unadorned humility of his teachings? Would he even be able to live up to the expectations that are set around him? Those questions are still at the heart of this show. It explores the way the church cultivates desire in a way that is completely out of step with the message at the root of their beliefs.”

What was the development process of the Dreamsong prior to Carnegie 18?

“I first started writing the show about five years ago. At that stage I was writing book, music and lyrics by myself. I'd put it to one side because I had grown frustrated with my inability to make the music sound the way I wanted it to sound in my head. Then, at the start of 2010 I started writing lyrics for a uni friend of mine, Robert Tripolino, who was quite a gifted songwriter. Rob could write music that sounded like what I wanted in my head. So I asked him to come on board and compose the score for the show. We did a staged reading with some of our fellow Music Theatre students at VCA and our course coordinators asked if we could perform the show as one of our 2011 graduating productions. Carnegie 18 seemed like the perfect opportunity to transition the show from an educational context to a professional one. It also gives us the chance to iron out the aspects of the show that we didn't get right the first time.”

How have you seen the piece develop through the Carnegie 18 workshop?

“The process of working with professional actors is invaluable. Every actor treats their



character as the hero of the story. It really helps identify where there are gaps in the trajectory of each character, or where we've taken shortcuts in the storytelling that need to be fleshed out. Sometimes at the writing desk you can be so busy looking at the whole canvas, you don't notice there's a figure in the corner that hasn't been painted properly.

"We also had to expand the show out a lot for our VCA season to accommodate a cast of thirty. Obviously this makes it prohibitively expensive to produce. A big part of what we wanted to achieve through Carnegie 18 was making the show work for a smaller cast."

Musical theatre development programs can be a dead end. After the try-out the question is where to next?

But not in this instance. In April 2012, Arts Centre Melbourne is producing a season of the most successful production from its first series in 2011.

That was *Contact!* – a full length suburban netball opera.

For the venue, it fills a theatre during a dark period and links in with the Melbourne Comedy Festival.

The lucky writer is Angus Grant. He's scored a three week season in the Fairfax Theatre (300 seats) in April and a tour to regional venues.

"It is quite extra-ordinary that our show sold out (last year). It ticks all the right boxes," he said.

He presented the opera as a completed score and outshone other submissions from musicals.

"The cast has eight sopranos and one tenor. Everything moves at a cracking pace."

The central character is the tyrannical coach called Bev. She's played by a meaty Wagnerian opera singer.

"They lose a player and there is all sorts of gossip that perhaps it was due to pregnancy. A new one is brought in, who exposes the lies on which the team is built. Everyone finds their voice, especially the downtrodden children of the coach."

In Netball players are restricted to a certain part of the court and this creates tensions.

"There is lot of frustration about who gets to play more glamorous positions. Women are forced into roles they don't want to do...which is a metaphor for life."

If the second season proves a success Angus Grant is hopeful that *Contact!* will tour elsewhere, giving him and Arts Centre Melbourne something to crow about.