

# WHAT A SONG & DANCE

WORDS MITCH BROOK • PHOTOS LAUREN BAMFORD

A WICKED WITCH, THE STORMING OF THE BARRICADE, "GREASED LIGHTNING", THE KING OF THE JUNGLE AND THE BABY IN THE CORNER – THEY'RE ALL FAIR GAME IN THE MUSICAL THEATRE BOOM. AS THE CURTAIN GOES UP ON A SLEW OF FRESH OPENINGS THIS MONTH, WE LOOK INTO THE METICULOUS WORK THAT GOES INTO EACH PRODUCTION



**ALL FOR ONE**  
Costumes, actors,  
set designers and  
musicians are all  
essential components  
of musical theatre

LOOKING  
THE PART

*Les Misérables* is full of lavish costumes. The cast, including Euan Dodge, occasionally needs assistance

THEY COST MILLIONS OF DOLLARS, INVOLVE A WORKFORCE OF HUNDREDS AND CAN TAKE MANY YEARS TO PRODUCE.

MUSICAL THEATRE PRODUCTIONS could be considered the live-performance equivalent of Hollywood movies – and Australians love them.

“There’s a huge range of stuff,” says Neil Rutherford, resident director of *The King and I*, opening in Sydney this month. “At the moment you’ve got *Wicked*, a contemporary production; *Les Misérables*, a new production of an old musical; *The King and I*, which is over 60 years old; and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which is off the scale in terms of those other three.”

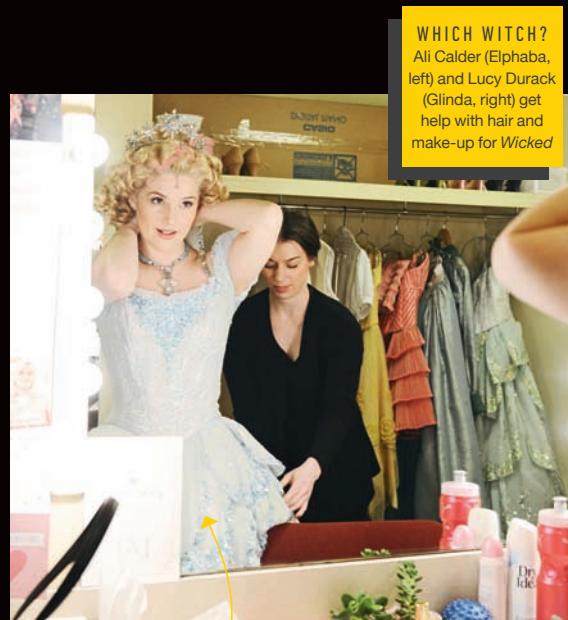
You only need to consider the number of current or upcoming productions to get an idea of musical theatre’s popularity: there’s also *The Lion King*, *Strictly Ballroom*, *Grease* and upcoming productions of *Once* and *Dirty Dancing*. “You can go for something that’s light and fluffy with huge energy, like *Grease*, or you can go with a dramatic, heartfelt story,” says Rutherford. “That’s the joy of musicals – they can be so diverse.”

Beyond purchasing a ticket and turning up to the venue, theatregoers

in Australia might not realise what goes into producing musicals such as these, a process that starts years in advance. John Frost is one of Australia’s most significant producers, with two Tony awards to his name and producing credits on at least six current major shows. For him, the process of staging a musical could start years before a production opens, when he takes stock of the public and political sentiment in Australia – factors which affect the financial viability of stage shows.



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WHICH WITCH?  
Ali Calder (Elphaba, left) and Lucy Durack (Glinda, right) get help with hair and make-up for *Wicked*

"I decide on a particular musical depending on its qualities, and where I think the public spending dollar will be in a couple of years' time," says Frost. "I then go and raise the money, which can fall into millions of dollars... All the money is private money, and I'm responsible for that."

"*Wicked* cost \$12.5 million to get the show up – all the rehearsals, advertising – and costs up to \$650,000 a week just to run," says Frost. Musicals such as *Grease*, *Rocky Horror* and the upcoming *Once* cost around \$3.5 million. The shows need to sell enough tickets to cover the weekly running costs, and pay back the initial investment in order to make a profit. Having control of the financial side grants the producer significant input

**"WICKED COSTS UP TO \$650,000 A WEEK JUST TO RUN"**

### VOCAL HERO

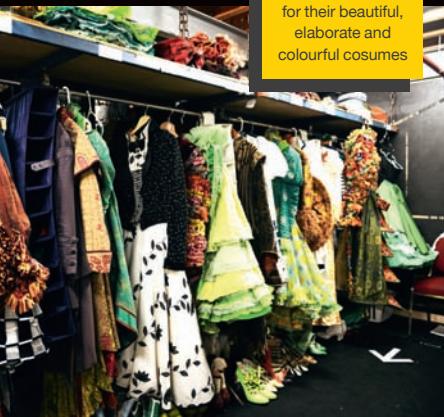
To keep her voice at its best, Lucy Durack avoids having too much of certain foods and drinks such as caffeine and alcohol. "You also can't have anything too spicy or anything with too much dairy that will make you phlegmy," she says. "I tend to eat fairly bland things."

into the choice of show and casting decisions. "I suppose I'm top of the tree and top of the business line in that respect," says Frost.

More direct responsibility for the content of musical theatre productions lies with the creative team, an expansive group including the director, musical director, cast and crew, orchestra, dancers, costume and make-up experts. "The director has the overall artistic vision of the production," says Rutherford. "You're looking at a whole range of things: working with designers, actors, the musical staff. It's a central artistic position and you liaise with everybody, but your vision of what you see the production as being is absolutely crucial to making it a success."



Working closely with the director is the musical director, who "maintains the standard and commitment of the orchestra and cast during the production," says Michael Casey, who holds that post for *The King and I*. "Most music directors follow on from the initial signature of the composer, and I've been lucky enough to" ➤



**COSTUME PARTY**  
*Wicked* and *The King and I* are renowned for their beautiful, elaborate and colourful costumes



RAISE THE CURTAIN

## "THE MUSICAL DIRECTOR'S ROLE REALLY IS BEING A NAVIGATOR"

meet and know many of them... The role really is being a navigator."

If the director is the captain of the ship, and the musical director the navigator, then the cast, crew and orchestra all make up the deck staff in a production – a team that's chosen after an often rigorous audition process. "With *Legally Blonde* the musical, which I did last year, I auditioned over about 10 months," says Lucy Durack, who's now playing Glinda in *Wicked*. "I did a few auditions, then a few months later I'd do more auditions – and then more again. Finally they flew me across to London to audition for the main director for *Legally Blonde* worldwide."

Next comes the hard work: staging and rehearsing the show. "It's normally about a six-week schedule that we have in the studio putting the show together," says Ryan Sheppard, who has been dance captain for *Wicked*

since it opened here in 2008. "Because *Wicked* is such a dance-heavy show, a lot of that time is spent putting on the big musical numbers. We'll normally do 10am to 6pm, six days a week putting these numbers together, rehearsing them over and over again."

For the cast, it's a balance between the talents of music, acting and dance. Says Sheppard: "It's what we call a triple-threat performer – a singer-dancer-actor. I don't think there's one thing that is the most important aspect of creating a musical theatre show."

Offstage, there's also the preparation of the set, costumes, props, sound and lighting, plus marketing and advertising – then the premiere. The initial outlay of capital starts to make sense when all these aspects are considered. After the premiere, the long run of shows starts, with eight shows a week being the norm for most productions. ➤



**Strictly Ballroom** is now showing in Sydney at the Lyric; [strictlyballroomthemusical.com](http://strictlyballroomthemusical.com)

• **Les Misérables** is now showing in Melbourne at Her Majesty's Theatre; [lesmis.com.au](http://lesmis.com.au)

• **Grease** opens in Hobart on 5 Sep at Derwent Entertainment Centre; [greaseistheword.com.au](http://greaseistheword.com.au)

• **The King and I** opens in Sydney on 7 Sep at Joan Sutherland Theatre; [thekingandimusical.com.au](http://thekingandimusical.com.au)

• **Wicked** opens in Sydney on 20 Sep at the Capitol Theatre; [wickedthemusical.com.au](http://wickedthemusical.com.au)

• **The Lion King** opens in Brisbane on 21 Sep at the Lyric Theatre, QPAC; [lionking.com.au](http://lionking.com.au)

• **Dirty Dancing** opens in Sydney on 28 Nov at the Lyric; [dirtydancingaustralia.com](http://dirtydancingaustralia.com)

• **Once** opens in Melbourne on 1 Oct at the Princess Theatre; [oncemusical.com.au](http://oncemusical.com.au)

### ON THE ROAD

"Everyone's always excited to go on tour and explore new places," says Ryan Sheppard. "We all live in the same building and work together. You literally could walk next door and tap on someone's door from work. That's always very daunting for me."

WICKED WIGS

The elaborate hairpieces in the show are a key part of the production's onstage aesthetic



"It is fairly physically relentless," says Durack. "Once you're on, if you have a lot to do in a show, it's a rollercoaster that you just can't get off. You have to commit to it. I give myself these quite strict pep talks, like, 'Come on, you can do this!'"

For the producer, it all comes down to whether or not the show sells tickets. "It's the public," says Frost. "At the end of the day, they're the judges who say if [a show] is a success or not." Fortunately the talent pool in Australia is of a calibre that allows for high-quality productions – something acknowledged by Frost. "What we



## OUR FAVOURITES

"In 1980 I did a production of *Evita*... It was an absolute gem, and my first foray into musical theatre in a really large way. I love that production and it's very close to my heart."

Peter Casey, musical director

"Probably *West Side Story*. It has everything – the amazing score, the story, a sense of drama – it's fun but heartbreaking.

I like a bit of tragedy as well."

Neil Rutherford, director

"*The King and I*, which won me a major Tony award. The other one is, I would say, a musical I did many years ago called *The Secret Garden*, a show I would love to revive in the future."

John Frost, producer

## 歌と踊りの舞台裏

数百万ドルの費用をかけて作られているミュージカルは、まさにハリウッド映画のいわばライブパフォーマンスのようである。

オーストラリアのプロデューサー、ジョン・フロスト氏は、演出は製作を公表する何年も前から始めると言う。演目を決め、そこから公共支出金額を計算し、それから資金調達をすると数百万ドルになることも。ちなみに、『ウィケッド』では125万ドル、リハーサルや宣伝が週に6万5千ドルといった具合だ。『ロッキー・ホラー』や最新作『ワンス』の製作費は350万ドルにもなるのだから、プロデューサーにとっては売れるか売れないかが問題。1日の終わりに成功したかどうかが決まるからだ。また、クリエイティブチームにはもっと直接的な責任があると、『王様と私』のディレクターであるラザフォード氏は言う。ディレクターは作品の全体像を持っている。そして、デザイナーや音楽担当者と見ていくんだ。で、製作全体にわたるオーケストラの基本と責任を維持し役者を選んでいるのが音楽担当ディレクター。だから、我々は共に出演する役者であり、仕事仲間であり、オーケストラもあるのだ。

また、制作行程については、『ウィケッド』でグリンダを演じているルーシー・デュラックが話してくれた。「昨年の『キューティー・ブランド』ではオーディションに10か月。それから6週間かけて各パートごとに取り掛かるの。週に6日間、朝10時～18時まで何度もリハーサルをするのよ」。舞台裏のセット・衣装・小道具・マーケティングや宣伝があって初公演、それから1週間に8回上演する長期公演となる。「ショーはいったん始まったらやるべきことがたくさんあって、まるで降りられないジェットコースターね。でもそれが私たちの使命なのよ」

ミュージカルは誰にでも分かる音楽とストーリー、そしてパフォーマー達が結びついて作られる。ブロードウェイやウエストエンドまで行かずとも、クオリティの高い作品がここにあるのだ。

## “IF YOU HAVE A LOT TO DO IN A SHOW... YOU HAVE TO COMMIT TO IT”

have in our country is a great work ethic and an enormous amount of talented people," he says.

The productions combine recognisable music – in songs such as 'Do You Hear the People Sing?', 'Defying Gravity' and 'Getting to Know You' – with compelling stories, and gifted artists to rival those in London and New York. Put together, it's a formula that's drawing audiences in the thousands. Why go to Broadway or the West End when Australia's cities have the high-quality productions theatregoers long for? \*

### Travel info ↓



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