

# HOW MY FULBRIGHT TOOK ME TO BROADWAY AND HELPED ME DISCOVER THE DREAM AND DILEMMA OF CREATING NEW MUSICALS

CARMEL DEAN

## ABSTRACT

Without the Fulbright experience that brought me from Australia to New York, I would never have been able to step inside the traditionally American artform of the new musical. Yet is Broadway the only place that new musicals can succeed? Or can Australian-made musicals make their mark, not only on its home turf, but on an international platform? It was Fulbright's unique focus on the international exchange of ideas that helped me realize that the bridge between Broadway and Australia can (and should) go both ways.

**Keywords:** Broadway • musicals • electricity • theater • new musicals



Is Broadway the only place new musicals can succeed? Or can Australian-made musicals make their mark, not only on its home turf, but on an international platform? After all, most of the big commercial musicals produced in Australia originated in New York. If Australians contribute widely to other global industries such as movies and sports, and we are universally loved for our culture, sense of humor, and unique stories—can the bridge between Broadway and Australia go two ways?

Like so many other young self-professed theater nerds, I always dreamt of heading to New York and basking in the bright lights of Broadway. Growing up in Perth, Western Australia, however, I couldn't have been any further away from that dream—and yet as a young classically trained pianist “gone rogue,” I amassed a collection of Broadway cast albums and video recordings for the ages, making the distance feel almost non-existent. Perth also had plenty of opportunities for us homegrown thespians to immerse ourselves in theater life. As a budding musical director (and wannabe actor), I threw myself into community theater. I fell in love over and over again with shows such as *West Side Story*, *The Sound of Music*, *Chicago*, *Godspell*, and other classics, as well as discovering lesser-known shows, such as *Assassins* and *Merrily We Roll Along* by my now-favorite musical theater writer, Stephen Sondheim.

*Fulbright's unique focus on the international exchange of ideas . . . helped shape my understanding that the bridge between Broadway and Australia can (and should) go both ways*

My passion for the artform took me to one of Australia's most respected musical theater training grounds, which just happened to also be in Perth, WAAPA (the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts). I dropped the acting and honed in on what I was good at, musical direction (accompanying singers, arranging music, and conducting musicians). Upon graduation in 1999, I was lucky enough to be awarded a Fulbright scholarship. Naturally, I headed to The Big Apple, biting off anything I could chew that was related to musical theater: studying the art form; the history; seeing as many shows as I could afford; and even meeting several of my idols. In 2003 I received a Master's in Musical Theater Writing from New York University, but my education in the business was actually just beginning.

### SHOW BUSINESS

What dawned on me in those early years in New York was that Broadway wasn't just a destination for song and dance fanatics—it is a billion-dollar industry. It is a beacon of Times Square, a massive and vital part of New York City tourism. For any business to thrive, it needs to be constantly growing and evolving. I mean, there are only so many times one can see *The Phantom of the Opera* or *The Lion King*, right? Venturing in and out of grungy rehearsal studios, tiny downtown theaters, and even writers' living rooms, I began to witness a system in which new musicals are constantly being tested out. Although there is no blueprint for creating a hit, the goal for each seedling of a show is still the same—to bloom into a successful Broadway production and gain long-lasting and global recognition, just as the classics I'd grown up with back home.

Whilst I'd found myself in the ultimate labor and delivery ward of the new musical, the thing was, for the amount of joy and exhilaration that experiencing a musical, old OR new can bring, what I didn't realize was that creating new musicals is exponentially difficult. There is no guarantee that a new musical will ever make it to a full production, let alone commercially or critically succeed. No one has ever figured out the formula for creating a hit show. On average, 80% of producers and investors will not recoup their investment in a Broadway show. In addition to the financial risks, it is a long, arduous process that can take anywhere from two to ten years. This time is spent writing the book (the dialogue spoken by the actors), the score (music and lyrics), and several "29-hour readings" (29 hours being the maximum time actors can be employed for that step in the process, per a long-standing contract between Actors Equity and The Broadway League of Producers) where the book is read and the songs sung at music stands. Then there will be several multi-week choreography/staging workshops where the material is "put on its feet," but still in a rehearsal studio. And by the way, these steps are never back-to-back. There will oftentimes be many months between them whilst the creators work on rewrites (and, being freelance artists, they often have other shows they are working on and other schedules to juggle). Eventually

if there is enough belief in the trajectory of the show (i.e., producers with money), there will be an “out-of-town” production where it is tested for the first time in a theater in front of an audience with all the production elements (sets, costumes, musicians, etc.). During the months and years leading up to this moment, millions of dollars need to be raised (Broadway musicals, on average, cost \$10-20 million to produce). Then, and only then, if press reviews and word-of-mouth have been positive, the producers will vie for one of the forty-one theaters on Broadway. If the theater gods are smiling, the show will “come in” to New York. Then, well, you cross your fingers and hope that you are in the 20% of shows which recoup their overhead costs and enjoy a successful Broadway run.

Of course, this is the business side of show business, and that doesn't diminish the thrill of creating a new Broadway show. To be a part of an original musical, especially if it records a cast album, wins Tony Awards, and gains industry hype, is incredibly satisfying. You become part of Broadway history. Somewhere in a city on the other side of the world, a young person is poring over the liner notes of a cast album or watching YouTube clips of a Broadway show. Even more exciting, if the show is successful in New York, it goes on to have a life elsewhere, via a national tour, a West End production and other international productions, and potential licensure of the book and score to regional theaters, community groups and schools. I was incredibly lucky that the first Broadway show I was a part of followed this trajectory. It was the moment I first felt my pre-and post-Fulbright worlds collide.

## ON BROADWAY

After graduating from NYU, I was hired by one of my mentors, William Finn, the legendary composer/lyricist, to be the Vocal Arranger and Associate Conductor of his newest work, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Ironically, given the above statistics about new shows taking seemingly forever to come to life, “*Spelling Bee*” had one of the fastest and most successful trajectories in recent Broadway history, and one that my now 20-year career hasn't come close to again. *Spelling Bee* had a short (two-year) development period, a smooth out-of-town tryout, and a sold-out season at an Off-Broadway theater. After garnering rave reviews, it transferred to Broadway in 2005, where it ran for almost three years. It truly was a Broadway success story.

*Spelling Bee*'s rise to distinction made theater owners in Australia (and elsewhere) take note. In 2006 I was invited to be the Musical Advisor for the joint Melbourne and Sydney Theater Companies' own productions of *Spelling Bee*. In this role I was able to facilitate William Finn's visit to Melbourne, where he worked with the director, choreographer, and cast, affording a valuable connection between Australian and New York creatives. The MTC and STC productions went on to receive glowing reviews by the Australian press (and as a side note, it was thrilling to hear my vocal arrangements for a Broadway musical performed on my home turf!). Although the name of the show may

not have the same recognition as other musicals of the early 2000s, such as *Wicked*, *Avenue Q*, or *The Book of Mormon*, *Spelling Bee* has proven its place in the canon. It is still one of the most produced musicals in high schools and regional/community theaters around the world. I often receive requests to talk to young theater artists who are doing their own version of the show and have been able to facilitate virtual meetings with William Finn and the other American creatives with students at my alma mater, WAAPA. Unlike when I was studying at WAAPA, thanks to technology, connecting with and learning directly from a Broadway professional isn't the impossible dream that it once was.

Recently—mid pandemic, sandwiched in between industry shutdowns and quarantines—I returned to the Sydney Theater Company to Music Direct their production of another American musical, *Fun Home*. I had not been involved in the Broadway production, but I saw it in 2015 and admired it greatly. As we embarked on rehearsals for the Sydney production, I called the show's writers, Jeanine Tesori and Lisa Kron (who incidentally were the first female writing team to win a Tony Award for Best Score and with whom I had crossed paths on other projects) and organized a virtual meeting between them and the Australian cast. Again, being able to discuss the evolution of the show with the people who created it on the other side of the world was an invaluable resource to the Australian company.

I bounced back and forth between Australia and America (I became a dual citizen in 2018) while my New York-based career within this niche market evolved. Yet, I've found myself asking the same question: Knowing what we know about how new musicals are created, is New York the only place that can support and sustain the creation of new work, or can it happen elsewhere?

## **BUILDING BRIDGES**

There is no question that Australia produces great talent. Just look at Tim Minchin (composer of *Matilda* and *Groundhog Day*, which both enjoyed Broadway runs) and Eddie Perfect (composer of *King Kong* and *Beetlejuice*, the latter of which is still running in NYC). These are just two examples of the many talented theater creators I know Down Under. Eddie and Tim's Broadway musicals; however, were not developed in Australia. I can count on one hand the number of shows which have begun in Australia and transferred to The Great White Way. One example is *The Boy From Oz*, a musical about Australian and international pop icon Peter Allen, which started in Australia and ran on Broadway for a year (and starred Australian-born Hollywood darling, Hugh Jackman). Another example is the musical adaptation of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, which launched in Australia and went on to enjoy a 16-month Broadway run, as well as subsequent tours. *King Kong* was first produced in Australia, then after further development in New York, transferred to Broadway.

In addition to the myriad challenges of making new musicals anywhere in the world, Australia has its own hurdles to overcome. One of its biggest is that theater is just not an inherent part of Australian culture. Tourists don't come to Australia to see musicals; they come to experience our landscapes and landmarks. Most Australians spend their free time enjoying the outdoors, watching, or playing sports, and drinking (it's one of our national pastimes). Thus, the audience pool at home is much smaller. Which of course then affects the amount of funding the industry receives. The Liberal (conservative) Australian government slashed funding to the Arts sector throughout its last decade of governing. Thankfully with a recent change to Labor government, the Arts will be more supported in the future—but it is still a struggle, as theater is not often a priority. Interestingly, a major difference between Australian and American funding is that American theater is often funded by private donors and organizations, whereas the majority of theater companies in Australia are funded by the local and federal governments.

I'm pleased to report that there is at least one Australian show in the works eyeing a Broadway run. *Muriel's Wedding*, a stage adaptation of the hit Australian movie, which was originally produced by the Sydney Theater Company. They recently held a developmental workshop in NYC (Its co-producer is Global Creatures, an Australian production company that also helmed *King Kong*, and more recently the Tony Award-winning musical *Moulin Rouge*, which is currently enjoying a successful run on both Broadway and in Australia). There is the smaller-scale Australian musical *Fangirls*, a sold-out and much-extended hit that played in both Sydney and Melbourne, which potentially could make it big in America if it lands in the lap of the right producers. *Fangirls* was originally produced by the Sydney theater company, Belvoir St, which alongside fellow Sydney company, The Hayes, frequently champions and encourages new Australian work.

One additional upcoming project being developed in Australia is a highly ambitious, large-scale new musical depicting a uniquely Australian story using the music of an Australian rock icon (I am not permitted to reveal more details just yet). It is being shepherded by The Michael Cassel Group, a Sydney-based production company, who as well as co-producing *Hamilton* in Australia, also co-produced the recent Broadway productions *MJ* and the upcoming *Almost Famous*. I am honored to have been given the position of Music Supervisor and Arranger for this project, and although I have had many opportunities over the last twenty years to use the skills I learned and honed in the US in Australia, this is the first time I've been a part of creating a truly home-grown original Australian musical from the ground up—and I couldn't be more thrilled about it.

Without my Fulbright experience in New York, I would never have been able to step inside the world of new musicals to study this unique artform. It was an opportunity that has shaped my entire adult life and continues to do so. Through straddling both countries' industries, I hope to continue bridging

the gap between Broadway and Australia for my colleagues and other young Australian artists, because as I've come to learn, theater people are some of the most resilient and driven people in the world, no matter where they are practicing their craft. They deserve to have their voices heard. Yes, if we're lucky, we can travel to places like New York to see our favorite musicals. But our homelands are also teeming with rich, complex untold stories. By nurturing and producing our own theater, we're not only preserving these stories, but demonstrating how truly universal this artform is.

## NOTES

1. *The Broadway League*. The national trade association for the commercial theater industry. The League serves as the central hub for statistical information about Broadway theater production in North America. <https://www.broadwayleague.com/home/>
2. *Playbill*. Provides an overview of current happenings in the American theater industry. <https://www.playbill.com>
3. *Aussie Theater*. Provides an overview of current happenings in the Australian theater industry. <https://www.aussietheater.com.au>
4. *Well-Behaved Women* is a collection of story-songs sung from the imagined perspectives of some of history's most impactful female trailblazers. [www.wellbehavedwomenmusical.com](http://www.wellbehavedwomenmusical.com)



The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee with  
“guest speller” Julie Andrews

---

## BIOGRAPHY

Carmel Dean was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in 2000, receiving her master's in Musical Theater Writing from New York University in 2003. She is an Australian-born composer/lyricist, musical director, and arranger, whose works spans many facets of the music and theater

industries. Carmel's Broadway credits include *If/Then* (starring Idina Menzel), *American Idiot*, *Hands on a Hardbody*, and *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. She is the Musical Supervisor/Arranger/Co-Orchestrator of the upcoming Broadway musical *The Notebook* (with a score by Ingrid Michaelson). Her compositional debut, *Renascence*, was produced Off-Broadway by the acclaimed theater company Transport Group, and subsequently won the 2018 Off-Broadway Alliance Award for Best New Musical. Her song cycle *Well-Behaved Women* premiered at Joe's Pub in January 2020 to sold-out performances, and received rave reviews for its production in Sydney, Australia. She has been commissioned to write the new musical *Maiden Voyage* with Mindi Dickstein (Broadway's *Little Women*) for New Works Provincetown. Other credits include Music Direction for *Fun Home* at Sydney Theater Company, where she recently received the Sydney Theater Critics Award for Best Musical Direction. Additional roles include Vocal Arranger for jam-band Phish and Trey Anastasio (Madison Square Garden; Las Vegas; Chicago's Wrigley Field); performer with Green Day on the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards; and former musical director for Broadway legend Chita Rivera. Carmel holds an MFA from New York University's Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program, is a current member of the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Workshop, is a member the Dramatists Guild of America Music Committee, and sits on the Advisory Board for Maestra Music, a non-profit formed to support and connect women and non-binary musicians in the musical theater industry. She can be contacted at: [carmiedean@mac.com](mailto:carmiedean@mac.com)

---