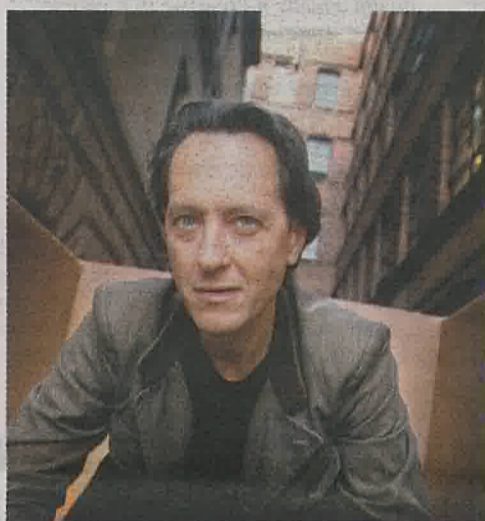


STARS IN THEIR



All singing, all dancing: Clockwise from main picture, Shane Jacobson, left, with Garry McDonald and Wayne Scott Kermond in *Guys and Dolls*; first day of rehearsal for the cast of *Wicked*; former *Australian Idol* contestant Rob Mills; charmer Richard E. Grant

IT'S boom time for musicals. New shows *Wicked* and *Billy Elliot*, new versions of old favourites *The Rocky Horror Show* and *Guys and Dolls*, and revivals of past hits such as *The Phantom of the Opera* will be joined next year by the return of *Chicago* and the Australian premiere of the Frankie Valli musical *Jersey Boys*.

Add to that the success of local hits *Priscilla* (about to return to Sydney) and the Johnny O'Keefe story revival *Shout!*, and it seems audiences have a voracious appetite for all-hoofing, all-belting shows, retro or modern, spoof or serious, original tunes or jukebox medley.

Still, the number of shows on stage means a lot of seats to fill and, in a bid to lure ticket buyers, producers are casting their net for stars at the shoals of film and television actors.

From the decision to give a guest spot to former *Big Brother* host Gretel Killeen as the narrator in the Sydney season of *The Rocky Horror Show*, to resurrecting the musical career of *Australian Idol* judge Mark Holden in *Shout!*, the strategy seems to be: celebrity sells.

One fish swimming well in new waters is Shane Jacobson, appearing in *Guys and Dolls* at Melbourne's Princess Theatre.

Jacobson's star status rests on his role in *Kenny*, the film about a lavatorial everyman bumbling through life with a homespun integrity and a truck full of Portalooos.

He was not an obvious choice for the role of Nicely Nicely Johnson, the wisecracking gambler in the new production of the 1950 Broadway classic. The bet turns out to have been a shrewd

one, however, with reviewers giving the thumbs up for a charismatic and confident performance.

Casting celebrities is nothing new or particularly reprehensible, in Jacobson's view, as long as they can do the job.

"Kenny gave me great opportunities and this is just another character role," he says. "Lots of people have come out of curiosity, but I'm just one tree in a really good orchard. Anyway, curiosity is fantastic and people are surprised that I can dance and sing."

In a bid to boost the box office while not alienating music theatre aficionados, *Guys and Dolls* hedges its bets, casting established names such as Marina Prior and Ian Stenlake with TV

Rob Mills and Anthony Callea are *Wicked's* mass-appeal drawcards, fulfilling all the criteria for grabbing ticket-buyer attention

identity Lisa McCune and distinguished actor Garry McDonald. Magda Szubanski, another TV and film actor, also has a theatre background.

"It's embarrassing telling people what my job is, it's so good," Jacobson says, adding that being on stage with Prior is amazing, "like riding on a donkey with Jesus".

Although he is new to the professional stage, 13 years of musicals and cabaret on the amateur circuit prepared him for the role, he says, and although he had a couple of singing lessons to

erase a rock 'n' roll style, "even the best tennis player in the world has a coach".

Of course, the 1955 film of the Broadway hit starred a non-musical Marlon Brando, and in London's Donmar Warehouse production — the same that has been brought to Melbourne — Ewan McGregor reprised Brando's role as romantic lead Sky Masterson.

Those who saw the Baz Luhrmann film *Moulin Rouge!* know McGregor can hold a tune tolerably well, but he had scant stage experience.

The show was a critical success and, as the Donmar's artistic director Michael Grandage puts it pragmatically, having star names on the bill helps the box office. "In terms of public

enjoyment, it also helps the audience have a fantastic time if the (cast) are people that they enjoy watching," he says.

Actors who have trodden the boards steadily in musical theatre but who don't have a spot in a TV cop show or a hit film may find celebrity casting a bit galling.

Opera Australia has cast Richard E. Grant as Professor Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* when the musical returns to Sydney for a commercial season at the Theatre Royal. In doing so, the

company bumps Reg Livermore, virtually theatre royalty, in favour of a well-known and famously charming film actor who, by his own admission, can't sing.

As Grant points out, however, the role "was written for Rex Harrison, who had never done a musical either and wasn't a trained singer. His speech-singing style is very effective for making the lyrics very clear."

His singing lessons, he adds, are progressing. "I wouldn't be so bold as to say they're going well," he concedes. "But my singing teacher convinced me that I can do it. Believing that you can is three-quarters of the way there."

Alex Budd, Opera Australia's manager of Opera Enterprises, says that while Livermore is a sufficient drawcard, the company needs "some variation in casting" to appeal to audiences beyond its regular subscribers.

At Melbourne's Regent Theatre, appealing to the biggest possible audience is crucial as the Broadway show *Wicked* has cost \$12 million to get to opening night.

There's a good witch and a bad one, a tin man and a lion, flying monkeys and a wizard, but no wide-eyed girl from Kansas. This is the Land of Oz before Dorothy got caught in the twister, a more morally complicated time where evil is nurture, not nature.

Australian Idol stars Rob Mills and Anthony Callea are the show's mass-appeal drawcards, fulfilling all the criteria for grabbing ticket-buyer attention. Mills plays wealthy party boy Fiyero while Callea is the love-lorn, short-trousered

EYES

It's a roaring good time for musical theatre, but producers are hedging their bets using the pulling power of the celebrity performer, writes **Fiona Gruber**



Boq. Extraordinarily, despite the fame of Mills and Callea from telly and the tabloids, producer John Frost says he had no hand in putting them on stage and let the American team of associate director Lisa Leguillou and dance supervisor Mark Myars do their job of casting.

The show features a mix of familiar and unfamiliar names. The two female leads, Lucy Durack (as white witch Glinda) and Amanda Harrison (wicked witch Elphaba), are largely unknown outside musical theatre circles. Maggie Kirkpatrick of *Prisoner* fame and a former Phantom, Rob Guest, have decades of musical theatre behind them and were shoo-ins. Others in the cast, Frost says, were harder to choose.

"The creative team came in not knowing anybody," he says, adding that he had a secret dream cast, none of whom ended up in the show.

Leguillou says there was no pressure to cast certain names; indeed, more than 1700 people were auditioned. "They were very smart about that," she says. "I'm sure there were people that they wanted or thought would get cast but they didn't say." Mills and Callea auditioned four times before their inclusion was confirmed, she adds.

"They're doing such a great job, I don't have enough superlatives for those boys," she says, admitting they have had to work hard to overcome their relative inexperience.

In the bowels of Melbourne's Regent Theatre, Mills sits in the cluttered dressing-room he shares with Rodney Dobson, who plays the

intellectual goat, Doctor Dillamond. Mills is brimming with enthusiasm. He loves this musical and, although it is challenging, the past few years have been a preparation, he says, with singing lessons to improve his vocal range and technique, and lead roles in productions of *Grease* and *Hair*.

He saw *Wicked* in London last year and immediately called his agent.

"I said, you need to get me an audition, I will get this part," he says. "Just seeing the show, I knew I was Fiyero."

Growing up, he always performed, he says, but his ambitions never included musicals, mainly because his state school lacked the facilities for putting them on.

Is *Wicked* the start of a new career direction? "I now have a massive love for musicals... I'm really looking forward to telling Fiyero's story every night for the next 12 months."

Along the corridor, Callea sits in calmer quarters. He shares a dressing-room with Guest and the emphasis is on low lighting and comfortable chairs. *Wicked* is all about jumping outside of his comfort zone, Callea says, and he admits to having felt a bit daunted at the start of rehearsals. "Helpless and quirky" Boq, the tallest munchkin in Oz, gets the short straw when it comes to love, but he has good songs and a lot of action.

Callea says the music by Stephen Schwartz (*Godspell*) was what attracted him: "I thought, this is a really cool soundtrack, a bit '80s, which is good because I love the '80s."

Frost called his management to get him to audition and came to Perth to see him in a production of *Rent*, Callea says. It was a great show, he adds, and gave him a crash course in basic stagecraft.

"I learned what prompt and upstage and downstage mean," he says with a laugh.

Frost is a man who knows his musical onions and, as a co-producer of the remounted *Phantom*, *Priscilla*, the present Broadway production of *Hairspray* and other shows, he has a reputation for picking hits.

After all, the commercial test of a musical is bums on seats. *Wicked* is in preview and has taken almost \$10 million in advance ticket sales. It is expected to run for a year, a relatively easy projection in New York or London with their international tourist economies but, as Frost observes, people don't come to Australia to see musicals.

Melbourne, however, is regarded as the home of musical theatre in this country and the show will not travel interstate (a factor crucial to the support of the City of Melbourne, Tourism Victoria and Victorian Major Events). At least 20 per cent of tickets will be sold to interstate and New Zealand customers, Frost says.

How many will come just to see Callea as a munchkin is impossible to tell.

But as the popularity of reality talent shows has demonstrated, whether featuring complete unknowns or those famous for something else, there is a vast potential audience for shows with tunes and toe-work.

HOTSEAT

MELBOURNE

Musical theatre: From the writers of *I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change* comes the premiere season of off-Broadway hit *The Thing about Men*, presented by Magnomos. Advertising executive Tom is a serial cheater; his wife, Lucy, cheats too, with Sebastian. Tom becomes Sebastian's new roommate in disguise. Positively Shakespearean. Theatreworks, St Kilda, until July 12. Bookings: (03) 9352 0232.

Dance: *Only Leone* is a new work and solo performance by Phoebe Robinson. It's a moving portrait of a figure responding to notions of isolation and the dynamic individual. Dancehouse, Carlton North, ends Sunday. Bookings: (03) 9347 2860.

NEWCASTLE

Visual art: Paintings from Remote Communities: Indigenous Australian Art from the Lavery Collection features 80 paintings from the Central Desert, the Kimberley and far north by celebrated artists including Paddy Bedford, Makinti Napanangka, Helicopter Joey Tjungarrayi and Freddie Ngarmaliny Timms. Newcastle Region Art Gallery, until August 31. Inquiries: (02) 4974 5100.



On show: *Texas* by Freddie Ngarmaliny Timms

NOOSA

Festival: Highlights of this year's popular Noosa Longweekend festival include Amanda Muggleton in Roger Hall's comedy *The Book Club*, directed by Rodney Fisher; satirist Max Gillies; authors Christopher Koch, Stephanie Dowrick and Venero Armanno; contemporary dance troupe Circa; country singer Sara Storer; and the ReelDance Film Festival. Workshops, discussion groups, visual art exhibitions, and more. Until July 13. Full program: www.noosalongweekend.com.

PERTH

Film: The 11th Perth International Film Festival features a new venue, new program director and event activity that extends the festival beyond the screens at Mount Lawley's Astor Cinema and into galleries and clubs. More than 100 films, some with live musical performances, at Spectrum Gallery, Mount Lawley; guest presentations; industry-based seminars; and open forums. Until July 13. Full program: www.revelationfilmfest.org.

SYDNEY

Music: The World Shakuhachi Festival 2008 is the largest gathering of Japanese flautists, with more than 400 players performing traditional and contemporary works. Concerts include Angelic Voices: A World of Shakuhachi (City Recital Hall, tonight); The Tibetan Book of the Dead in the Between (Sydney Conservatorium of Music, 10pm and midnight tonight) and the World Masters Concert at City Recital Hall on July 7. Until July 8. Full program: www.worldshakuhachifestival08.com.