

Where the people still dance

As the queens of the desert kick up their outlandish heels, former Fan of Fosse Marieke Hardy finds that she has so much to relive.

AS FAR AS I'M concerned, there are two types of little girls in this world - those who are briefly and colourfully obsessed with musical theatre, and those who will one day change their name to Indigo Wa-Wa Jukebox Mahogany and embark on a random stabbing spree through Highpoint Shopping Centre.

Obviously I'd count myself as a member of the former group, although who knows what the future holds should this writing caper not pan out. Musical theatre is intoxicating, a revelation, and - for a few awkward years in one's late teens - possibly more embarrassing than watching your parents tongue-kiss at their 30th wedding anniversary.

Why we automatically shun those camp showbusiness spectaculars for a brief period in order to concentrate on lowbrow activities like crowd-surfing and graffiti is sadly difficult to explain - though somehow, inevitably and humbly, we always end up coming home.

I grew up soaked in musical theatre; marinated in all its earnestness and heart-on-sleeve melancholy and knees-up razzle-dazzle. I pored over exotic-looking record sleeves advertising "Broadway cast recording" on the cover and solemnly insisted on wearing a pair of hot pink legwarmers pretty much constantly between the ages of seven and 12. There was just something about the world that musicals offered which set every one of my pre-pubescent senses aflame.

The technicolour streets, the bright-eyed women. The manner in which folk would burst into song without the slightest provocation and suddenly and startlingly be joined in their melodic celebrations by random passers-by and train drivers and fruit-sellers and whoever else felt it a good and in no way unhinged idea to kick up their heels in the middle of a crowded city street.

Musicals promised a world where harmony was king and not much else mattered but splurge guns and crap games and other such exotic-sounding activities utterly foreign to a child growing up in East Hawthorn.

Dismiss the cultural significance of Hello Dolly if you will, but matchmaking in Yonkers is something everyone should be at least mildly versed in before they turn 20, and if the lessons happen to be handed down via the magic of rhyming couplets then all the better.

Through musical theatre I learned about prostitution, war, sailors on shore leave. Additionally and shamefully, almost everything I understand to be about religion has been sourced almost entirely from the stage productions of Jesus Christ Superstar and Godspell.

Clearly there are holes in my education, though I must say for an errant teen the difference between having a red-faced religious education teacher shouting about Jesus and sins and hearing Mary Magdalene fret over her work-obsessed paramour with the heartsick ballad I Don't Know How To Love Him is gargantuan. I responded to the feeling, the high drama. It's unlikely King Herod ever actually uttered the rhyming couplet "Prove to me that you're no fool/Walk across my swimming pool" to the Son of God, but I certainly understood enough about what went on between them to hold my own at shouty religious dinner parties in years to come.

From obsessing over musicals came getting involved and joining up - hitching a wagon to a troupe of players.

It's the camaraderie being a member of a theatre group bestows upon one that truly intoxicates - being a member of a 50-strong chorus in pancake make-up, sharing the blessed, ethereal honour of singing in unison. When I was 15, I shared the role of Eliza in the school's production of My Fair Lady with the operatically brilliant Rebecca Leitch, and every second night for a week I would drop my h's and visit Ascot and by hamming it up, make life a misery for my real-life boyfriend at the time, who was devastating Kew audiences in his role as Henry Higgins.

From memory we fought like cats and dogs both on and off-stage, which no doubt added to the door-slamming "I'll be in my dressing room" thrill of it all. Previous years had woven the magic of A Midsummer Nights Dream (giggling pre-pubescent fairies bending over in tight costumes) and Man Of La Mancha (giggling pre-pubescent prostitutes disturbingly seducing the men of Spain), both of which bestowed that significant sense of belonging upon otherwise bereft and hormonally puzzled adolescents.

Fellow chorus members became everything; the overture a life-affirming call to arms. There was no life existing outside of the Whitehorse Theatre - nothing worth going back to, anyway. Every waking moment focused on kick-step-step-pivot-turn, or sewing holes in peasant blouses, or jazz ballet slippers. Bliss.

And then, almost as suddenly as it begins, the obsession is over. Musical theatre appears awkward, embarrassing, twee. It's a teenage boyfriend still hanging around with big, sad eyes waiting for acknowledgement or a pat on the head or a passionate reunion behind the shelter sheds, and comes across as unbearably naff when compared to the dirty thrills on offer in the band room at the Espy or illicit jazz shows on Triple R.

For my part, I let Cabaret gather dust, denied I'd ever queued up for tickets to Hair. When standing in the midst of a group discussing who among us had been lame enough to get excited about Starlight Express, I fell suddenly and significantly silent.

Owning up to a past steeped in musical theatre seemed like admitting a previous penchant for skinhead lovers. You grow up, you stop playing with Barbies, you ditch the crimper, you stop insisting that you want to look exactly like Joel Grey in Cabaret by the time you reach 35. It's a rite of passage - why exactly I don't know. What did musicals ever do to deserve such a cold shoulder?

Not long ago I was offered tickets to see Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, and came very close to knocking them back. It's one thing to acknowledge a guilty past as a Fan of Fosse, quite another to march along to a tizzied-up theatre with sweaty suburbanites looking for a theatre restaurant show. Wasn't that what modern musical stagecraft was all about, anyway?

The quick fix of awe-inspiring stage trickery and easy access songs which the audience have been listening to on Gold 104 for the last 30 years. No one has the patience to sit through a brand new libretto any more - give them classic hits from the '70s and '80s, stuff some implausibly lightweight premise down their gullets and send them off into the night with showbags and an In The Round Spectacular Celebrity Cast recording. It seemed a cheap imitation of all the beautiful pieces of art from yesteryear, and I wasn't certain I wanted a part of it.

In the end, it only took the seconds before curtain where the house lights dimmed with a sudden plunge and the music from the orchestra pit arched over into existence for me to lose all sense of time and space and find myself once again in that giddy breathless state of euphoria and - helplessly, perfectly undone - sit utterly bewitched by the parade unfolding onstage.

It really is impossible to maintain an aloof, "impress me" facade when you're presented with choreographed high-camp echoes of your past - each gamely sweating cast member a modern cousin to the desperate hopefuls of Chorus Line, the tappers of 42nd Street. How could it have been so seamless to glide back into the world of overacting chorus boys and tinsel wigs? Could it be solely attributed to the musical itself?

Priscilla was - yes - unabashedly glamorous; all lip-gloss and acerbic one-liners and spectacularly oversized props, though I'd never much been a huge fan of the movie.

Perhaps the "cocks in frocks on a rock" simply acted as a conduit, unleashing in one sweeping moment all that I had once loved about live, sweaty, hands-on-hips performance. It reminded me of the agonising transcendence of All That Jazz, the comic genius of Bugsy Malone, the infinitely lawless opening sequence of West Side Story.

It was all of them and none of them; a medley of memory. And with every over-the-top song and winking sequin I was taken back to a sublime, open-hearted pocket of childhood where nothing was more important than the next set change or rousing medley. A pocket I was ready to return to. Priscilla, Queen of the Desert opens at the Regent Theatre on October 6. Ticketek 1300 555 593. www.priscillathemusical.com.

About the Author

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