

SPOTLIGHT Insider

The Aussie story right at home on stages of West End

PRODUCER MARYANN WRIGHT, NOW LIVING IN THE UK, WANTS TO PUT AUSTRALIAN MUSICALS IN FRONT OF HUNGRY BRITISH AUDIENCES

Kerry Parnell

Move over G'Day LA, it's No Worries West End, as Australia takes the stage in London's famed theatre district.

Well, that's the plan of one determined Aussie producer. Maryann Wright, from Sydney, is setting about bringing Australian musicals to the attention of British audiences and forging a closer relationship between the two performing nations.

London's theatres are full of Australians treading the boards – Sarah Snook is currently causing a sensation in the UK in the Sydney Theatre Company's production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Jason Donovan has made a life on the UK stage, most recently in *Grease*, plus *House of the Dragon's* Milly Alcock made her London debut in *The Crucible*.

What Wright, 33, wants to see, however, are more Aussie musicals in the UK. She's working on a new production of an old Aussie musical, *The Hatpin* – by James Miller and Peter Rutherford – which first opened in Sydney's Seymour Centre in 2008. It follows the disturbing 19th century true story of Amber Murray, who gave



Maryann Wright and Grace Taylor are working on *The Hatpin* together.

her illegitimate baby to a couple to take care of, with murderous results. "So many people remember this show, because it was so beautiful," says Wright, from her base in London. "It is incredible."

Working with the original writers to update the songs, she has secured a \$60,000 funding grant from Arts Council England, as well as support from the Australian High Commission, to begin production.

With an Aussie cast, workshops are underway and Wright hopes to see it



Producer Maryann Wright wants to harness our 'exceptional talent' to write the next big musical that flies internationally.

on stage in the UK by 2025. With so many Australians in the UK, she's had support from both investors and artists, but can't reveal names just yet.

"We are in conversations with some fantastic Australian performers. Whenever we've spoken to people about this project, they want to be involved because Australia is their home and they want to see an Australian show succeed," she says.

She's also working on an Australian musical event in May, at the Australian High Commission. The cultural showcase will highlight new Australian writing and feature Australian stars of the West End.

"The theatre industry is a massive community of people who want to tell stories. If we can get a big enough network of people who want the same outcome, we can create something very exciting," she says.

"I know it's a big idea and many people have tried variations of this in the past, but I hope by looking at specifically Australia and UK international development, we can make it work."

The musical mission is not something Wright could have predicted she'd find herself embarking upon, when she studied at Sydney University, followed by drama school in London, but having worked on all sides of the industry, the journalist-turned-publicist, actor

and producer, knows how to make her dream work.

"The plan was actually never to live in the UK, but I fell in love, so I was ruined," she says.

"But the UK theatre industry is very exciting and one of the best in the world, especially for developing new theatre. What sets British theatre apart is you almost never see the same play twice – you could live here for 10 years and see a different play every night if you wanted to, or musical. They just have a real passion for new work," she says.

It's the opposite in Australia, Wright believes, where big promoters tend to tour successful musicals from Broadway or the West End.

"So, we don't get to see a lot of new work. That's what has kept me in the UK. The Australian theatre

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community nurtured me for the past 15 years, both as an actor and as a young producer, so I have a real passion for the power of our talent and our stories," she says.

"We have exceptional talent in not just performers, but writers. I'd like to harness and help develop it, so we can write the next big Australian musical that moves internationally."

"I want to get funding and find the investors who will take the talent of Australia and help them work on their shows so they can be developed to the highest standards needed to be a success internationally."

"If we don't put the resources in, it will never happen."

"Sometimes people get scared we can't tell Australian stories outside of Australia," she says, "but quality work will always translate."



Sarah Snook in Sydney Theatre Company's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in the UK.