MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY

MY BRILLIANT CAREER

A NEW MUSICAL BASED ON THE NOVEL BY MILES FRANKLIN

BOOK BY Sheridan Harbridge & Dean Bryant

MUSIC BY Mathew Frank LYRICS BY Dean Bryant

DIRECTED BY Anne-Louise Sarks

23 JAN—28 FEB 2026
Southbank Theatre, The Sumner

7 MAR—17 MAY 2026
On Tour

EDUCATION PACK

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Throughout these notes, look out for these icons for opportunities to learn more:

Activity

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Video

Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the support of the Department of Education, Victoria, through the Strategic Partnerships Program.

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Editors Emily Doyle, Nick Tranter
Graphic designer Sarah Ridgway-Cross
Rehearsal photographer Charlie Kinross
Cover photographer Pia Johnston
Images in this pack also include the original 2024 Melbourne cast.

Melbourne Theatre Company acknowledges the Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung peoples of the Kulin Nation, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work, create and gather. We pay our respects to all First Nations people, their Elders past and present, and their enduring connections to Country, knowledge and stories. As a Company we remain committed to the invitation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its call for voice, truth and treaty.

Melbourne Theatre Company

At Melbourne Theatre Company we believe theatre is for everyone. We are Melbourne's home of live storytelling, producing an annual season of plays created for and about the world today.

Southbank Theatre. Photo: Benjamin Healley

Beyond the stage, we run a range of initiatives that support artist development, champion new writing, invest in future audiences and address underrepresentation across the industry.

OUR VISION

To be recognised as one of the world's preeminent theatre companies, leading the cultural conversation and chosen as a favourite destination for Australians.

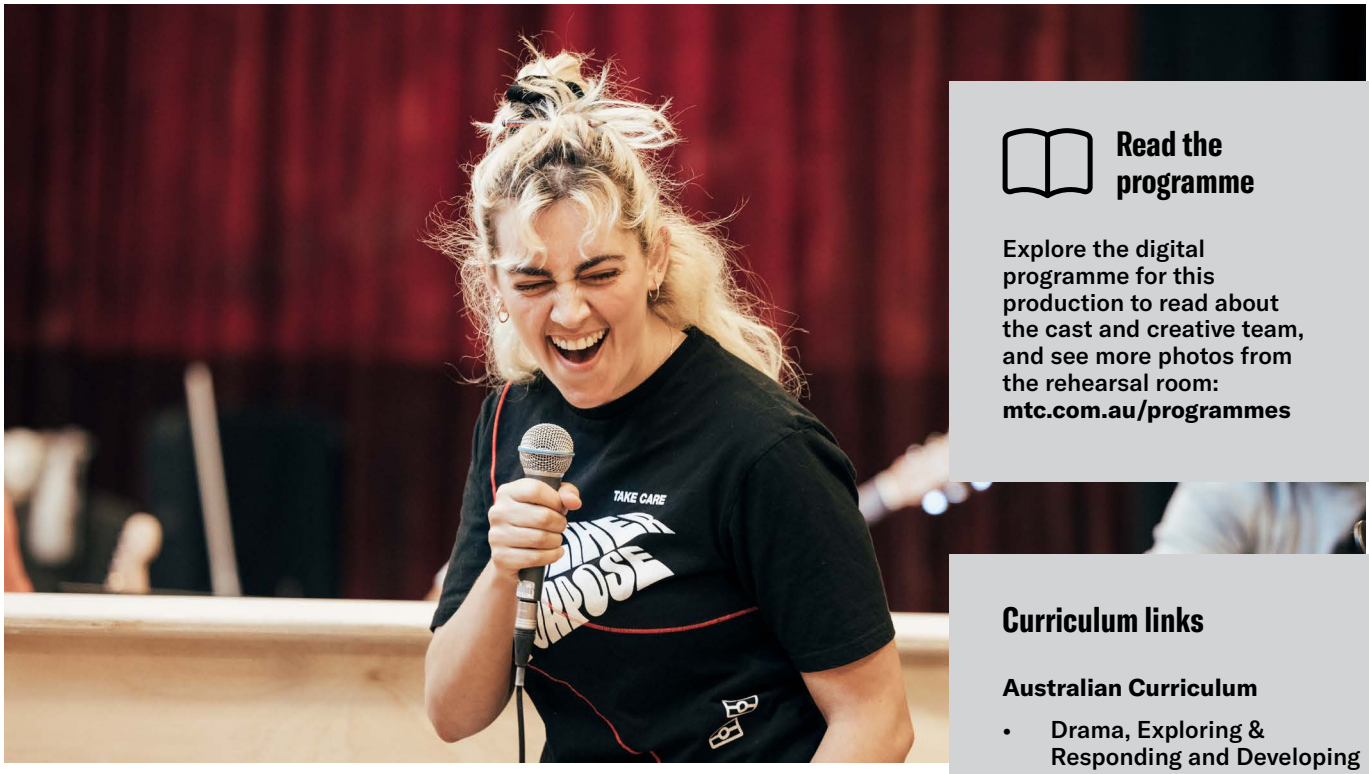
OUR PURPOSE

To share remarkable stories that enable people to better understand the world around them.

MTC HQ Virtual Tour

Walk the halls of MTC HQ in this virtual tour and explore the spaces where plays are rehearsed, sets are built, costumes are sewn and wigs are created one strand of hair at a time: **mtc.com.au/eduhub**

About the show



Read the programme

Explore the digital programme for this production to read about the cast and creative team, and see more photos from the rehearsal room: **mtc.com.au/programmes**

Set in the sweeping landscapes of 1890s Australia, the electric reimagining by Sheridan Harbridge, Dean Bryant and Mathew Frank transforms Miles Franklin's literary heroine into a singer-songwriter for this very moment. Unapologetically ambitious, Sybylla Melvyn is wholly uninterested in the future society expects of her. Instead, she marches to the beat of her own drum, challenging class, gender and family to find her own voice.

ATTENDANCE INFORMATION

This production contains mature themes and theatrical haze effects. Recommended for ages 11+ / school years 6–12. For detailed information about the production's content, visit our production content guide at mtc.com.au/production-content-guide.

DURATION

Approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes, including interval.

Curriculum links

Australian Curriculum

- **Drama, Exploring & Responding and Developing practices and skills** Levels 8 & 10
- **English, Language and Literature** Levels 7–10

NSW

- **Drama Stage 4, 5, 6:** Australian Theatre reflecting society, Literary classic reimagined for stage, Women's voices
- **English Stage 4, 5, 6:** Identity, Culture and Voice
- **Music 1 & 2 Stage 6:** Composition & Performance
- **Creative Arts 7–10:** Adaptation as Contemporary Australian Theatre Practice

VIC

- **VCE English:** Text list 1
- **VCE Drama:** Unit 2 – Contemporary drama practices and Australian identity
- **VCE Theatre Studies:** Unit 2 – Contemporary theatre styles and movements
- **Drama 7–10:** Respond and interpret

Acknowledgements

My Brilliant Career was developed by Monash University, Melbourne, as part of the Jeanne Pratt Artist in Residency program, which culminated in a development staging directed by Petra Kalive with dramaturgy by Anna Barnes. Further development funded by City of Stonnington and Melbourne Theatre Company's NEXT STAGE Writers' Program.

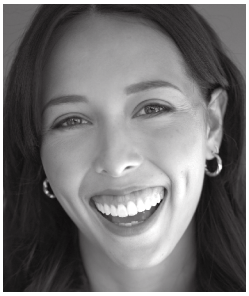
NEXTSTAGE

Paul and Wendy Bonnici & Family, Tony and Janine Burgess, Kathleen Canfell, Fitzpatrick Sykes Family Foundation, Jane Hansen AO and Paul Little AO, Larry Kamener and Petra Kamener, The Margaret Lawrence Bequest, Helen Nicolay, Tania Seary and Chris Lynch, Craig Semple, Dr Richard Simmie.

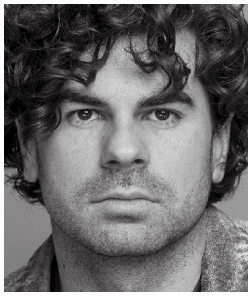
The Vizard FOUNDATION

Cast and creatives

Cameron Bajraktarevic-Hayward
Frank / Ensemble



Melanie Bird
Gertie / Blanche / Ensemble
(understudy Sybylla)



Lincoln Elliott
Jimmy / Horace / Ensemble

Victoria Falconer
Musical Director / Ensemble

Kala Gare
Sybylla Melvyn

Raj Labade
Harry / Peter / Ensemble

Drew Livingston
Father / Jay-Jay / M'Swat / Ensemble
/ Assistant Musical Director

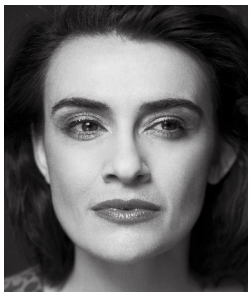
Ana Mitsikas
Grannie / Rose Jane / Ensemble

Christina O'Neill
Mother / Helen / Mrs M'Swat /
Ensemble

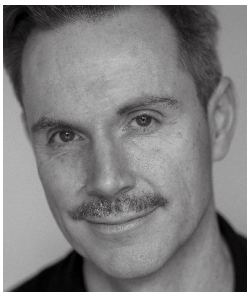
Jarrad Payne
Ensemble

Jack Green
Understudy

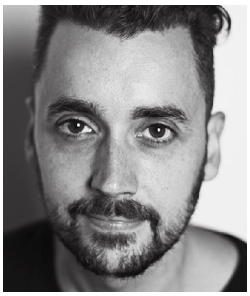
Meg McKibbin
Understudy



Sheridan Harbridge
Book



Dean Bryant
Book / Lyrics



Mathew Frank
Music

Read their bios

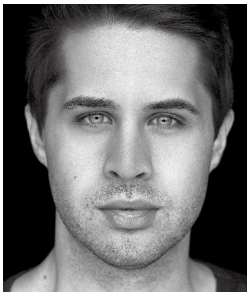
Explore the digital programme to read the biographies of the cast and creatives working on this production:
mtc.com.au/programmes

Anne-Louise Sarks
Director

Amy Campbell
Choreographer

Marg Horwell
Set & Costume Designer

Matt Scott
Lighting Designer



James Simpson
Orchestrator / Vocal Arranger

Joy Weng
Sound Designer

Miranda Middleton
Associate Director

Savanna Wegman
Associate Set & Costume Designer

Matt Furlani
Voice & Text Coach

Stage Manager (to 30 March)
Whitney McNamara
Stage Manager (from 30 March)
Oriana Papa
Deputy Stage Manager
Tom O'Sullivan
Assistant Stage Manager
Mercedes Gowlett

Adapting the novel

Miles Franklin, 1902. State Library of New South Wales collection.

THE NOVEL

My Brilliant Career is a new Australian musical based on the famous Australian novel by Miles Franklin. The show is directed by Anne-Louise Sarks, with the book by Sheridan Harbridge and Dean Bryant, music by Mathew Frank and lyrics by Dean Bryant.

Miles Franklin's novel *My Brilliant Career* was first published in Australia in 1901. After being rejected by many publishers, Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin shortened her name to disguise her gender and protect her work in the male-dominated literary world.

The novel was very popular at the time. The story is about Sybylla Melvin, a young woman living in rural New South Wales in the 1890s. Sybylla has big ambitions for her life and wants to be a writer, but she's uncertain about how to create a 'brilliant career'. Options for women 130 years ago were limited and success was tied heavily to marriage, not careers.

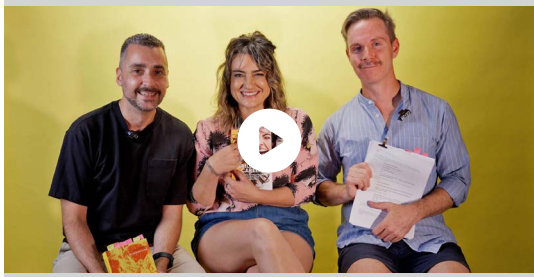
Sybylla's family struggles due to drought and the poor decision-making of her financially irresponsible father. Sybylla is very unhappy and therefore relieved when she's sent to live with her grandmother to prepare her for marriage. It's at her grandmother's property, Caddagat, that Sybylla meets two young men – Harry and Frank – who demonstrate romantic potential.

Later, Sybylla is forced to leave Caddagat to help pay off her father's debts by becoming a governess for the M'Swat family. Sybylla continues to search for her 'brilliant career' and is forced to make some challenging decisions.

FROM PAGE TO STAGE

This version of *My Brilliant Career* is an adaption of Miles Franklin's famous novel into a musical, by Sheridan Harbridge, Mathew Frank and Dean Bryant. Sybylla's coming-of-age story is still set in 1890s rural New South Wales, however, this production represents more contemporary values, as reflected through the characters and themes in the story. In this *My Brilliant Career*, Sybylla's ambitions to be a writer come in the form of musician, as she sings and performs her inner most desires.

Adapting for the stage



Co-creators Mathew Frank, Sheridan Harbridge and Dean Bryant

Watch the videos with co-creators Sheridan Harbridge, Dean Bryant and Mathew Frank, then answer these questions:

- How did the team use highlighters to break down the novel?
- What's an example of how the team manipulated the structure of the story for the stage?
- What is the split of dialogue to songs in the show?
- How has contemporary vernacular been written into the show?
- How is the form manipulated for the show with Sybylla's direct address?

Sheridan Harbridge, Mathew Frank and Dean Bryant.
Photo: Josh Scott

Learn more about the adaptation process in this Q&A with co-creators Dean Byrant, Mathew Frank and Sheridan Harbridge.

Why did you want to adapt *My Brilliant Career*?

Dean Bryant (DB): We all grew up in rural areas – Sheridan and I, like Sybylla, on dairy farms – and loved that the story was about a young person who didn't fit in and was searching for their place in the world, for some way to live a creative life.

Sheridan Harbridge (SH): I was really excited to take on such an iconic book that every generation has grown up with. Every time I would tell people we were adapting it, just the absolute emotions that would pour out of them about how much they loved that book growing up... It was really exciting to take on and bring their version of Sybylla to life.

What was behind the decision to turn it into a musical?

DB: It felt like a story that would enlarge by being sung. We had the idea of a teenage girl in her room writing out her angst in piano ballads. The score has always lived in that world, and we needed to tune the script to match the energy we were aiming for.

Mathew Frank (MF): Working with actor-musicians is the most exciting thing to see, it's like Olympic athletes. Getting the orchestra out of the pit and onstage, being musician, singer and actor – it's a thrilling thing not to separate the disciplines.

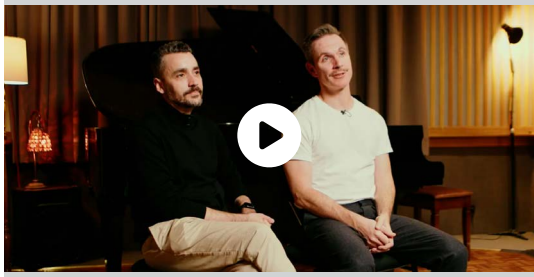
DB: The novel is epic, with Sybylla spinning from place to place and her mood changing constantly. We wanted to capture that dynamism in the musical. The way she talks to the reader immediately opened up a way for her to talk to the audience. This became even more exciting when we transformed the show into an actor-musician version, reimagining her as the front girl of a band, taking us into almost a gig version of her life.

SH: What's exciting about adapting the book is that it was successful, not just for feminism in the moment, which was not spoken about much, but also because it was distinctly Australian.

MF: Musically, I loved the idea of someone finding their voice, so I could use my own composer's voice while marrying that to modern music, working in different pop genres – like a Sybylla mixtape – but also playing with folk songs and music of the day. So there's my voice as a composer, my pastiche of pop/rock, alongside a pastiche of music from the time.

SH: Can I add to that I think those three phases are interesting, because we take on the three phases of feminism: her era, feminism from the 70s when the book was republished and had that huge cultural place with the film and then the feminism of now, which is a different cultural beast.

Hear from the co-creators



Co-creators Mathew Frank and Dean Bryant

Watch the video, then answer these questions to help you make predictions about the show:

- Director Anne-Louise Sarks says *My Brilliant Career* is about Sybylla finding her voice and having the courage to be herself. What other plays – musicals or otherwise – have lead characters with similar goals?
- What kinds of obstacles do you expect Sybylla to face on her journey? Kale Gare sings the line, 'If I say what I see, I might reach someone like me.' How might this line reflect the objectives of the creators?
- Actor Cameron Bajraktarevic-Hayward says that seeing the 'struggle of teenage-hood on the stage will be beautiful for a young audience.' What do you think this means? Do you agree?

'The story is about a young artist striving to find a mode of expression. We are all here because of the risk that Miles Franklin took at a terrifying time to be an artist and make her way in the world.'

SHERIDAN HARBRIDGE
CO-CREATOR

How does Sybylla's story intersect with where feminism is now?

SH: The current phase of feminism is very close to the inner world of Sybylla in 1896, which was contradictory. She wasn't trying to be a perfect, ideal, strong woman; she's gloriously selfish and lets herself go down any path and follow any impulse without censoring it. I think there have been phases with feminism when women have had to be flawless, to be a wall of strength but now we're embracing imperfection – that's true equality. What's exciting about adapting the book is that it was successful, not just for feminism in the moment, which was not spoken about much, but also because it was distinctly Australian and that was what was so unique – an Australian feminist story. We crave to hear our own voice on stage and it's fun to incorporate what Australia is now into the work.

The cast of *My Brilliant Career* in rehearsal

What was the writing process like?

DB: Mathew and I have collaborated as co-writers for a quarter of a century now, so we were used to the joys and struggles that come from that. But bringing a co-writer onto the script was exciting and scary. Sheridan and I have now worked in so many different modes, and what's really rewarding is that you can keep taking the reins as one of you feels strongly about what needs to happen next. When you trust the person there's a massive sense of relief in sharing the load.

At its heart, what do you think this version of *My Brilliant Career* is about?

SH: The story is about a young artist striving to find a mode of expression. We are all here because of the risk that Miles Franklin took at a terrifying time to be an artist and make her way in the world. I am here because of this, and to see the offspring of that risk in full flight, in their form of art, is the perfect journey for this work. It's about how Sybylla, as an artist, is someone who exists outside the matrix but pushes back against the structure women are placed in that doesn't make sense. That is a timeless story, questioning why we build societies as they are. It's ultimately about joy and rebellion ...

MF: ... about taking a risk to share what the world might not want to hear ...

DB: ... and how the place you wanted to escape from feeds what you ultimately create.

Adaptations

Miles Franklin's novel has been adapted several times into films, plays, musicals and even an upcoming Netflix series. Why do you think this story continues to resonate with audiences?

Discuss themes

How would you describe the 'current phase of feminism' that Harbridge discusses? What makes a story feminist?

Adapting

Look at the introduction in the novel and consider how this text might be adapted for the stage. Will characters speak to each other or directly to the audience? Are there sections that you think could be sung?

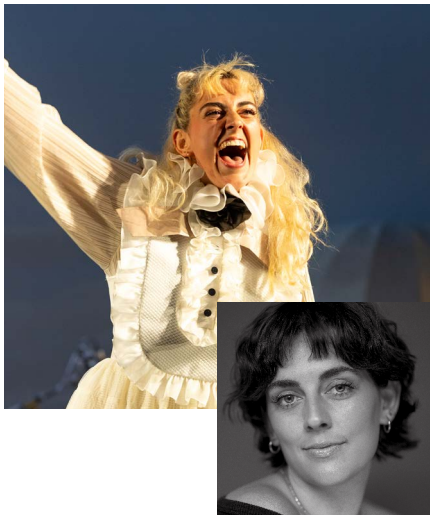
'It's ultimately about joy and rebellion, about taking a risk to share what the world might not want to hear and how the place you wanted to escape from feeds what you ultimately create.'

SHERIDAN HARBRIDGE, DEAN BRYANT AND MATHEW FRANK

Characters

Ten actor-musicians perform all the characters in the story, and most play more than one character. The cast also play musical instruments during the performance.

Kala Gare



SYBYLLA
Kala Gare

Sybylla Melvyn is the main character who is telling her story. Sybylla is a teenager who lives on a farm in Possum Gully with her mother and father and siblings. Life on the farm is hard, physical work and Sybylla wants more from her life than to be a farmer and get married. Sybylla is played by Kala Gare.

> **'Sybylla is an icon. She's a teenage girl who has giant dreams and a deep passion for something bigger than her, but no understanding of what it is, and how she – a poor girl in 19th century Australian outback – can achieve it. She was raised with a freedom to follow her dreams and a true belief that she could achieve them, arming her with an intellect and appetite for more that would keep her raging against the social conformities of the time as she grew older.'**
>
> KALA GARE

Life As We Know It

Kala Gare

Watch Kala Gare sing 'Life As We Know It' from the production in this video at **mtc.com.au/eduhub**.

I make no apologies for being egotistical

Discuss the choice to have Sybylla's inner monologue delivered as direct address on stage.

'Sybylla is an icon. She's a teenage girl who has giant dreams and a deep passion for something bigger than her.'

KALA GARE

Drew Livingston, Kala Gare, Christina O'Neill, Raj Labade and Ana Mitsikas

Giver of apples. Taker of whatever he wants.

How does Sybylla talk about Harry? What is informing her opinion of him throughout the story?

'Harry's driven by the desire to have everything in life – love, success and everything in-between.'

RAJ LABADE

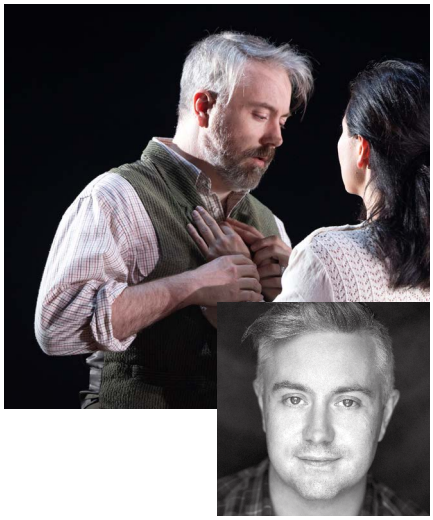
HARRY
Raj Labade

Harold Beecham, often called Harry, owns the property near Caddagat called Five Bob and is therefore a wealthy, eligible bachelor. He is Sybylla's love interest, and fiancé, for much of the story. Harry is played by Raj Labade.

> **'Harry is a wealthy landowner in a town called Caddagat and the only suitor that really excites Sybylla. He's headstrong, calm, but sometimes has a bit of a temper. He's driven by the desire to have everything in life – love, success and everything in-between. The way Harry stands is postured and more mannered than myself, so I stand with my chest out and shoulders back. I also have a slight accent which is a subtle British or upper-class Australian dialect.'**
>
> RAJ LABADE

PETER
Raj Labade

This is Peter, the charming oldest son of the M'Swat family. He is idolised by his family. When Sybylla and Peter meet, the M'Swats become worried that Sybylla will fall in love with their handsome son, who's already promised to marry another young woman. Peter is played by Raj Labade.



FATHER
Drew Livingston

Sybylla's father, often called Dick (full name Richard), struggles to support the Melvyn family financially. He was once an ambitious man and happy husband, but farming life has been challenging, and he struggles with alcoholism. He makes bad business decisions with cause hardship for the family. Father is played by Drew Livingston.

JAY-JAY
Drew Livingston

Jay-Jay is Sybylla's Uncle. His full name is Julius and he is a carefree bachelor who travels around. He often visits his family – sister Lucy and mother Grannie Bossier – at Caddagat. Jay-Jay is played by actor Drew Livingston.

> **'Jay-Jay is a landowner who wants as much as he can get for as little effort possible. He loves his people and to have a good time. He is the kind of person who truly believes he is always in the right. I like to think about how Jay-Jay always invades other people's space. He does it with his voice and comments as well as physically.'**
>
> DREW LIVINGSTON

MR M'SWAT
Drew Livingston

Mr M'Swat runs a successful farm at Barney's Gap. Sybylla is sent to the M'Swats to be a governess for their many children. This arrangement is 'payment' for the money Mr M'Swat lent to Sybylla's father, Dick Melyvn. Mr M'Swat is played by Drew Livingston.

Play with the dolly rather than worry your nog with politics

Discuss Uncle Jay-Jay and Dick Melvyn's treatment of Sybylla in the story. How do their personalities shape Sybylla's understanding of society and her roles within it?

'Jay-Jay is the kind of person who truly believes he is always in the right.'

DREW LIVINGSTON

MOTHER
Christina O'Neill

Sybylla's mother is called Lucy. She grew up on Caddagat in wealthy surroundings but married Dick Melvyn for love – this did not turn out well for her. Lucy struggles to support her family, both financially and emotionally, which causes tension with Sybylla. Lucy is played by Christina O'Neill.

> **'Lucy is Sybylla's mother. She is a realist, grounded and practical and what drives her is a better life for her children and their survival in this tough landscape. In the course of the story, she loses so many things (the cattle, her husband's battle with the bottle, children leaving home) but she tries to be courageous and strong in the face of so much adversity. Lucy has a quick tempo – she thinks quick and she always has a task at hand.'**
>
> CHRISTINA O'NEILL

You useless girl

Compare and contrast Lucy with her daughter, Sybylla. What are their core values?

'Lucy is a realist, grounded and practical and what drives her is a better life for her children and their survival in this tough landscape.'

CHRISTINA O'NEILL

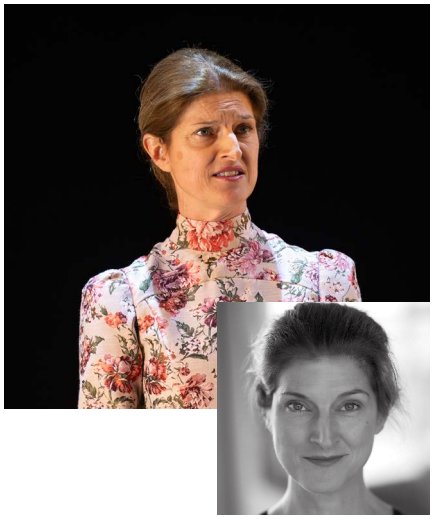
HELEN
Christina O'Neill

Helen is Sybylla's Aunt. She was once married to a man who left her for another woman, and Helen now lives at Caddagat with her mother. Helen and Sybylla get along well, and Helen provides emotional support for Sybylla. Helen is played by Christina O'Neill.

MRS M'SWAT
Christina O'Neill

Mrs M'Swat is the matriarch of the M'Swat family and is referred to as Missus M. She has many children, including a newborn baby (which is a doll prop). Sybylla becomes the M'Swat children's teacher to help pay off her father's loan from the M'Swats. Mrs M'Swat is played by Christina O'Neill.

Kala Gare and Ana Mitsikas



GRANNIE
Ana Mitsikas

Grannie Bossier runs Caddagat and is Sybylla's grandmother. Sybylla is sent to live with her Grannie in Act 1 to help prepare Sybylla for marriage. Grannie comes from a wealthy family and has fixed ideas about how women should be good wives and mothers – Sybylla does not agree with this. Grannie is played by Ana Mitsikas.

> **'Grannie is the Grandmother of the main character, Sybylla. Grannie is very traditional and believes it is important to conform to society's expectations. She doesn't understand Sybylla's drive to challenge the status quo and instead works to help Sybylla make a 'good' marriage – one that will bring financial security for her and her family. Grannie believes that a good marriage is the only way for a woman to get ahead in life and is the 'career' that all women should train to do.'**
>
> ANA MITSIKAS

ROSE JANE
Ana Mitsikas

This is Rose Jane, the youngest member of the M'Swat family. She is intrigued by Sybylla's ability to play piano and asks Sybylla to teach her. Rose Jane is played by Ana Mitsikas.

This is going to be a big job

Discuss the function of Grannie in the story and what she tells us about gender roles at the at the time the story is set.

'Grannie is very traditional and believes it is important to conform to society's expectations.'

ANA MITSIKAS

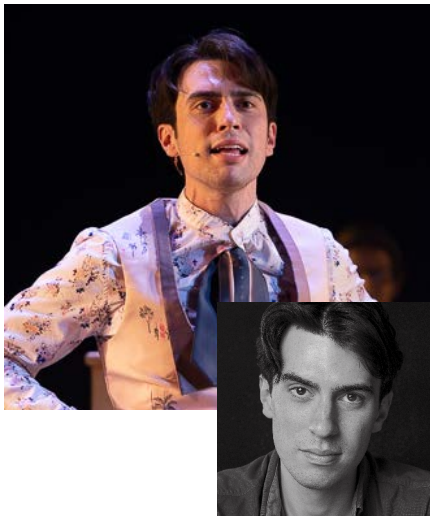
Drew Livingston, Cameron Bajrakrarevic-Hayward, and Lincoln Elliot

I think a fellow could have great fun with you

Compare and contrast Frank and Harry. What does Sybylla think of each of them?

'Frank's driven by the desire to prove his masculinity and intelligence to everyone.'

CAMERON BAJRAKTAREVIC-HAYWARD



FRANK
Cameron Bajraktarevic-Hayward

Frank Hawden is an English jackaroo (farm worker) who works at the property, Caddagat. He first appears when he's sent to collect Sybylla from the station. He finds Sybylla attractive and expresses interest in marrying her. Frank is played by Cameron Bajraktarevic-Hayward.

> **'Frank is a young British man who has come to Australia for a year basically for work experience. He's driven by the desire to prove his masculinity and intelligence to everyone. To get into character I have to put on an upper-class British accent (also known as Received Pronunciation or RP). This truly does help sit into who Frank is along with the help of many pairs of high waisted trousers.'**
>
> CAMERON BAJRAKTAREVIC-HAYWARD

BULLANT
Cameron Bajraktarevic-Hayward

This is Bullant, another of the M'Swat children. He's called bullant because he often pinches his siblings. Bullant is played by Cameron Bajraktarevic-Hayward.

BLANCHE
Melanie Bird

Blanche is a glamorous woman from the city who visits Caddagat with Harry. She enjoys her life, traveling across the country attending social events among upper-middle society. She sees these events as opportunities to 'audition' potential husbands. Blanche is played by Melanie Bird.

> **'Blanche Derrick is a sharp, stylish socialite who is described as one of the greatest beauties in Melbourne. Men fall at her feet, but she's far more than just glamorous – she's clever, socially aware and understands the choices available to women in the late 1800s. Determined to succeed within that system, she plans to marry well. Blanche mentors Sybylla, encouraging her to be strategic without giving up who she is. I let Blanche's feathered pink costume, designed by award-winning Marg Horwell, shape my physicality, helping me carry myself with confidence and elegance.'**
>
> MELANIE BIRD

Gosh it's fun, isn't it?

Discuss the arrival of Blanche and the impression she makes on Sybylla. Is this a turning point in the story?

'Blanche is clever, socially aware and understands the choices available to women in the late 1800s.'

MELANIE BIRD

GERTIE
Melanie Bird

Gertie is Sybylla's younger, loving sister. She enjoys Sybylla's stories and encourages Sybylla to write. Gertie is very sad when Sybylla leaves the family home to live with Grannie at Caddagat. Gertie is played by Melanie Bird.

LIZER
Melanie Bird

This is Lizer, another of the M'Swat children. Sybylla helps Lizer to learn to read and play piano. Lizer is played by Melanie Bird.

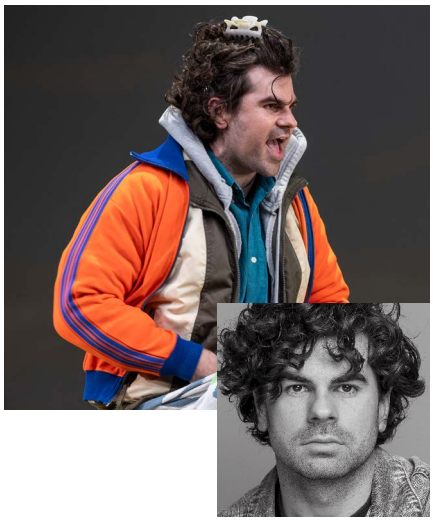
Kala Gare, Christina O'Neill and Lincoln Elliot

Jimmy has mastered the future tense.

Discuss Sybylla's time with the M'Swat family. How does Sybylla grow in these scenes?

'Jimmy's song is also very chromatic which gives it a chaotic and crunchy energy and channels his defiance.'

LINCOLN ELLIOT



JIMMY
Lincoln Elliot

This is Jimmy. He is one of the M'Swat children. Jimmy loves to bang his ink pot to annoy Sybylla – his misbehaviour causes Sybylla a lot of stress when she first arrives at Barney's Gap. Jimmy is played by actor Lincoln Elliott.

> **'Jimmy is a bit of a troublemaker. He's the one that drives the conflict with Syb while she's at the McSwats. He wants to have fun and play games with his siblings but even more so, he doesn't want to learn. Jimmy's voice is a bit more nasal and twangy than my own, bringing out a bit of flavour from my Dubbo upbringing. His song is also very chromatic which gives it a chaotic and crunchy energy and channels his defiance.'**
>
> LINCOLN ELLIOT

HORACE
Lincoln Elliot

Horace is Sybylla's younger brother. He likes to tease Sybylla and this causes arguments between them. Horace is played by Lincoln Elliott.

The cast of *My Brilliant Career*

BALLADEERS
Victoria Falconer

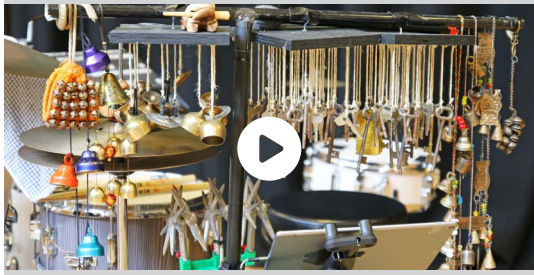
The Balladeers are musicians who are part of the ensemble. They often move around the stage to become part of the storytelling. This balladeer is played by musician Victoria Falconer, who is also the Musical Director of the production.

> **'I am the musical director, which translates to being the leader of the band onstage. At times, members of the band are called in by Sybylla to play various character roles in the telling of her story. The band as humans could also be seen as an extension of Sybylla's thoughts and feelings, which is exactly how music works in musical theatre – when action or emotion rises to a heightened state, in musical theatre land, the only option is to sing!'**
>
> VICTORIA FALCONER

Jarrad Payne

Another Balladeer, this musician also plays guitar and percussion and provides many sound effects throughout the show. This balladeer is played by musician Jarrad Payne.

Musical Instruments



Watch the video with Musical Director Victoria Falconer to learn about all the musical instruments in this production at **mtc.com.au/eduhub**.

'When action or emotion rises to a heightened state, in musical theatre land, the only option is to sing!'

VICTORIA FALCONER
MUSICAL DIRECTOR

Theatre style

The cast of *My Brilliant Career* on stage.

MUSICAL THEATRE

Musical theatre combines songs, dialogue, acting and dance, often with spectacular sets, costumes and lighting. In many ways musical theatre overlaps with opera, however, musicals put more emphasis on the spoken dialogue whereas operas are usually entirely sung. By their very nature, musicals are highly non-naturalistic, usually depicting a wide variety of locations, actors playing multiple roles, the conventions of song and dance accepted as "normal" behaviour, and solo songs used as a dramatic device to tell the audience more about a character's thoughts and feelings (a soliloquy to music, in a way).

Most Western musical theatre emerged in the 19th century, with many conventions and structural elements established by Gilbert and Sullivan (in Britain) and Harrigan and Hart (in the United States). Well-known Australian musicals include *Bran Nue Dae* (the first Aboriginal musical, penned by Jimmy Chi and his band Kuckles), *The Sapphires* (written by Tony Briggs, about a singing group of four Yorta Yorta women who tour Vietnam during the war), *The Boy From Oz* (the first Australian musical to make it to Broadway), and movie-to-stage adaptations *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Muriel's Wedding*, which have both toured internationally.

In this production of *My Brilliant Career*, the actors are also the musicians, always in view of the audience and sometimes playing instruments in character. Direct address is used by Sybylla throughout the show, and most actors play multiple roles.

Sources: BBC (2022), *Musical Theatre* on bbc.co.uk; Tongue, C. *and Neutze*, B. (2022), *The 15 greatest Australian musicals, on stage and screen* – sorted on theguardian.com.

Discuss style

How do you expect to see the actor-musicians using their performance skills in this theatre style? What conventions of musical theatre might you see in this production?

Script Notes

Kala Gare and Victoria Falconer

Watch the video where Kala Gare and Musical Director Victoria Falconer discuss setting up the expectations of the audience with musical conventions in the opening number, 'Life As We Know It'.

'The novel is epic, with Sybylla spinning from place to place and her mood changing constantly. We wanted to capture that dynamism in the musical.'

DEAN BRYANT
CO-CREATOR

Setting

The cast of *My Brilliant Career* on stage

Set & Costume Designer Marg Horwell

The story of *My Brilliant Career* takes place in the 1890s, in rural New South Wales. The production also depicts several locations as we follow Sybylla on her journey.

There's Possum Gully (Sybylla's family's farm), her grandmother's home (Caddagat), the M'Swat family home (where she becomes a governess), and other scenes set in an orchard, on a boat and at a fancy ball. As part of the design process, Set & Costume Designer Marg Horwell created miniature sets of each scene, to demonstrate her design vision to the wider production team.

Possum Gully storyboard. Set model by Marg Horwell.

The storyboard images that you see here are three examples of Horwell's vision placed in the model box (small-scale replica of the set design in the theatre). The show opens in a field setting with a piano on a raised central platform. When we meet the Melvyn family, the space becomes Possum Gully, their family farm. Horwell and Director Anne-Louise Sarks's vision for this field is that it represents both the rural Australian landscape and also a gig – the band is central to each setting. Horwell's set and costume design acknowledges that the band is central to the creation of the world of the story – they're not a backdrop or accompaniment, they are also creators. The piano is central to Sybylla's self-expression and creating cohesion with the other band members of actor-musicians. The synthetic thatch flooring is a gesture to the drought-stricken rural landscape. It's deliberately textured and should feel expansive, but it's also not trying to be naturalistic; Horwell's design is very theatrical.

Discuss Set Design

How does the set design, including choice of colours and textures reflect the rural setting that is central to the story?
How does the piano – placed in a central position – manage your expectations as an audience?

Orchard storyboard. Set model by Marg Horwell.

The second storyboard shows the orchard scene at Caddagat, Sybylla's grandmother's property, which was also Sybylla's childhood home. Caddagat has a feel of a refined English house in the Australian landscape (note the chandelier). Caddagat has everything that Sybylla's been yearning for – books, art and no farm duties. It's a fabulous life, but it's also a world where Sybylla is thrown into the marriage market – a very traditional expectation for a woman at the time. Caddagat's orchard is where Sybylla first meets Harry Beecham, a wealthy young man who owns a neighbouring property. Sparks fly between them. The flowers on the floor have been added in an earlier scene to represent Caddagat's fabulous, theatrical world. New scenes evolve with new additions like the ladders – these are a gesture to the orchard and are required for the apple-picking that takes place.

Ball storyboard. Set model by Marg Horwell.

The third storyboard shows the Beecham's ball setting. Harry's wealthy family throw a ball to celebrate Harry's return after a period spent away. Multiple chandeliers are flown in from above to highlight the wealth, flamboyance and playfulness of this scene.

The cast of *My Brilliant Career* on stage

Costume Design

Kala Gare

Set & Costume Designer Marg Horwell's design approach to *My Brilliant Career* blends period authenticity with modernity, celebrating both character and performers, all while honouring the complexities of the play's heroine, Sybylla Melvyn – a young woman ready to make her mark on the world.

For Horwell, *My Brilliant Career* was as much about creating a physical transformation as it was about weaving together subtle narrative shifts. 'This show, costume-wise, really was about developing a linear arc,' Horwell explains. 'We start with a contemporary look – a person who comes on stage with no character – before they begin playing an instrument. Then, we gradually embed elements into their costumes that allow the performer to seamlessly become any character, without the need for dramatic changes or making huge transformative shifts.' This flexibility in design is crucial, especially given the nature of the show, which involves all the actors playing instruments and dancing. 'The characters rarely leave the stage, and getting them to change costumes is so tricky,' says Horwell. 'Most of the changes are under a minute, so the costumes had to work within those parameters.'

The evolving world of *My Brilliant Career* became a balance of historical accuracy and imaginative interpretation. 'We needed to introduce a form of storytelling that would evolve with the piece,' Horwell continues. 'We started with a more subdued, period-appropriate world, but as the show progressed, the costumes become more saturated in colour and more playful in silhouette.' The aim, Horwell reveals, was to maintain a sense of malleability between the character and the performer. 'We wanted the line between character and performer to be quite fluid,' she says. 'As we went along, there was a desire to show that our performers were always present in the world of the play, no matter the character they were portraying.'

Discuss fashions now and then

Discuss how Marg Horwell blends period fashion with contemporary design and how these ideas connect to themes of the story.

Read the extended interview

Learn more about Marg Horwell's costume design in the article 'Stitching the story' by Tilly Graovac at **mtc.com.au/eduhub**

Sybylla's first costume design render by Marg Horwell

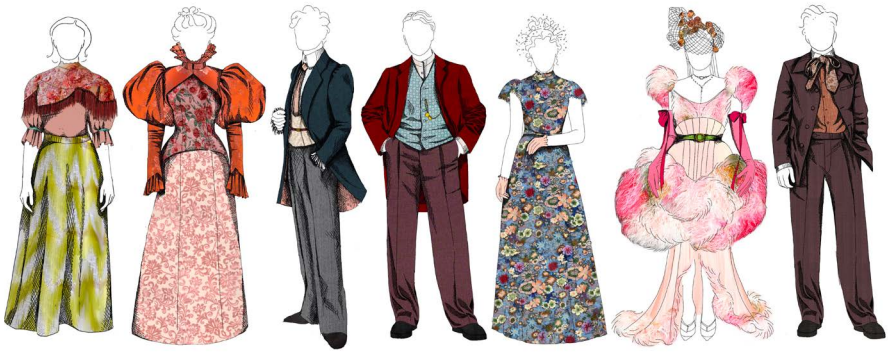
Sybylla's final costume, designed by Marg Horwell

'The first look for Sybylla is one of my favourite things I've designed. It's influenced by a recent Maison Margiela collection which featured cut-offs over pleated skirts. I love taking "now" fashion and smooshing it into period fashion. Her corset look is inspired by a Dior collection, and it's made from vintage bowtie fabric.'

MARG HORWELL
SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

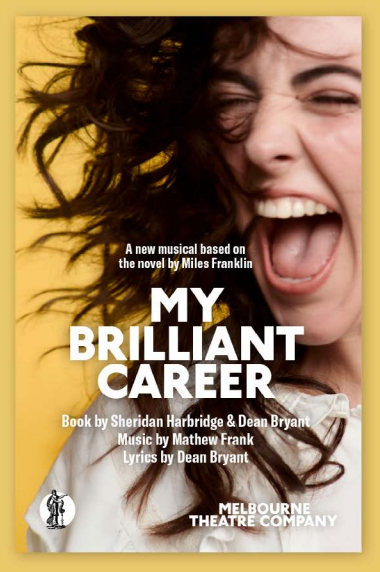
Designing for the play's protagonist, Sybylla Melvyn, was an especially rewarding experience for Horwell, and was done so with actor Kala Gare in mind. 'Designing for Sybylla, and by that I mean Kala and her physicality and the way she doesn't let clothes wear her, Sheridan's voice because I can hear her humour, as well as Anne-Louise's voice as director, has been so rewarding and, in my career, one of the most fulfilling tracks for a character,' she says. 'We wanted Sybylla's costumes to be oversized, playful, and absurd in a way that pokes fun at period fashion, corsetry and layers, particularly in a hot Australian climate.'

Apart from Sybylla's 'wonderfully anachronistic' first costume, one of Horwell's favourite designs is Sybylla's final costume, a denim wrap skirt and a pleated shirt rolled up at the sleeves. 'She looks so much older than she did at the start and over the course of two-and-a-half hours, she's matured beautifully. There's something simple about the palette and it's the opposite of a lot of musicals where you build up to be shiny and colourful at the end, it feels very genuine and grounded. The bookend of Sybylla is very satisfying to me.'



Saturated colours and playful silhouettes for the ball.
Design renders by Marg Horwell.

Learn more



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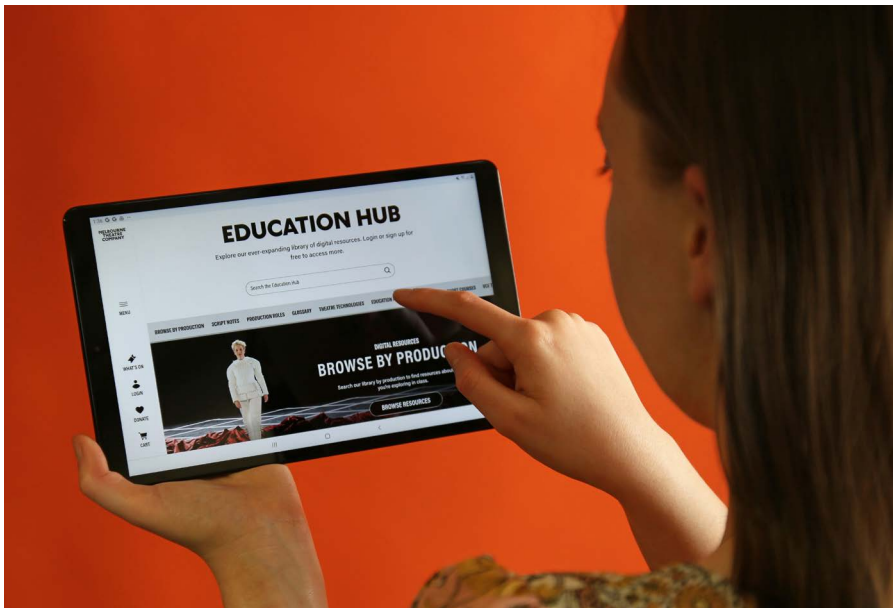

Learn more

Explore our full suite of *My Brilliant Career* learning resources, including videos and interactive resources, in our Education Hub.

Explore the resources at **mtc.com.au/eduhub**

Watch the trailer

Get a sneak peek of the production on stage in the video trailer.

Watch the video at **mtc.com.au/backstage**