



BLAZE A TRAIL!



David Harris, Tony Sheldon and Euan Doidge lead the *Priscilla* cast.



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Australians simply love to laugh at themselves – cue the ping-pong balls!

It's back! From outer space... Yes, *Priscilla* is touring the country, and leaving a trail of glitter in her wake.

LET'S FACE IT, the world can be pretty bleak these days. Thank the Goddess, then, for the glory of musical theatre and its magical ability to bring us some good ol' razzle dazzle.

More dazzling than most is *Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert: The Musical* now enjoying its ten-year revival as a theatrical production. As most will know, it's based on the original 1994 movie, conceived and directed by Stephan Elliott.

Having already played Melbourne, the production is currently shaking its groove thing in Sydney and heads to Adelaide and Brisbane next.

The story of two drag queens and a faded trans showgirl and their road trip from Sydney to Alice Springs is a much-cherish Australian cultural icon. The commercial success of the film back in 1994 took many by surprise but perhaps its greatest achievement was in bringing the LGBTIQ community to the forefront of public discussion in a positive way.

Times have certainly changed and that brings us to some of the sensibilities of the script's humour. Aren't jokes about camped-up men, oversexed Asian brides and country hicks a little dated in 2018? Perhaps so, but these clichés were certainly widely held when *Priscilla* first appeared and in the production's defense, it's that era that's still portrayed in the stage musical. Yes, we can look back and recognise that we were a little less sophisticated, less PC back then, but Australians

simply love to laugh at themselves – so cue the ping-pong balls!

You could be forgiven for thinking that the star of this show is the cast or even the bus. Sure, but the real star is actually the stunning, cleverly created costumes – of which there are a great many. Original Academy Award-winning designers Lizzy Gardiner and Tim Chappel have woven their magic once more. The costumes are brilliant, and their power is bestowed upon those who wear them.

Theatre stalwart David Harris (*Wicked*) plays the sensitive Tick, while fresh from the *Kinky Boots* stage, Euan Doidge delivers many of the show's best one-liners as the brazen Felicia. Robert Grubb (*Mamma Mia!*) plays the straight-laced Bob, with Emma Powell (*Fiddler On The Roof*) as Shiril, and Blake Appelqvist shines as Miss Understanding – including a shimmering turn as Tina Turner.

But it's Tony Sheldon as the gentle, middle-aged trans woman, Bernadette, who delivers the stand-out performance. Sheldon's take on Bernadette is quite different to that taken by Terence Stamp in the movie. It's a subdued version of the character but one that allows Bernadette to rise in stature over the course of the show. Sheldon makes the character his own. It's not hard to see how he and co-star David Harris have achieved such success internationally.

The dedication toward this musical extends beyond the cast to a devoted creative team including director Simon Phillips (*Ladies In Black*) and choreographer Andrew Hallsworth (*Anything Goes*). Hallsworth's creative partner Dean Bryant (*Sweet Charity*) is Associate Director.

One of the technically impressive aspects of this production is the timely transition of costume and make-up changes – they're fast! The show only has two actual make-up artists with the actors donning their own face paint. So how do the actors go from one look to the other so quickly? Well, apart from the convenient use of a quick-change crossover area backstage, many wear a temporary and cleverly made drag mask! Designed by Tim Chappel, they're a thin membrane of polycarbonate in all the colours of the rainbow!

Alas, there's still no music from ABBA, but that is made up with an abundance of Kylie; and Cyndi Lauper's poignant *True Colors* certainly finds its moment. Classics from the Camp Songbook such as *Hot Stuff*, *It's Raining Men* and *I Will Survive* power the show's disco tempo and '90s dance trademark *Finally*, helps bring the piece together satisfyingly.

Australia doesn't have many musicals to call its own, but *Priscilla* has reached New Zealand, the UK, Italy, Sweden, Brazil, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, Canada and Broadway. Not bad for a show inspired some 24 years ago, when writer Stephan Elliott saw a lone coloured feather floating down Oxford Street.

And, take note, such is her success that the copycat American film version, *Too Wong Foo*, is rumoured to be transitioning to the stage as well.

MORE: Priscilla Queen Of The Desert: The Musical is playing at Sydney's Capitol Theatre, and transferring to Adelaide in August and Brisbane in September. Go to priscillathemusical.com.au



Tony Sheldon's Bernadette.



(Above) She Will Survive: desert disco.
(Right) Euan Doidge's Felicia Jollygoodfellow.

