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## Classic Australian story gets a new life on New York stage



**Michael Koziol**

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**New York:** It seems an unlikely story to be told through song, let alone on a stage in Manhattan. But on Tuesday night, the musical adaptation of Joan Lindsay's classic novel *Picnic at Hanging Rock* will make its world premiere at a 200-seat off-Broadway theatre in the heart of Greenwich Village.

"It's a universal story, but with a very specific Australian landscape and character and culture woven through it," composer Greta Gertler Gold, one of the project's creators, says. "I've never seen that in New York."



Greta Gertler Gold and Hilary Bell outside the Greenwich House Theatre in the Village, where *Picnic at Hanging Rock* will premiere. YING XIANG TAN

It is a daunting task: reimagining one of Australia's most loved and important books – not to mention the Peter Weir film – nearly 60 years later and on the opposite side of the world.

Gold and her playwright co-creator, Hilary Bell, have worked on *Picnic* for about five years; Bell wrote the script and lyrics, Gold the music and arrangements. It's their third musical project together following adaptations of children's books *The Red Tree* and *Alphabetical Sydney*. "We always wanted to write an adult musical," Gold says. "I wanted to explore something very female-centric and Australian, and I'm always drawn to darker kind of musicals, or unsuspecting stories."

*Picnic* tells the story of three female boarding school students and their female teacher who disappear from a picnic at Victoria's Hanging Rock on Valentine's Day in 1900. Only one of the girls is later found, traumatised, and the mystery is left unresolved.



A group at Hanging Rock dressed as the character Miranda in 2018, as part of 50th anniversary celebrations of the novel. LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI

Gold says the musical draws on parts of Lindsay's "secret" 18th chapter – which was edited out of the original book but published posthumously, and provides some answers about what might have happened to the girls.

With permission from Lindsay's estate and input from Indigenous dramaturge Nick Harvey-Doyle, the musical also reinvents one of the young male characters from the novel, Albert, as an Aboriginal tracker.

Most of the cast are American, but ex-Sydney sider Kaye Tuckerman plays governess and mathematics teacher Greta McCraw, while assistant costume designer Jemima Firestone Greville is another Australian transplant to the Big Apple.

The Americans have had to learn Australian accents, though Gold says it wasn't as tricky as one might have thought – largely thanks to a certain anthropomorphic cartoon pup.



Anne-Louise Lambert as Miranda in Peter Weir's film of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). ALAMY

"A lot of the young actors have grown up with *Bluey* – it's very well ingrained in their consciousness," she says. "Some of them have also been watching Steve Irwin's son on TV."

For the unfamiliar, Robert Irwin last month won the US edition of *Dancing With the Stars*, watched by a little over 9 million Americans.

The development of *Picnic* was assisted by Creative Australia, Create NSW and Hayes Theatre Co, as well as the Australian Consulate-General in New York and private investors.

Before moving overseas in 1999, Gold co-wrote The Whitlams' classic *Blow Up the Pokies* with frontman Tim Freedman, as well as one of the band's darkest songs about lost young men, *Charlie No. 3*.

Drawn to New York City's music scene from a young age, she moved there in her late 20s following a short stint touring in Germany supporting an Australian singer-songwriter.

At the end of the tour, "I asked them to fly me to New York instead of Australia", Gold says, using her tour cash and a cousin's bed to springboard into a new life in the big city.

While Australian actors have found success in Hollywood and on Broadway, it's relatively rare for American audiences to be exposed to Australian stories. Last year, New York's Public Theatre hosted a limited run of *Counting and Cracking*, a 3.5-hour play about multiple generations of a Sri Lankan family who migrate to Australia, originally developed by Sydney's Belvoir St Theatre.

"As someone who has lived in New York as an Australian for a long time, it's very gratifying to bring that culture to life on stage here," Gold says.

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