

Meet the women turning an Australian icon into a New York musical

Peter Weir's "Picnic at Hanging Rock" put Aussie cinema on the world stage and spawned many adaptations, but never a musical. This indie-pop collaboration fixes that.



Creative partners behind *Picnic at Hanging Rock* musical, Hilary Bell and Greta Gertler Gold, at rehearsals in New York.

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Fifty years after Peter Weir's groundbreaking Australian film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* was released, composer and songwriter Greta Gertler Gold watched it on the big screen for the first time in a New York cinema earlier this year.

The haunting film lures its audience into the Australian bush alongside a group of boarding school girls who get lost on Valentine's Day, 1900. It casts the outback as an ethereal unknown and plots a supernatural mystery that never gets solved.

“The light from the film beaming onto the faces of these New Yorkers sitting in the dark felt so theatrical to me and so beautiful because they

didn't even realise that it really does capture this Australian light," Gertler Gold says of the anniversary screening.

But while her fellow cinema goers may have been watching the film for the first time, the 55-year-old had been chewing over the story for years.

While born in Boston, she lived in Sydney's eastern suburbs for her childhood, adolescence and early adult years. Watching the film first as a young woman, she assumed the worst, that it was a terrifying warning of outback rape and murder. But many years later, after reading the novel it was based on, the story landed more as a psychedelic romp through the bush.

This week, Gertler Gold presents a new adaptation of the novel – an indie pop musical that will make its world premiere in New York at the off-Broadway venue Greenwich House Theatre.

"Somebody described it to me as [Stephen] Sondheim meets Kate Bush," she says of the iconic Broadway composer and the Brit-cult 80s songstress. "I love that, and I'll go with that."

Gertler Gold, a law-school dropout who co-wrote rock anthem *Blow Up the Pokies* for band The Whitlams, moved to New York about 26 years ago. A mutual friend introduced her to Hilary Bell, the daughter of Australian theatre legend John Bell, and the pair have collaborated on and off ever since.

Bell, 59, wrote the lyrics for the musical, extending a very long arc in her memory of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* from childhood, when her mother, actress Anna Volska, auditioned for Weir's film (but missed out on the role of Mademoiselle, a French and dance teacher in the story, which went to Helen Morse).

"Like most people, and certainly most Australians, who have grown up with the story, I just assumed it was true until we started researching it," she says.

Based on original novel

While Weir's film put Australian cinema on the global stage and inspired other TV and stage adaptations, this project is based on the original novel by Joan Lindsay.

The author, who said the story came to her in a series of dreams, was a bit spooky herself and apparently stopped clocks in her presence (a motif in the story, rammed home with the sound of ticking clocks in the film).



Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* brings Joan Lindsay's story of mysterious disappearances to life.

An ambiguous mystery set in an unforgiving landscape feels a challenge for musical theatre, an art form characterised by narrative progression, climax and emotional payout from often happy endings. But Bell says so long as there is emotional closure – when the audience is left feeling something – a narrative ending is not essential.

Along with the majesty of nature, she hopes the production evokes the energy and excitement of youth. "We wanted that kind of messy, smelly, sweaty schoolgirl energy," she says. "That sense of anticipation that you have as you're growing up. And then in 1900 – and you know, now still – the way that that can be quashed when you start to realise all those doors are not going to open for you as a woman."

Apart from the well-known Australian musical theatre actress Kaye Tuckerman, the rest of the cast are American. They've been working on their accents, eating musk sticks and learning how to "cooee!“.

“It’s such an Australian story,” Gertler Gold says. “But New Yorkers are craving stories from other parts of the world more than ever now, right now. They want an escape.”

Gertler Gold is the lead producer and has raised money from about a dozen investors and her own savings. It has been a huge learning curve, working as a creative while learning the business of musicals at the same time.

The capital raised, which she declines on legal advice to disclose, is enough to pay wages, including for 16 actors and five musicians, and put the show on. And even though she can take on new backers all the way until opening night, there will be no immediate return from the four-week run.

The payoff, if it comes, will be from future productions. In her agreement with the estate of Joan Lindsay, if the production runs as planned, Gertler Gold and her investors take on the rights to the story in musical form in perpetuity. She hopes to bring it home to Australia and put it on in other locations, while also licensing it to schools, drama colleges and other productions.

“It’s my passion, this project, and my big swing of my career,” she says.