

A broad on Broadway

'The Queen of the Desert' has conquered Broadway. **Sally Clark** catches up with the choreographer responsible for the NY version.



Sally Clark

WHEN I SPOKE with music theatre choreographer Andrew Hallsworth in April, he was still coming down from the experience of a lifetime. He had just flown in from New York, following the

opening of *Priscilla – Queen of the Desert – the Musical*, and was still buzzing from the realisation that months of his hard work had just been realised on a Broadway stage.

Hallsworth has been associated with the stage adaptation of Stephan Elliot's 1994 motion picture since its theatre debut in Australia in 2006. He worked with the show's choreographer, the late Ross Coleman, on that original production as well as on the production that opened on the West End in 2009.

The working relationship of Coleman and Hallsworth dates back to Jacobsen Entertainment's original production of *Shout! The Legend of the Wild One*, in 2000. Hallsworth was cast as a performer as well as dance captain, but he was also assistant to Coleman. The partnership worked so well that Hallsworth continued to collaborate with Coleman until his death in 2009, co-choreographing both *The Music Man* (2002) and *Bye Bye Birdie* (2003) for the Production Company before embarking on *Priscilla*.

As a result, Hallsworth has an acute understanding of Coleman's motivation for the choreography in *Priscilla*, making him the perfect custodian of his work when it had to be reproduced for the Broadway production. His expertise was needed – the American producers changed 40 per cent of the show's musical content by substituting Madonna songs for Kylie Minogue's. Hallsworth had to choreograph all the new numbers while

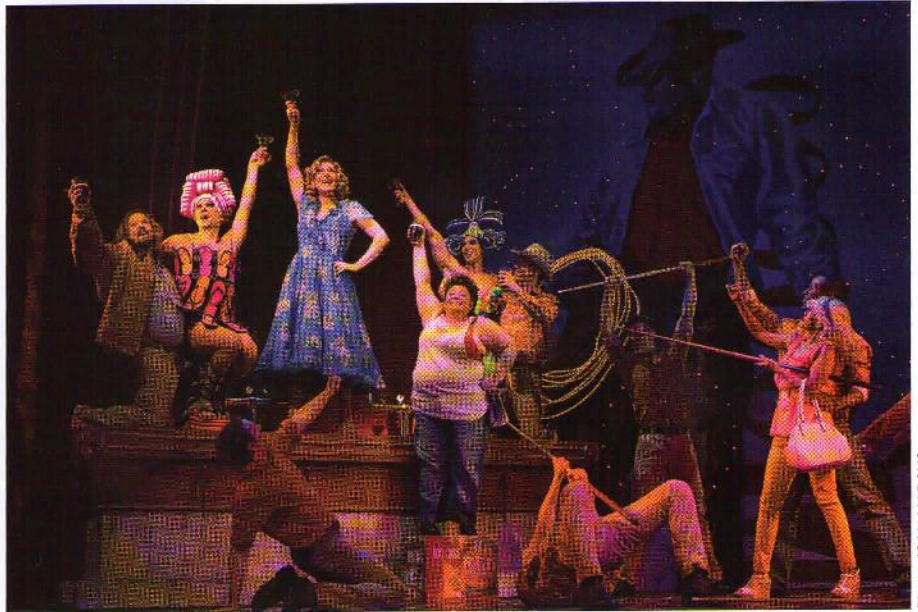


Photo: JOAN MARCUS

ABOVE: Tad Wilson, Will Swenson, Tony Sheldon, Keala Settle, Nick Adams and Mike McGowan in the Broadway cast of 'Priscilla, Queen of the Desert'.

keeping them in sympathy with Coleman's existing work.

"We had a very similar approach to choreography," Hallsworth says, "so I'm sure he is happy with what I've done with the new routines. He wouldn't want anyone else doing it, actually, so it was a real pleasure to step up to the plate for him: retain his work and add mine."

"It felt odd not having him in the room but he was there in spirit. Some days stronger than others – but he was there."

The Broadway *Priscilla* has had a long genesis, especially if you consider that the first auditions took place in 2009. It was "pure *A Chorus Line*," Hallsworth says, "hundreds of dancers, in Lycra, stretching. I think we saw close to 1500 performers. They just kept coming. It was pretty overwhelming, actually, that so many people were casting for the one show." He believes one of the major draws for those auditioning was that the musical was Australian with the original Australian creative team. They wanted to be in the first Broadway production of this show created by these people.

"I had groups of 40 that would turn over every 45 minutes. The dancers would repeat what I was saying and, at first, it threw me. I was thinking, 'why are they repeating everything I say?', and then I

realised – they were getting a free dialect class on the Aussie accent. Hilarious!

"We (also) saw quite a few Aussies who live in New York City, but none was quite right for the show. Tony Sheldon is reprising his role as Bernadette (he has played this role in all the show's incarnations) . . . so he is our flame holder."

Two further rounds of auditions followed and then rehearsals began in late August 2010. "We rehearsed in New York for five weeks, then moved to Toronto. Then there were two more weeks of tech rehearsals and two weeks of previews before we opened in Toronto, late October 2010, for a 12-week season to work the show in before Broadway. This was our 'out of town' time, which is very normal for Broadway. We don't have the luxury of 'out of town' here in Australia, so it was a real indulgence.

"Cast and creatives (director Simon Phillips, musical director Spud Murphy, *et al*) all met up again in NYC mid-February, 2011. We rehearsed and teched the show into our theatre on Broadway – The Palace – [which is] right smack bang in Times Square. We previewed for another three weeks and then opened on Broadway on March 20."

He continues: "It was so surreal. Having spent so much time in NYC over the last 18 months, day-in, day-out



The Broadway cast glams it up for 'I will survive'.

INSET: Andrew Hallsworth in the position he's always dreamed about: working on Broadway.

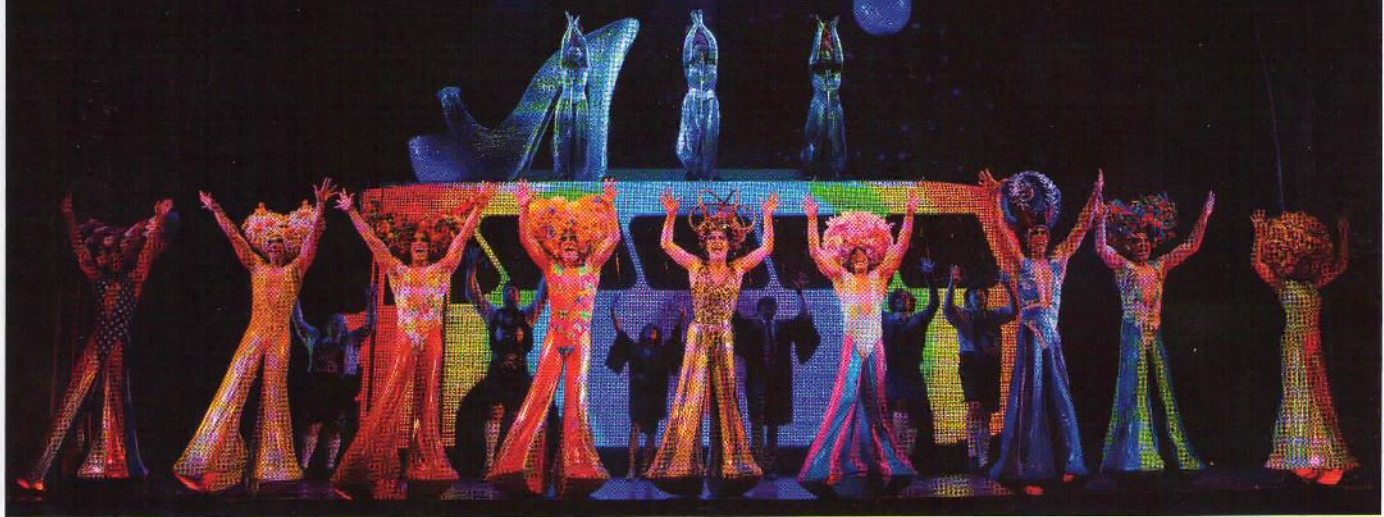


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(working) – it's great, but then you look up and see the lights on Broadway and you have a sudden 'ping!' and it dawns on you that you're working on Broadway. It makes you cry because it's the one thing you dream about. Tony Sheldon said the same thing. At no particular time, during the show, he would look out at the audience, (who were) screaming, laughing and applauding him, and then he would have the same 'ping!' and tears would just roll down his face! Broadway and the Broadway community are very special."

SPEAKING OF the Broadway community, one of its members who championed getting the show there was Bette Midler, who first saw the *Priscilla* on the West End. She fell in love with it and became a producer of the Broadway production. "Bette Midler's energy is infectious," Hallsworth says. "She is very direct and ballsy [but also] incredibly gracious. She gave us really positive and interesting advice. She never wanted to move away from the show's heart – the Australianisms. She loves Australia and that's what really attracted her to *Priscilla*. She got the humour: our Aussie larrikinism. It was amazing to meet her. I've never normally star-struck, but with the *Divine Miss M*, I was a giggling mess on the inside."

Another Broadway icon, choreographer and director Jerry Mitchell (*Legally Blonde*

– *the Musical, Les Cage Aux Folles*) is also credited as production supervisor on the Broadway *Priscilla*. "He was a part of the initial creative meetings, leading up to the rehearsals," Hallsworth explains. "He offered his opinion on the show, the script and new songs – advising us on what an American audience may or may not get. It was great but we didn't take his advice on everything. We would try most things and if what we did originally sat better with the show we would go back to that."

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"(Likewise) He never told me to choreograph a routine this way or that – that would never work or happen (as) we have very different styles and I always needed to keep the Ross Coleman vernacular so the show didn't look like it was choreographed by two choreographers. Jerry never knew Ross, so he wouldn't be the right person to put anything on the floor for him. [However] He has a spectacular resume so I was happy to get advice from him."

Immediately upon his return from New York, Hallsworth hit the rehearsal studio to choreograph the Melbourne Theatre

Company production of *Next To Normal* which was directed by Dean Bryant. He and Bryant then move on to co-direct the Production Company's upcoming production of *Anything Goes* (which runs in Melbourne in July). While in NY Hallsworth saw the revival of this piece starring Sutton Foster and Joel Grey. "It was a beautifully designed production. Fast paced. Great choreography and direction."

Between his professional commitments, Hallsworth is grooming the new blood of the industry in his role as director of the musical theatre course at Todd Patrick's Patrick Studios Australia in Melbourne. "I have

taught the Musical Theatre classes at PSA since it opened five years ago, but last year I started devising a course with Todd that was actor/singer based. I've had two musicals on the West End (the other being *Eurobeat – almost Eurovision*) and now Broadway so all my experience – about what's needed to get a gig, and how hard you need to train and maintain training – is what I've put into the timetable for this course.

"Longevity, in this business, is success. Being a lead actor is not the be-all and end-all. Having a long, fulfilling career is what's important."