

Hugs, tears . . . this show has it all

Emotions ran high as a new music theatre prize was announced yesterday, reports **John Mangan**.

It was like the climax of a musical. The crowd was hushed, the tension palpable, the envelope was opened, the winner announced, suddenly Marina Prior rushed out on stage and started singing. Naturally, by the end of the song, everyone was in tears.

A typical Thursday morning in stately Raheen manor? Not really, but a milestone in Australian musical theatre perhaps, as the inaugural \$80,000 Pratt Prize was announced by the glowing Jeanne Pratt.

The winners, selected from a field of 143 entrants, were emotional. Writer Gary Young and composer Paul Keelan had worked with Marina Prior before in their musical theatre day jobs, but hearing her sing *You Take Me to My Dream*, from their manuscript, *Sideshow Alley*, was just too much.

"It was just a total surprise," Keelan said, as the hubbub died down and the fact that he and Young had just won \$50,000, plus a \$30,000, workshop began to sink in.

Without the prize, who knows what *Sideshow Alley's* future would have been. Musicals are fearfully expensive to stage, and producers are reluctant enough to gamble on proven shows, let alone take on new works by unknown writers.

There's the vicious circle. While Australians have excelled internationally in so many fields of the arts, musical theatre has always been something of a poor cousin. Ironically this is partly because the occasional smash hit makes it look like a field that doesn't need government support.

Producers are loath to gamble on new names, and newcomers remain newcomers because they can't get any of their shows staged — Young and Keelan themselves confess to having a few other shows sitting in the drawer that haven't had the opportunity to make the leap from page to stage.

The Pratt Prize, which was



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The \$80,000 clinch — Marina Prior congratulates an overwhelmed Paul Keelan. Moments earlier, Gary Young and Keelan had been fighting back tears as Prior sang their song. Finally, after the hubbub, a toast to Jeanne Pratt.

PICTURES: JOHN WOODSTRA

judged by Jeanne Pratt, Ken Mackenzie-Forbes, Jonathan Mills and Michael Shmith, should help. "It's fantastic," Keelan says. "The prize gives us exposure. And as it comes up each year, it should inspire writers to keep writing, because there will be this avenue."

Johnny Chester, the Australian rock and country legend (*Shame and Scandal* was one of his hits), decided a few years ago to try his hand at a musical, *Rebound*, which he wrote with playwright and actor Alan Hoppgood. One of the six finalists in the Pratt Prize, the show has been performed twice by amateur groups, but will it ever be performed professionally?

"I spent ages working on it

and Alan Hoppgood came in and helped me and then everybody said to me, 'The easy part's writing it'. And I thought, that's taken three years, and that's the easy part? But it's the truth. I was very fortunate that a theatre company in Wagga picked it up for the opening of their new civic centre theatre, and a group in Mornington did it last year, but the professionals are reluctant to do new productions because they've got to know they're going to get bums on seats."

Rachel D. Taylor, general manager of the Production Company, which will stage the workshop of *Sideshow Alley* next year, knows how limited opportunities are

"There are only a few venues like Chapel off Chapel that are prepared to take a risk with new work, and with a new musical you're fighting an uphill battle because audiences don't know the story and haven't heard any of the songs. Even *Witches of Eastwick*, which had a familiar story, closed earlier than they might have hoped," says Taylor.

"The great thing about this prize is that it enables people to focus on refining their music — they don't have to take a job as a waiter. Also, the workshop gives potential directors and artists a golden opportunity to see the work with a full cast, and a band of 10 or so."

One of the benefits of the prize from the perspective of

one of its judges, Ken Mackenzie-Forbes, is that he is fed up with sending writers' royalties out of the country. He told the audience at the awards presentation that as a producer he reckoned that over the years he'd been responsible for tens of millions of dollars going overseas.

Colleen McCullough, Max Lambert, Anthony Costanzo, David Sale, Anthony Crowley, Ron Creager and MaryAnne McCormack joined Young, Keelan, Chester and Hoppgood among the shortlisted finalists, but the judges' final decision was clear.

"We were asking the question, is it a good piece of drama?" says Mackenzie-

Forbes. "Will it work as stage entertainment? We had to decide which was the strongest theatrical entertainment and had the best music."

As for Jeanne Pratt, her aspirations for the Pratt Foundation's inaugural prize are clear. "I would like them to have a hit on their hands and go on to write more things," she says.

"Rather than trying to find an Australian Beethoven, I was more or less trying to find an Australian Irving Berlin.

"Hopefully it will get on the stage properly and be a big hit, and who knows, it might go overseas.

"Wouldn't it be great to export an Australian musical!"