

Song and dance for a top prize

Australian-made musical theatre got a big fillip yesterday courtesy of Jeanne Pratt, writes **Jane Albert**

ONE of the country's most generous philanthropic arts families has taken the poor state of arts funding into its own hands and awarded the inaugural \$80,000 Pratt prize for music theatre.

Jeanne Pratt yesterday handed over a cheque to Paul Keelan and Gary Young to develop their musical *Sideshow Alley*. The lucrative annual prize, which includes \$50,000 in cash and a \$30,000 workshop performance with Pratt's Melbourne-based the Production Company, is the first of its kind in Australia. An ecstatic Young says the prize will be crucial to the survival of the music theatre sector in Australia.

"Plays are taken care of, new music works receive grants, but I think music theatre suffers from the dreadful label of commercialism. Yet it's one of the most popular forms of entertainment in this country," he says.

"This [award] is fantastic both from the point of view of the funding and having an award like this in our industry."

Pratt says she established the award to fill a yawning gap in the development of music theatre. "It's very important we have our own voice," she says. "It's time we had our own musical [industry] instead of importing from overseas all the time." Besides the local hit

The Boy From Oz, which is awaiting its Broadway opening, and David Atkins's musical dance work *Hot Shoe Shuffle*, there have been few commercially successful Australian musicals. Little money is funnelled into the development of new work and many productions founder at the development stage.

"Our music theatre producers have triumphed on Broadway and in the West End," Pratt says. "I believe our writers and composers have the ability to follow them with original works of opera and music theatre. But until now there has been so little incentive."

Sideshow Alley was selected from a field of 144 entries. The judges — Pratt, Ken Mackenzie-Forbes, Jonathan Mills and Michael Shmith — selected six finalists including Colleen McCullough, Max Lambert, Ron Creager and Anthony Crowley. Pratt says the judges were looking for "an Australian Irving Berlin rather than Beethoven".

Sideshow Alley is a tragic love story set in an outback sideshow boxing tent in the 1950s. "I tried to find something that had a certain Australian content to it and was also commercial, not too arty farty," Pratt says. Young, the associate director on the Australian production of *Mamma Mia!*, wrote the lyrics while Keelan composed the work. The couple has collaborated on other works, including *Ship of Fools*.



Showtime: Young, left, and a tearful Keelan are awarded the Pratt prize