

# Knockout Aussie tale puts life back into musicals

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At last the arrival of a new musical that isn't strung together from a back catalogue of popular tunes.

*Sideshow Alley*, by Gary Young and Paul Keelan, is that rarest of things in today's conveyor-belt culture - an unashamedly Australian tale replete with larrikins, show people, dry humour, slang and sentimentality.

The tuneful show, staged by Young for its world premiere at the Queensland Performing Arts Centre on Saturday, has tremendous promise and in its best moments is spirited and heart-warming.

Set in Jimmy Sharman's 1950s boxing tent and associated travelling carnival of exotic characters and forbidden pleasures, *Sideshow Alley* may not have broken the drought when it comes to producing home-grown musicals, but at least it puts some life and excitement back in the field.

Keelan's music is an appealing mix of stirring ballads and duets about the fickleness of love, resilience, fortune and fate. The focus is on the love triangle of the young tent boxers Billy (Alex Rathgeber), Alec (Christopher Parker) and the object of their competing affections, the fortune-teller Rita (Silvie Paladino).

The music has shades of *Les Miserables*, *West Side Story* and *Beauty and the Beast* while its rhythm, atmosphere and mood most immediately recall Nick Enright and Terence Clarke's *Summer Rain*, also a musical about an outsider show troupe, the prejudices they encounter and their quest for acceptance.

*Sideshow Alley* recaptures the heroic spirit of a motley populace clinging to tradition and set to become extinct in a quick-changing world and with the advent of television.

Young's book needs refinement, especially the problematic second act which pushes for tragedy without offering sufficient context or logic to convincingly carry it through.

There is a vastly talented ensemble on hand, including Michael Bishop, Robyn Arthur and Sally-Anne Upton, to convey the essential grit, humour and pluck.

But the work needs further development given its pregnant pauses, repetition and uneasy tie-up of loose ends.

Young's staging is deft and engaging while Parker and Rathgeber are outstanding as the bruised and brooding boxers. They are a knockout in a show headed for Melbourne and Sydney.

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