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# Magic carpet lifts treasures of Aladdin to Sydney stage

Having seen Broadway's version, **Jo Litson** can't wait to see the Disney musical *Down Under*

**T**he magic carpet ride in the much-loved 1992 animated film *Aladdin* is one of those golden Disney moments.

As *Aladdin* and *Jasmine* soar over the city to the Oscar-winning ballad *A Whole New World*, rug-rats and oldies alike succumb to its romantic charm.

Animating it on screen is one thing. Pulling it off convincingly on stage is another matter. But the magic-carpet ride is truly magical in Disney's smash hit musical *Aladdin*, now into its second year at Broadway's New Amsterdam Theatre.

As it glides around the stage against a starry night sky, it's a beautiful effect, entralling the audience. How it's done is a mystery. Standing backstage after the show, gazing up at the carpet now hanging high above the stage, it's still impossible to work out how it operates — and the staff at Disney Theatrical aren't telling.

The magic carpet is now flying overseas. An Australian production is on its way and Sydney audiences will see it first at the Capitol Theatre from July 27 next year. Based on the film, in which Robin Williams voiced the manic, shape-shifting genie so memorably, the musical sticks closely to the Disney formula, but bursts with infectious energy and wisecracking comedy.

It's also a visual delight with an eye-popping palette of vibrant colours and more razzle-dazzle than the *Mardi Gras* parade. Gregg Barnes' costumes — all 337 of them — are richly decorated with embroidery and sparkling beads. Gold trousers worn

during the Genie's show-stopping number *Friend Like Me* are each encrusted with 1428 Swarovski crystals.

Bob Crowley's sets are equally colourful, including a

wonderful *Cave of Wonders* with glittering mounds of gold.

Disney doesn't talk budgets but it's clear no expense has been spared. A lot of time, love and sheer hard work have also gone into the production.

After try-out seasons in Seattle in 2011, and Toronto in 2013, Thomas Schumacher, president of Disney Theatrical Productions, and his creative team restructured the show, rewrote some songs, added new ones and reworked several visual effects. It paid off. The show has been playing to packed houses since opening in March 2014 on Broadway, where more than one million people have already seen it.

**T**he day after experiencing the production, a handful of Australian media is treated to an intimate presentation by Schumacher and Alan Menken, the show's composer.



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Friends and colleagues for 25 years, they banter together as Schumacher introduces songs from the show, which Menken talks about and sings.

As Schumacher says: “There isn’t a Disney fan in the world who doesn’t know the oeuvre of Alan Menken.” The eight-time Academy Award-winner wrote the music for Disney’s films such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty And The Beast*, *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback Of Notre Dame*, *Hercules*, *The News Boys* and *Enchanted*.

Aladdin won him Academy Awards for Best Original Score and Best Original Song (*A Whole New World*), as well as two Golden Globes to add to his umpteen other gongs.

The musical features the five songs from the film: three written with Howard Ashman (who died in 1991) and two with Tim Rice. There are also three numbers written with Ashman that didn’t make it into the movie, including a touching ballad for Aladdin called *Proud Of Your Boy*, and four new songs written with Chad Beguelin (*The Wedding Singer*).

The film’s Genie songs were written before Williams was cast, with Ashman envisaging the character as a black hipster, Harlem jazz musician in a Cab

Calloway or Fats Waller mould.

“My first thought was ‘can Robin Williams sing like Cab Calloway?’,” recalls Menken with a laugh, adding Williams worked really hard to learn to sing *Friend Like Me* just the way they wanted it. “Then they said ‘let Robin improvise’ and you had this force-of-nature, hysterical improvisation.”

The Genie in the musical is closer to the jazz vibe originally intended, but just as much of a show-stealer. A larger-than-life, genial character, he charms the audience, getting the show off to a spectacular start with a new version of *Arabian Nights* and bringing the house down with *Friend Like Me* — now a maniacally entertaining big-band number.

James Monroe Iglehart won a Tony Award for his joyous portrayal on Broadway. The question now is who will play the genie in Australia?

**ALADDIN, CAPITOL THEATRE FROM  
JULY 27, 2016. TICKET WAITLIST:  
ALADDINTHEMUSICAL.COM.AU**



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The exuberant stage cast of Aladdin have whooped it up on Broadway and in Toronto. Picture: Deen van Meer



Maestro Alan Menken with Thomas Schumacher in New York.