

SPECTRUM

YOU OUGHTA KNOW

Alanis Morissette on the guts
of the musical *Jagged Little Pill*
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Strong women pop bitter pill

Alanis Morissette insisted there be no holding back on tough issues in *Jagged Little Pill*, the hit musical inspired by her iconic album.

How on earth am I not one of the 33 million people who bought Alanis Morissette's confessional album *Jagged Little Pill* when it came out in 1995? Nominated for nine Grammys and winning four, including album of the year, it skyrocketed the now seven-time Grammy winner to what she later said was PTSD-inducing fame at the age of 21, when fans regularly broke into her hotel room to leave notes. Twenty-five years later it's still one of the top 20 best-selling albums of all time, and has been re-released twice – as an acoustic re-recording on its 10th anniversary, and in 2015 as a 20th anniversary deluxe collector's edition. Its latest iteration is the Tony Award-winning *Jagged Little Pill: The Musical*.

Perhaps best-known for the immortal lyric, "Would she go down on you in the theatre?" (from the break-up anthem *You Oughta Know*), the original album addresses the perennial themes of unrequited love, growing up, ageism, sexism, perfectionism and loneliness head on. And, judging by all the recent comments on her YouTube channel from people who have been listening to her literally since they were children, the songs resonate as much as ever.

Comments such as, "I was 11 when this album came out. I'm now 36, and it hits differently, but goddamn it's so good!" and "Perfect still speaks to me so strongly, I use it as a guideline when talking to my own children", testify to its enduring impact. The *New York Times* journalist Jon Pareles' live interview for the *Times Talks* podcast series includes a Q&A session where both women and men take the opportunity to thank Morissette for changing/saving/guiding their lives – including two sisters who discovered her when they were six.

It's easy to see how the album might have resonated with angsty teens, but children? Having now fallen under her spell for the first time in my 60s, I find her videos *A Blaze* (an ode to her children from her 2020 album *Such Pretty Forks in the Road*), and 2016's *Souleye + Ever + Me + Love = Sweetness* exquisitely affecting. It's as if her emotional authenticity chimes with yours, like an E string resonating with the plucking of an E string on another guitar across the room – a phenomenon known as sympathetic resonance.

"Her music is so capacious," says the musical's director, Tony winner Diane Paulus, on the eve of the opening of the Australian production. "Alanis's emotional power is very theatrical and I just knew that energy, that kind of vulnerability and fearlessness, would be super visceral." And it is. When I saw it on Broadway last week, the audience was by turns crying, laughing

and cheering, and leapt to a standing ovation mid-show at Lauren Patten's rendition of *You Oughta Know* – a response so frequent that extra minutes were allotted in the production to absorb it.

But although the songs are informed by Morissette's life, this is not the Alanis Morissette story. "Her only request was that it not be about her," says Oscar-winning screenwriter Diablo Cody (*Juno*), who won the Tony for best book of a musical for *Jagged Little Pill* in 2020.

"[When the producers] ran the idea past me, I thought, well that sounds interesting, but the only way I'd want to do it is if it wasn't a jukebox musical. It would have to be a story I could sink my heart's teeth into," says Morissette, speaking to me over the phone from the San Francisco Bay Area, where she lives with her husband, hip-hop artist Mario "Souleye" Treadway, and their three children.

Having immersed myself in all things Alanis for over a week in preparation for this interview, when we talk her voice feels like a warm bath after a hard day. Or a hug. "There were several meetings with Pulitzer Prize winners, but it didn't feel like a match until I met Diablo Cody, at which point I had a sense of what this could be and I got really excited. And then director Diane Paulus signed on and then choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, and then I just thought, wow this is one plus one plus one equals 500. So I got *really* excited!"

Cody, a fan of the Canadian singer since her teens ("She is an icon to me!"), felt the same. "Revisiting the album, I thought I'd be reminded of being a teenager and that would be the energy I brought," she says. "But when I listened again I thought, oh, actually these songs feel super relevant and I'm not getting a nostalgia vibe at all. I'm getting a present day vibe, and it might be more political than I'd expected."

Evolving over the next several years against the backdrop of emerging Trumpism, the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, and the public exposure of Harvey Weinstein, among other sexual predators, the show centres around a dysfunctional Connecticut family – Mary Jane, a controlling, opiate-addicted mother, her husband Steve, a porn-watching workaholic, and their adopted queer black daughter, Frankie, and picture-perfect birth son, Nick – whose lives implode when Nick's friend, Bella, gets drunk at a high school party and is raped while she is unconscious.

The show covers so many of today's hot button issues, including rape, the opioid crisis, sex and work addiction, trans racial adoption, gender identity, and more, that it was dubbed by *The New York Times*, "the



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WRITER DIABLO CODY

most woke musical since *Hair*." It's not every day we experience a rape on Broadway. "That was one of the topics that I was very gently asked to *not* be part of the musical," says Morissette. "And I said, 'Not a f—king chance! We have to put this in or I'm not interested.'" Not only does she have personal experience, she adds: "I don't think I've actually met a woman who hasn't been subject to some version of it. Even the request for it not to be in the musical is in and of itself a form of erasure."

But there was controversy when the show was accused by the trans and non-binary community of erasing references to the perceived non-binary identity of the teenage character Jo between the Boston try-outs of the show in 2018 and the Broadway production's premiere in December 2019. Paulus and Cody say this was never the case – not least because Lauren Patten, the actress who originated the role in both productions and won the Tony for best featured actress in a musical, is cisgender.

"Jo is a gender non-conforming teen on a journey with an unknown outcome," says Paulus. And Patten has said that she looks forward to the role being played in the future by actors across the gender spectrum. (*Muriel's Wedding* star Maggie McKenna, who identifies as a "non-binary, queer human" will play the role in Australia).

That characters and issues can develop and grow in real time is part of what Cody loves about Broadway. "If you're doing TV and it flops, the pilot goes in the trash. This was like, OK, let's make it better," she says. The process made her "fall back in love" with writing. "In Hollywood, it's very hard to approach projects as art, because you're thinking about budget, about social media, about all these things that are not artistic," she says. "In the theatre, it's still very much alive and well, this mindset that we're artists. It really felt like, hey, let's put on a show, in a way that I haven't experienced in a very long time."

"The inside-out approach is always the



From far left: Alanis Morissette performs in New York in December 2019; Diane Paulus, Morissette and Diablo Cody at *Jagged Little Pill*'s December 2019 Broadway premiere; the Australian cast: from left, Liam Head, Grace Miell, Tim Draxl, Natalie Bassingthwaite, Emily Nkomo, AYDAN and Maggie McKenna. PHOTOS: GETTY

one that feels best," agrees Morissette, who famously creates songs from journal entries. "We could go outside in, and think about what the demographic is, what's working in today's culture, fill in the blank, but the truth is, none of that matters to me. What matters is, is this getting us all excited? Do we jump out of bed wanting to continue to write?"

Part of what makes Morissette jump out of bed is her drive to heal others. "From the very beginning she was like, 'This show is going to be a therapeutic exercise – for the actors, for us, for the audience,'" says Cody. "We're going for our own jugulars," says Morissette who, along with 20 per cent of the population, identifies as a Highly Sensitive Person, four per cent of whom are also, like her, Empaths [in the psychological theory coined by clinician Elaine Aron]. "And the bar is held high. This isn't just an invitation for a quick gig. It's an invitation to be part of a movement towards wholeness, towards greater self-awareness and understanding and empathy."

Hearing *Mary Jane* sung by Steve and *Perfect* by Nick touches her profoundly.

"The post-trauma I have around misogyny and patriarchy, just hearing a man emoting in that kind of way by singing those lyrics. It's jaw-dropping to me," says the singer, who confesses to invariably being "a sobbing mess" in the audience. "And when we were doing it in Cambridge, I was thinking, god, we have to write a note on the bathroom door. We have to tell people that if it triggers something for them, there are resources and places for them to get support, because it's a lot to walk out of a theatre with."

It is a lot, partly because the show covers so many – some say too many – issues. "But these issues are ubiquitous," she says. "So any reticence on some people's parts was merely, 'Can we take this on?' And my answer was always yes!" Morissette's bravery and willingness to take things on is striking. But as an artist on her own terms. Her response to the new HBO

documentary, *Jagged*, which she has dismissed as "salacious" and full of "implications and facts that are simply not true" and "a reductive take on a story much too nuanced for them to ever grasp or tell" is an example of how she feels when the reins are taken out of her hands.

Her own art reveals all there is to know about her to anyone who cares to really look. And there is plenty to see. Singer, songwriter, activist, writer, blogger, one-time advice columnist (for the British *Guardian* newspaper), producer, wife, mother, home schooler, podcaster and executive producer of an upcoming TV comedy about a 40-something, married with three kids rock star, famous for her youthful anthems of female rage. The title is *Relatable* – the perfect choice for a show inspired by (but not about, she says) a public figure so relatable that her website address is just her first name.

Meanwhile, she is promoting her latest

album, *Such Pretty Forks in the Road*, and looking forward to going back on tour, including rescheduled Australian dates in late 2022. Performing is "like a prayer," she says, speaking with relief about her recent post-COVID US tour. "It was so great to be back and making a joyful noise with everybody."

And with that, the very relatable Alanis Morissette, who agreed to doing this interview later than planned to accommodate my pre-existing therapy appointment, signals the end of the interview with the words, "Thank you so much. Now I'm going to go and snuggle my kids."

Jagged Little Pill runs at Theatre Royal Sydney from Thursday to December 19, then opens at Comedy Theatre Melbourne on January 2. Tickets from jaggedmusical.com. The documentary, *Jagged*, premieres on Foxtel today.

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Geraldine Hakewill, Ewen Leslie, and Zahra Newman. Photo by Daniel Boud.