

feature

PICTURE  
JAMES GREEN





# BULLY FOR YOU

Maggie McKenna is playing one of Australia's most-loved characters in her professional debut but the daughter of TV royalty is more than up for the challenge. She tells **Julie Hosking** why Muriel still matters.

When Maggie McKenna tells me she really identifies with Muriel Heslop, I try not to let my scepticism show. How could this pretty, vivacious slip of a thing, with a smile as wide as the Sydney Harbour Bridge, relate to an ABBA-loving social misfit from the backwater of Porpoise Spit? What on earth would this incandescent millennial have in common with the unlikely heroine of an iconic Australian film that was made before she was even born?

Quite a bit, actually. "At school, I was definitely a loner. I really struggled," she says. "I never had many friends and got bullied quite a bit. I was never happy there, so that sort of thing of the mean girls really hits close to home for me. I felt like an outsider, 100 per cent. I can really relate to Muriel, so it's an awesome thing she's been brought into this century."

Leaving aside how old that makes those of us from the last century feel, Maggie is right. With the exception of the aforementioned mean girls, there would be few females who hadn't felt as vulnerable and overlooked as Muriel at certain times in their lives. And there would be even fewer who hadn't grown to cherish the kind of female friendship that is the heart and soul of Muriel's Wedding. Why wouldn't her story resonate across generations?

Maggie herself was introduced to the 1994 film by her paternal grandmother. "I saw it with my grandma the first time because it was her favourite film," she says. "I would have been three or four, so 'You're terrible, Muriel' has been a part of my vernacular since I can remember. Since she's passed I feel like she's here with me for the show. She's here, she's watching me."

She'd certainly be proud of her granddaughter, stepping into some very famous shoes. And in her professional debut. When we meet a week before her 21st birthday – "I know, best birthday present, EVER" – she's still pinching herself to make sure it's not a dream. It's a warm spring day, so warm in fact we've moved from one corner of the restaurant overlooking Sydney Harbour, at the end of the pier where she's about to start rehearsals for Muriel's Wedding the Musical, to another more sheltered spot.

Maggie is understandably on a high, a visible mixture of raw excitement and nerves as she contemplates the enormity of the next step. "It's incredible. It's super, super scary and daunting because people love Muriel and loved Toni Collette as Muriel, and Toni is an icon, she's incredible, so it's huge shoes to fill," she says. "But I sort of can't think about it like that. I have to say 'It's a different show, it's a different part and I'm Muriel now'. I have to do that because if I get in my head 'Oh, Toni did it better'... I'll just never do a good job. I can never be Toni, so I just have to be my Muriel."

The ambitious undertaking has been a long time in the making, with the film's writer and director P.J. Hogan initially reluctant to bring his beloved baby to the stage. When he finally agreed to adapt it for Sydney Theatre Company, with award-winning director Simon Phillips at the helm, the spectre of the film – and audiences' affection for it – hung over cast and crew, not so much as a dark cloud but as a reminder of what was at stake. You

could almost feel the tension in Making Muriel, Nel Minchin's excellent behind-the-scenes documentary, which aired on ABC on Sunday. If there's one thing you don't want to do, it's stuff up an Aussie classic.

For P.J., there was also another more complicated layer: it was personal. The Heslops were based on his own dysfunctional family; his father was the bully Bill "the battler" Heslop, his mother the struggling Betty, his sister the troubled Muriel.

Then there was the matter of creating new songs for a story that had been inextricably linked with a Swedish supergroup. "What pop songwriter wants to go head to head with ABBA," jokes Keir Nuttall, who wrote the musical's original songs with partner Kate Miller-Heidke. "Yeah, the last thing we want is for people to go 'What were those shit songs in between the ABBA songs'," Kate adds.

But everyone knew the most crucial decision would be choosing the "right" Muriel. "We knew that it was going to be difficult to cast," P.J. says in Making Muriel. "It's not like there's a list of actresses who could play Muriel. I'm still waiting for Toni Collette to walk through the door."

That the 21st century Muriel would arrive via a video, when the production team had almost despaired of finding someone who ticked all the boxes, took everyone by surprise. Like Toni Collette before her, Maggie McKenna was a complete unknown. She had recently graduated from the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, where she had gone to study at 18 "to toughen up" and challenge herself outside the comforts of home.

"When I told Mum that they still couldn't find a Muriel and I was going to go for it she was like 'OK, you'd be great but just don't get your hopes up because it's a big role and they're probably going to want to cast someone older and more experienced'," Maggie recalls. "Fair enough, because that is generally what would happen, but I went 'Nup, I'm going to do it'. I had a gut feeling.

"I sent a tape in from the States and then a few days later they sent me back the callback material and said 'The day you land, can you come straight to us and do a callback'. So it was a 16-hour flight of not sleeping and then going to the callback!"

After being asked to do a two-week workshop to determine whether she'd be given the part, Maggie delayed her return to LA, flying back the day it wrapped. Armed with a year's working visa for the US, she was contemplating a merry-go-round of auditions competing with "anorexic" blondes for parts in Hollywood she wasn't sure she wanted when she got the call: she would be Muriel.

The first thing Maggie did was Facetime her parents. "I didn't tell them straight away. I said 'So, my agent called me about Muriel ...' and then Mum cried and Dad was so stoked. Mum's been so incredibly supportive and happy and has cried more about it than I have. It's one of our favourite films as a household."

Mum is Gina Riley, one half of another Australian cultural icon, TV's Kath & Kim; Dad is producer Rick McKenna, whose credits include the much-quoted series. Her parents – who have nothing in common with »

*'It's a different show, it's a different part and I'm Muriel now.'*





« Muriel's bullying father and depressed mother – have always been encouraging, even though they know the downside of this fickle industry.

They've also led by example, showing it is possible to have a public profile but keep your private life separate. "I've come into this industry with that view of I'm happy to be seen when I'm doing work and when I'm doing publicity for the show but keeping a very low-key life outside – that's how you maintain sanity, pretty much. Because this industry can be pretty rough," Maggie says.

Something she experienced as soon as the cast was announced in June (she'd had to keep it a secret from almost everyone she knew for six months). "I go on Facebook but then when the launch happened you'd see really mean comments about you and you'd be like 'What have I done?' I've had to make a real conscious effort not to look at any of the Muriel stuff because it messes with your head. No one wants to read mean things about themselves. It's about focusing on the work, all that other stuff is just people's opinion and it doesn't matter. You don't have to live a life that's out there, and that would be quite empty in the end."

Maggie believes it was inevitable she'd follow in her mother's footsteps in some way or another. Growing up in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Elsternwick, the only child naturally gravitated to the arts. "I hated sport and I hated school but anything performing wise I'd just light up and love it," she recalls. "My parents knew from a young age that I was going to do it, as much as they didn't want me to do it, I was sort of born into it ... it's their fault! I got to be around it all the time so of course I'd want to do it, it looked so fun."

It was through performing that Maggie started to build her confidence and self-worth. "I was a very, very shy kid," she says. "I did every outside of school

program I could and was auditioning since I was 15 and that's when I started getting confidence in who I was – that I was a worthy human because a lot of time at school I didn't really feel like that. I really found my friendships out of school; I met a group of people when I was 13 in a performing group and they're still my best friends – they were the people who kept me sane through high school."

School was challenging in more ways than one. "I felt really dumb as well. I'm smart in other ways but not academically, so my teachers would make me feel really stupid and then I didn't really fit in, so I felt like there was really no place for me at school."

Maggie believes the relentless pressure put on students to achieve high ATAR scores only contributes to the sense of failure that can envelop young people struggling to find their way. "I had a terribly low ATAR and the shame schools put on you for that ... for what? It means nothing. I would love to do something around that at some point and help people who feel like they don't fit in. It just makes people so unhappy, that pressure."

While she was still at school, the empathetic teenager volunteered for Headspace, which helps adolescents suffering depression and anxiety, giving input on fundraising and ways to help other young people. "I'd love to work with them again."

It's likely they'll come knocking on the back of her rising profile, for 21st century Muriel is proving a winner. Critics are as enamoured of her performance as they are with the adaptation, which premiered in Sydney late last month. She's been described as entrancing and engaging, with a powerful voice and great stage presence. And perhaps the biggest compliment of all: "Maggie McKenna's Muriel makes us fall in love with her all over again."

In the musical, Muriel still dreams of escaping the wrath of her father and her mundane existence in

*'I felt like there was really no place for me at school.'*



**From screen to stage** Bill Hunter and Toni Collette in the film; the cast of Muriel's Wedding the Musical (top); Maggie as Muriel and Madeleine Jones as Rhonda (top right).

Porpoise Spit for the big city, where she's sure she will find someone to love her. This time, though, there's the added lure of social media. Muriel thinks if she manages to secure the kind of following the Kardashians enjoy on Twitter all the adulation will make her happy. Of course, it doesn't.

Maggie believes it's the timeless nature of the characters that has enabled its rebirth as a musical. "The characters are so well written. Muriel is just the classic outsider everyone relates to. There were all those mean bitches in school everyone hated, so you relate to that, and you also relate to the friendship Rhonda and Muriel have."

Having worked really hard to win the coveted role, Maggie isn't about to put it down to luck. But she does think the producers were looking for "the essence" of Muriel. In her audition, she sang a song from the musical Dogfight called Pretty Funny, which is about a girl who feels left out. "It's a very Muriel song, which is why I chose it. It's a goofy song as well. And I think they wanted to find someone who's a bit of a nerd, a bit of a weirdo just naturally."

Then there was the vocal range required for the new songs. "Kate Miller-Heidke has got this ginormous range and writes these incredible songs,





**Famous footsteps**  
Maggie has followed Mum Gina Riley (left in Kath & Kim with Jane Turner) into showbiz.

and the struggle was to find a dork who could carry off these songs,” she says. “She and Keir, who have been writing together for years and years, they are really good at getting into the headspaces of characters, so they’ve really hit the nail on the head of what’s going on inside Muriel’s head, which is an extra-sprinkle bonus for people who love the film. You get a bit more deeper inside into how she’s feeling when she’s alone, which I think is so cool.”

As for the man who started it all, Maggie can’t quite find enough superlatives. “I think P.J. is a genius because he’s written a piece that you can laugh your head off through and then be sobbing and then laughing again, and then crying, which is very, very hard to do – to make a piece that stands up and people want to watch again even though it is sad,” Maggie says. “The fun parts are obviously so great to do but also telling the story of my mother and her suicide is so touching. Justine Clarke is so incredibly beautiful in the role that it’s breathtaking.”

And, yes, Maggie grew up watching Justine on Play School. Having one of her TV idols play her mother is yet another surreal experience along this incredible journey. For those who associate her real

**Words and music** Kate Miller-Heidke and Keir Nuttall (right) wrote the original songs for the musical.



mother more with comedy than music, Maggie is quick to point out Gina has a cracking voice.

“Funny story, actually. When she was pregnant with me she was doing a musical here at STC, so it’s kind of full circle,” she says. “She’s a really strong singer, so I grew up with us belting our lungs out in the car. I loved Fleetwood Mac, that was me and my dad’s favourite band. I listened to a lot of music theatre because Mum loves music theatre and Dad loves AC/DC, so we’ve got it covered!”

Maggie has also been writing songs for as long as she can remember. “When I was a kid, I thought I’m going to be a pop star – yes, quite a common dream,” she says. “I would write and write and perform ... pop and rock and music theatre. It’s sort of therapy in a way, that’s how you deal with emotions and with things you feel, that’s how I learnt to deal with it, especially being an only child. I spent a lot of time by myself – you talk to yourself and sing to yourself. In my head, I was always playing to stadiums!”

Maybe one day she will. As Toni Collette says in Making Muriel: “Playing Muriel was overwhelming, a hugely life-changing experience.” It’s hard not to see history repeating itself for 21st century Muriel.

Maggie isn’t allowing herself to think too far ahead but she is relishing every single minute. “I think it’s just so awesome that I get to play for my first big role someone who doesn’t fit in – who I obviously love – and does get bullied and it’s around mental illness ... it’s such an incredible piece to be a part of.”

I suggest that some of the mean bitches who made life hell at high school might suddenly try to hook up via social media, angling to become friends with a newly minted star. “They might be and I’ll be like ‘Who are you again, sorry I don’t remember,’” she says with a laugh. “No, whatever. I’m happy, so that’s all that matters.” **WW**

**Muriel’s Wedding the Musical is at Roslyn Packer Theatre, Sydney, until January 27, see [sydneytheatre.com.au](http://sydneytheatre.com.au). A national tour is yet to be announced.**

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