If men weren’t from Mars and women weren’t from Venus, Rita Abrams and Josie Brown never would have met, and their musical version of “Pride and Prejudice” wouldn’t be having its world premiere in London this week.

It’s an unlikely partnership, if only because the women live and work in different worlds. Abrams is the Marin-based Emmy-winning composer who had a surprise hit song in 1970 with “Mill Valley,” an ode to the town she has called home since 1968, recorded with the third-grade class she was teaching at Strawberry Point Elementary School. And San Francisco-based Brown is a novelist whose titles include “Secret Lives of Husbands and Wives” and the “Housewife Assassin” series.

Abrams and Brown met through their association with the author John Gray, author of “Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus.” Abrams was turning that book into a musical revue in Las Vegas, and Brown’s husband, Martin Brown, was the guy who made that project happen.

As the two women got to know each other, Brown was impressed by Abrams’ work writing revues for grown-ups like “For Whom the Bridge Tolls” as well as songs for children.

When I was reading “Pride and Prejudice” for the umpteenth time, I was struck that the story really should be a musical,” Brown says over coffee with Abrams in a café near her Pacific Heights home. “Everything about Rita is melody and harmony. She’s also very contemporary, but I knew she had a musical in her. I knew she could pull of a period piece. I talked to her about it, and she hemmed and hawed for a year.”

That was in 2007. When Abrams, who was absorbed in other projects, finally turned her attention to Jane Austen’s much-loved 1813 novel, she was amazed by what she read. “Austen is so contemporary,” Abrams says. “Her humor is absolutely present day, and I knew I could maximize that I figured, ‘Somebody is going to make a musical of this. It might as well be me.’”

Somebody already made a musical of “Pride and Prejudice” — several of them, in fact. The most famous is the 1959 Broadway flop “First Impressions.” There is a half dozen others kicking around out there, including one that utilizes Austen herself as a character.

Listen to samples of Rita Abrams and Josie Brown’s Pride and Prejudice: the Musical at www.prideandprejudicemusical.com
“We tried to be as true to the book as we could be,” says Abrams, who still lives in Mill Valley. “When Josie brought the script to me, I was a little in awe. Did she write this or did Jane Austen?” Watching their easy, energetic interaction in the café, it’s clear Abrams and Brown enjoyed their collaboration. They say they would do it again in a heartbeat if the right project came along.

“One reason we work so well together is that we both do totally different things,” Abrams says. “We each have complete admiration and respect for the other. I couldn’t sculpt a plot and (form) the structure the way she did.”

HUMOR IN LYRICS

“And I couldn’t move the story along through lyrics and find the humor in the characters he way Rita did,” Brown says.

Once the women got down to the serious work, with Abrams writing music and lyrics and Brown the book, they had a workable show within a year. They recorded a demo CD and began to look for theater companies to produce the show. After what they describe as a “long, arduous” process, the first to bite was the Ruislip Operatic Society in Northwest London. The world premiere opens Tuesday and runs for three weeks. Both composers will be there, then it’s home and on to other projects.

Brown’s novel, “Secret Lives of Husbands and Wives,” has been optioned as a TV series by producer Jerry Bruckheimer, the guy behind the “CSI” franchise on TV and the “Pirates of the Caribbean” and “National Treasure” series on the big screen. NBC has begun filming the show with plans to air it in early 2013. “I think NBC wants this to be its ‘Revenge’” says Brown, who is busy pitching other books to other networks.

GREAT CONCEPT

“The best thing I can do is come up with a great concept and just follow through,” Brown says. “TV is so different from writing for theater or writing novels. With a novel, you write by yourself and work and an editor, who makes careful tweaks. On TV, they say things like, ‘I think we’re adding a murder.’ They change everything, so you have to be flexible.”

Abrams is also immersed in other projects, including a review she wrote with Morris Bobrow and Gerald Nachman “New Wrinkles,” which keeps popping up all over North America. She’s also working on a two-person musical called “Just My Type” based on the Myers-Briggs personality test.

“It seems like for years I’ve been trying to clear the decks to write a hysterical little musical revue for women,” Abrams says. “But that still hasn’t happened. There are so many other projects that I don’t know if it ever will.”

“And I still haven’t written my ‘Gone With the Wind’ yet, either, says Brown, who will release more novels in the coming year. “We’ll see how ‘Pride and Prejudice’ goes. If it has wings, Rita and I will have to collaborate again sooner rather than later.”

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