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Two Bay Area women collaborate on London musical

Chad Jones
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Writer Josie Brown(L) and composer Rita Abrams, creators of Pride and Prejudice Musical premiering in London at the end of November, pose for a portrait outside Josie's home in San Francisco, CA, Monday, October 15th, 2012 Photo: Michael Short, Special To The Chronicle / SF



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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.

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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 cafe near her Russian Hill 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 off 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 had made a musical of "Pride and Prejudice," several of them, in fact. The most famous is the 1959 Broadway flop "First Impressions." There are a half-dozen others kicking around out there, including one that utilizes Austen herself as a character.

"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?"

"We immediately became aware of the tons of Jane Austen societies around the world who are adamant you remain true to the book," Brown says. "We wouldn't even use a contraction if we couldn't find it in the book."

Watching their easy, energetic interaction in the cafe, it's clear Abrams and Brown enjoyed their collaboration and say they would do it again in a heartbeat if the right project came along.

Ask the women their ages, and their stream of happy conversation slows. They'd like to simply state their ages and get frustrated with themselves when it turns out to be more complicated than that. Abrams admits to being in her late 60s and adds, "Say that I'm excited I'm not 70 yet." Brown thinks for a minute and says, "Say that I'm ageless in my 50s."

Their collaboration is a much easier topic. "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 for the structure the way she did."

"And I couldn't move the story along through lyrics and find the humor in the characters the way Rita did," Brown says.

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