

WEST WEEKEND

JANUARY 28-29 2017

SINO
TYPE

Celebrate Chinese
New Year in style

BELLY
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FOOD THAT
MAKES YOU
FEEL GREAT

TIM MINCHIN

One of Perth's favourite sons is finally
bringing his baby back home.

plus »

ROBERT
DREWE
STANDS UP
FOR ROTTO

The Weekend West

Home truths

WORDS JULIE HOSKING PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

Tim Minchin has conquered the world stage but the Perth boy with a love of language and a healthy disregard for authority hasn't lost sight of what really matters.

The doorbell rings midway through our conversation. We can't see from our position on the couch at the back of the mezzanine but a purple unicorn

has just entered the cavernous room below bearing a bunch of balloons. "It's for Violet," the public relations manager calls out. "Oh, thanks! That's the second present someone's delivered for my daughter," the bemused dad says to me. "It's a bit spooky."

It's Violet Minchin's 10th birthday and it's a pretty special one. Just her and Dad enjoying some one-on-one time in his home town; mum Sarah and younger brother Caspar are back in Los Angeles. However, the fair-haired charmer has to share him with some media and a select group of guests at a special showcase later in the day.

For this isn't Tim Minchin, the struggling actor who left Perth for Melbourne more than a decade ago in pursuit of work. Or even Tim Minchin, the toast of comedy I first met 10 years ago when he came home to play *Amadeus*, having broken through at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Now, he's Tim Minchin the musical genius. The master of wordplay and irreverence behind not one but two hit musicals. The star of myriad TV projects home and away. The director in charge of a big-budget Hollywood film boasting a bevy of Australia's best talents. And the voice of one egotistical cane toad. His name has become a calling card.

Except that the thoroughly normal, incredibly nice and undeniably funny man in front of me is at pains to point out he isn't that different. What he can do might have changed but who he is has not. It's why he feels faintly ridiculous rattling around the impressive but enormous Mansions at Crown. "Downstairs there's a gym, outside, that pool, that's just our pool," he gestures out the huge, light-filled windows. "And there's two massage tables! It's just me and Violet down in one of the big beds."

Tim is thoughtful and generous with his answers, grateful not to have to explore his entire backstory once more ("Seriously, couldn't you just Google that," he says in reference to the countless times he's been asked to revisit the past). We talk about the tyranny of distance, the abuse of authority, the horrors of the internet and the pitfalls of parenthood.

It was when he realised he would be away for Violet's birthday for about the fifth time in her short life that he and Sarah decided she could come with him on his latest round of promotions for *Matilda*, the smash-hit musical based on Roald Dahl's beloved book about a little girl who stands up to bullies in her quest for learning. There was also the bonus of two loving sets of grandparents and cousins (courtesy of brother Dan; sisters Nel and Kate live on the east coast). Violet is out now with Tim's mum Ros, buying a dress for tonight, and Tim is clearly delighted to have her with him. But he's also pragmatic about the sacrifices that come with success.

"I miss my kids when I'm away but everything's a trade-off isn't it? We have such a fun life, all of us, and my kids know they're loved and are brought up with reasonably strong boundaries, just like I was, and if they're sad that Daddy's away for their birthday, well I'm sad too, that's normal. I don't think," he says, launching into a line from the Harry Chapin song about growing up, "cats in the cradle and the silver spoon ... I might, I do wonder. But this year I have been away half the time when you add it all up and that's too much. But that's an exception because *Groundhog Day* was opening in London and I was trying to keep these two huge projects moving forward."

Like his first hit musical *Matilda*, which finally opens in his home town late next month, *Groundhog Day* is drawn from much-loved source material, the 1993 film starring Bill

Murray and directed by Harold Ramis. Is he something of a masochist, adapting projects that carry a heavy weight of expectation because of the original's reputation?

"I guess you feel 'Sh.., I hope I don't blow

this', but with *Matilda* I felt much more like 'I hope I don't let down the amazing artists I was working with'. I came on quite late and Dennis Kelly had already written this really cool adaptation and I was like 'Oh my god' because it was a *huge* change in the level of responsibility and my sense of responsibility for it was to them. The Dahl side of it, I was like 'Well, yeah I should be the guy to do that because I'm like a Dahl guy and it's quirky and it's wordy and it's funny and, yeah, I might f.. it up but I've got as good a chance as anyone'."

He took a similar approach to *Groundhog Day*, which will open on Broadway soon after *Matilda* premieres here. "I think *Groundhog Day* is a brilliant idea for the stage, even a play. I think the movie is great but the Ramis and the Murray of it all that I adore, because they're geniuses, that's one thing you could do with the text – the other is make an amazing musical, well hopefully. It doesn't make me worried about doing the right thing by the text because I only have one setting, which is to do my best."

It was *Matilda* director Matthew Warchus who planted the seed while they were in New York for their first big hit. "He was like 'We should do *Groundhog Day* next', and I was like 'F.. yeah, how do you get the rights to that?'"

It's one thing to get the rights but it's much harder to bring a dream to life, particularly two such high-profile potential disasters in the making. To take the story of one of fiction's best-loved heroines to the stage, a journey beautifully and intimately explored in sister Nel's documentary *Matilda & Me* last year, and emerge so triumphant (it won seven Olivier awards and four Tonys) is almost unbelievable. To back it up with the critical success of *Groundhog Day* is the stuff of fairytales, something Tim was sweating over on more than one front – one of the musical's major backers had pulled out weeks from opening.

But none of this prepared the 41-year-old for the demands of filmmaking. The animated musical *Larrikins*, which he directs and has written the music for, is due out in 2018. "I'm playing (he assumes the character's distinctive voice) a cane toad called Andrew and his voice came from me touring with Todd McKenney who would do Peter Allen's voice and then I would do Todd McKenney doing Peter Allen," he says. "It sort of morphed into this kind of pansexual cane toad who thinks he's a massive rock star and thinks he's beautiful and 'There must be more to me than just this face'. He's quite funny."

When Universal Studios bought Dreamworks last year, the film was "teetering on the edge of maybe not happening at all after four years of my life and \$40 million", but it's back on its almost all-consuming track. It was *Larrikins* that necessitated the family's move from London to LA a few years ago.

"We didn't want to leave the UK. I love London, and the things it did for my life, and the theatre, and our little village," Tim says. "But when this idea came up 3½ years ago that I should direct – I was already writing music for it – I was like 'Ha ha, I've never directed anything', and they were like but 'You've got a vision for it and we'll support you', and I think my ego, probably regrettably, said yes."

He hesitates. "It's been an amazing experience but the things I've had to not do (to keep it moving) ... it's hard," he says. "It's also brilliant and the most creatively challenging thing I've ever done. Every day. I'm making creative decisions on script, I'm directing Jacki Weaver, I'm talking about the surface of a feather or the 3-D ..." Then there's the discovery »



***'I miss my kids when I'm
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« that he's not so bad at leading people. "The artists are very forward in telling me that it's a very positive experience for them because I can keep it fun and listen to people, providing they're not talking to me from a position of authority. As long as they understand that all conversations, all ideas, whether they come from the janitor or the head of the studio, are equal to me – and that mine are slightly better!"

He laughs again. Tim is the first to admit he has a problem with authority or, perhaps more accurately, assumed authority, and he's not even sure why. Raised in a "normal family" by strict but fair parents, who he absolutely adores, he says he was a B-plus student at Christ Church Grammar who was far from a troublemaker.

"I'm still not. I'm no punk. In Australia, I think I've got this reputation ... I'm not an anarchist and I'm not arbitrarily iconoclastic or arbitrarily anti-establishment, I think I'm the opposite," he says. "I'm a data-head and I read and the idea that a cardinal of the Church should be protected from normal everyday criticism is wrong," he says, referring to Come Home (Cardinal Pell), the song he released last year demanding George Pell come back from Rome to testify at the royal commission into child sex abuse. "The language with which we talk about these people should be the same in which we'd talk about a tennis coach, or a football umpire or a builder ... you don't get to hide behind silks."

He was shocked by the response to the song, though it was overwhelmingly positive, raising money for victims to go to Rome to hear Pell's evidence. "The church s.... me for some reason and it is authority, and it is the idea that there's an institution that claims moral high ground when it's dragged along by moral progress," he says. "Morality is a moving beast, it requires constant thought and balance but there's no doubt we progress. The moral arc bends towards liberty ... there's a quote, I don't think it's liberty, maybe equality. I don't know but it's a good word. You know s...s bad but if you long graph, it's getting better."

I look up the quote later "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice". Tim thinks the best way to instil a moral code in his own kids is to be open and honest with them. But, having been on the flip side of success, how do you teach them about struggle from a position of privilege?

"I don't know. I mean, we're staying here. I just tell her but telling her is not as good as experiencing it. I said to Violet: 'You turn 10 today, you'll never stay in a place like this again, I never have, no one ever does. You have to understand that this company are putting on our musical and for them that represents huge business and this is like a fun gift. And she totally gets it, Violet is super ahead of all this," he says. "It's very interesting this level of privilege and you would probably be surprised by my home. I'm very lucky



we've got a nice four-bedroom home. I didn't think I'd be able to buy one ... the space my wife and the kids occupy is about the size of this (pointing around the room), the kids share a room, but that's not to say I'm not spoilt rotten and my kids are not spoilt rotten. And we live in Hollywood where the homelessness is a big problem and you have to address that very early. You know 'Why does that man live on the streets?' So my kids knew the idea of mental illness very young and I wish they didn't but maybe that's fine."

It brings to mind a scene in Matilda & Me where Tim's staring over the LA skyline, looking homesick. "I wasn't, that's just Nel trying to manipulate me," he laughs. "It's interesting, though, the closeness of my family is partly because of that distance. We talk all the time on Viber, we're constantly sending each other photos and stuff and we miss each other but it's a joy to see each other when we do and we're not in each other's faces all the time."

He acknowledges the distance will be harder as both sets of parents get older and he and Sarah have long wanted their kids to go to high school in Australia. It's why they're moving back next Christmas, at least to Sydney, where Nel lives with her husband Guy and little girl Ivy. "Oh, Ivy," Tim says, his face lighting up. "Violet just loves Ivy. It's a big enough driver to drive us home and turn my back on pretty serious global potential, which doesn't suit half my brain and very much suits the other half. I want to be the sort of person..." he trails off.

Who gives your kids the sort of life you had growing up, I venture. "Yeah, but I've already f.... them up. It is different. I've been very careful, I've certainly made decisions not to get super well-known but in this country I've kind of missed the boat. I mean not everyone knows who I am, and that's great, I'm certainly not on the telly all the time, but I'm well enough known that the kids will have a parent who is known, which is a pity."

He's very protective of his children. At the showcase a few hours later, when someone asks if they can take a photo of Violet with him, he very politely declines. I chat to Ros, who is keeping a close eye on her granddaughter, and his dad David. They are clearly proud of their boy but it's also obvious this down-to-earth couple don't treat him any differently from their other three children. He might be Tim Minchin the superstar on the world stage but back



Words & music
Tim receiving an honorary doctorate at UWA; with wife Sarah at Matilda the Musical in London; the young cast of Matilda performing Revolving.

here in Perth he's just Tim, one of four beloved offspring. I can't help think it's one of the reasons he's remained such a decent human being.

And Sarah, of course. She may not be here tonight but the former social worker has been by his side through so many ups and downs. Tim is quick to acknowledge the many sacrifices she's made for his career. "She went through proper grief when we left London because we had babies there and that network, they were her family," he says. "She's great, though. She's incredibly resilient and one of those people you sort of meet and you think 'Yeah she's nice' and then suddenly, a year later, you're like 'I'm in love with that woman' and you don't know quite what happened. She sits very in the centre of herself."

Nor does she define herself by how others might perceive her, of being "just" Mrs Minchin. "She doesn't need to be seen as a certain thing by people. She's not jealous of me. She doesn't have a chip on her shoulder, I guess that would worry her if she thought it was a thing. She's funny but only if you give her space to be. She's not competitive. We're both actually, we're quiet sorts of monsters, we don't shout or argue, believe it or not."

Which is not to say, like all couples, they don't have their struggles. Staying together through thick and thin is hard enough, let alone in the spotlight. "Everyone has battles; ours are different. But we were lucky in that we weren't in it for the stuff that we ended up having. We weren't in it for the money or recognition, though I was very, very keen to have a job that lasted, so I guess that means recognition. I wanted a career."

'Morality is a moving beast.'

The demands of juggling multiple projects may prevent the WAAPA graduate from making it back to Perth for the Matilda premiere. "My mum is outraged by that," he says with a rueful laugh. "I desperately want to be here ... I desperately want to be a part of the Australian industry and feel like I'm contributing but I would stop short of feeling like I owe too much. I owe my absolute best and I give my best, and I owe everyone who works on my shows huge respect and the production here as well – saying it's world class is faint praise; it's not even close."

I get a taste of the marvellous Matilda that evening when Tim slides behind the piano in a penthouse suite overlooking the Swan for the showcase. As he entertains the small crowd with a few anecdotes and a couple of songs, the sun sets behind him, casting a golden glow. It was such a magical occasion I wouldn't have been at all surprised to see purple unicorns appear at the window. **W**

Matilda the Musical opens at Crown Theatre on February 28, see ticketmaster.com.au.