

# TV To Go: Tim Minchin is almost upstaged on his musical comedy Aussie road trip



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Published November 26, 2019



IT'S a bit cheeky when you sit down with your interview subject and the first thing you ask is about their incredible co-star. Thankfully, actor/comedian/composer and all-round renaissance man Tim Minchin gets it.

Upright, a comedy-drama road trip through the Australian Outback involving an unlikely duo and a piano, is Minchin's baby. As well as playing self-destructive lead Lucky Flynn, he's co-scripted, co-directed, co-exec produced and composed new songs for it. But it's newcomer Milly Alcock as gobby teenager Meg, his uninvited, oft-times aggravating young travelling companion, who threatens to steal the 2,400-mile ride from Sydney to Perth. 'She's the story, isn't she?' agrees Minchin good-naturedly. From the hundreds of young female actors who auditioned for the role, Mill, as he affectionately calls her, ticked all the boxes. And then some...



Road trippy: Minchin plays a self-destructive pianist crossing Australia

'I was very keen to find a girl who could play 16 but was 18 and Milly was 18,' he says. 'So that was one thing. Secondly, her face - the camera just eats it up. Thirdly, we had to decide whether to go with a funny girl who gets away with the dark stuff or a dramatic actor who gets away with the funny. At that time I thought she'd probably be stronger with the drama, which suited me fine because I didn't want the comedy to be about actors with timing. I wanted to make it truthful.'

Meg might appear as tough as old boots but there are things in her life she's keeping hidden. A pivotal scene shot early on involving a dying camel (there are camels, snakes, a racehorse and a baby kangaroo) revealed the full extent of Alcock's acting chops.

'I thought, "This kid's got no limits," says Minchin, 44, who lives in Sydney with his wife, Sarah, and children Violet and Caspar. 'She can do it all. No tantrums, no needing... anything. No mum, no friends, no minders, no one on set. We said, "We can fly your mum in." Her mum's a nanny. She said, "Mum can't afford to take time off work." We said, "We could pay her to come for a week." "Oh no, she's got the kids." Amazing. So self-contained. I can't say enough.'



Misfits: Minchin and his co-star Milly Alcock

When we talk, Minchin is about to head off round the country on his musical comedy cabaret show, *Back*, which wraps up just before *Upright* airs. Making a go of it as an actor, though, is an ambition he's harboured for years. As an 18-year-old living in Perth and making music, he couldn't work out how that might happen.

'When friends went off to NIDA [Australia's Rada] I was like, "It's not for me, I'm not good-looking enough." Then, since I got a profile over here, I've been very cautious about it.'

There was a guest role in David Duchovny's satirical TV industry sex fest, *Californication*, and the part of Judas Iscariot in the O2 Arena stage production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Yet he turned down a big-bucks *Seinfeld*-style US sitcom where he would have played a version of himself.



'I never thought a sitcom was the right idea for me,' he says, 'I just don't feel funny like that. So I kept making sure I wasn't just doing "funny guys". I felt with *Upright*, this will be what shows them that I can actually act and will get me lots of acting work.'

There's a pause and a smile. 'Of course, now I've done it I'm like, maybe I don't need a bunch of other people's affirmation any more.'

Another possible iron in the fire is the long-awaited film adaptation of *Matilda: The Musical*, the record-breaking stage show for which Minchin wrote the Olivier-winning music and lyrics.



'I have to admit that I don't need to be involved, although obviously I'd like to be,' he says.

'*Matilda* was never mine. I was just the composer/lyricist. There is a script. Sony's just changed all its management so no one will commit but hopefully they'll press go on it and it will get made.'

Whatever happens with *Matilda*, the future looks bright for Minchin in the acting stakes. Proud of his co-star he may be but his unfussy performance is a key part of a show that plays out like a little gem. Lucky and Meg's adventure is funny, engaging and, at its conclusion, surprisingly moving. Does he think the show has a message?

'The s\*\*\* in your life becomes the fertilisation for future flowers.'

A fragrant note to finish on.

■ All episodes of *Upright* are available on Sky Atlantic and NOW TV from tomorrow