



LAUGHS OUT LOUD

Australian comedians are captivating the world's comedy capital, writes Jane Cornwell



RED hair teased into a fright wig, eyes rimmed with kohl, Tim Minchin hunches over a grand piano at London's Queen Elizabeth Hall and launches into a nine-minute beat poem about his dinner party encounter with a witless hippie named Storm. "Reading auras is like reading minds, or tea leaves or star signs or meridian lines," he intones, bare feet working the piano pedals. "These people aren't plying a skill, they're either lying or mentally ill."

A rapt audience admires the Australian comedian's infectious tunes and witty wordplay — "Only a ginger can call another ginger 'ginger,'" he sings in the bigotry-bashing *Taboo* — then erupts into cheers. Most people there are fans who have seen him perform at the Edinburgh Festival, in British theatres or on British television, or have read reviews of his show *Ready for This?* and know what they are in for. A few of the unsuspecting walked out earlier, after a song attacking religious zealots. "Walkers!" Minchin shouts. "Go on, f - - k off!"

Over at the Porthole Club, a comedy venue on northwest London's Kilburn High Road, Kent Valentine has a small crowd in stitches with his hilariously honest stories. ("Nothing compares with the feeling of making a whole room of people laugh," he'll say later. "And knowing that you haven't even hit them with the best bit yet.") Billed as "the next Adam Hills", the likable host of ABC1's *Spicks and Specks* who lives half the year in London, Valentine is one of an increasing number of 20-something Australian comics making their mark in Britain.

There's confrontational firebrand Brendan Burns, winner of the 2007 Edinburgh Fringe Festival's coveted if-comedy award (formerly the Perrier) for his show *So I Suppose This is Offensive Now*. The equally blue Jim Jeffries, often described as one of the rudest shock comics of his generation, was notoriously attacked on stage in 2007 by an incensed punter in Manchester. Comedians such as Logie-bestowed *It Takes Two* winner Julia Morris, recently returned to Australia after eight years in Britain.

"It took me a while to chip through the system, so I'll definitely be coming and going," says the genial Morris, dubbed a "force of nature" by London's *Evening Standard*. "London is the comedy capital of the world."

Morris's new show, *Don't You Know Who I Used To Be?*, premieres at next month's Melbourne International Comedy Festival, the annual laugh-a-thon that showcases local talent and brings the best overseas comedians to Australian audiences. Most of the above comics will also do dates in other capital cities, in the copycat festivals that have sprung up in the wake of Melbourne's success. "Everyone's desperate for a laugh at the moment," Morris says.

We Australians pride ourselves on our droll humour and laid-back view of life. So while career opportunities for comics have never been greater — comedians are the big money earners in commercial radio and TV — we demand that they are funnier than we are. "We have to work a little harder," Morris agrees. "Especially in Britain, where comedy standards are higher and everyone has a funny Australian friend."

Britain is where the real work is, says Susan Provan, director of the Melbourne comedy festival since its foundation in 1987. "For people who are good it makes sense to perform in Britain for six months or even end up living there. The Edinburgh Festival is a good entry point, but I just think the Brits are very open to Australians. And the UK comedy circuit is huge; you can perform there every night of the week and several times each weekend if you want to."

Having made it in Britain, many Australian comics are springboarding to Los Angeles to showcase their wares and, ideally, secure their own TV series. Some aim to make it in the movies. "Every American agent I talk to is after their own Eric Bana or Tim Minchin, who they've all heard about now," Provan says.

"Comics no longer stand in front of a microphone every night; they can have very comfortable careers without being the latest hot young thing. There's always another hot young thing five years behind them anyway."

Five years is roughly the time it takes a talented comic to go from playing a tiny room at the Melbourne comedy festival to selling out a huge one, or from being low on the bill at a London comedy haunt to headlining British theatres. Not every Australian act works in Britain: the raw-meat-throwing surrealism of female duo Miss Itchy perplexed Edinburgh audiences; Ocker stand-up Dave "Hughsie" Hughes returned home improved but unappreciated. Many switch

careers: despite having won best act and best show at the recent British Chortle Awards, Minchin is off to LA next year to try acting.

"The life span of a comic is longer now that they've stopped people smoking in venues," Morris offers. A comedian's career is as long as you want it to be, Valentine insists: "Getting on TV isn't the be-all and end-all in the UK like it is in Australia. As long as you like standing in front of a room full of strangers and making them laugh you can go from there to a happy grave."

Still, why do it? Why do the job that American actor-comedian Will Ferrell calls "hard, lonely and vicious"?

"What's the worst that can happen, apart from getting punched in the head?" says the subversive Jeffries, who has just made a sitcom pilot for Britain's Comedy Central channel. "They can all boo you, but then you just get in your car and go home. Good shows and shit shows are part of the job."

It's harder for women. Drunken, sexist, late-night crowds can destroy the confidence of even the most talented female comedian; creative crowd control and a hide of steel are vital. Those who survive tend to be very good indeed. "I remember one guy seriously wanting a discount when he discovered a woman was headlining," Morris says with a sigh. "I always say all you have to be is funny, whatever you're sporting under your garments."

Then there's the adoration, the fame, the buzz that comes with having an audience in hysterics. For some male comics there are the groupies (or "gaghags"); British actor-comedian and notorious babe magnet Russell Brand tells of the pulling power afforded by being funny onstage in his autobiography *My Booky Wook*.

Women comics take another tack. "By the time I finish work," Australian comedian Rachel Berger likes to say, "the only men I meet are lying face down in the gutter."

Brand's involvement in last October's Sachsgate affair, in which he and BBC presenter Jonathan Ross made a series of lewd phone calls to *Fawlty Towers* actor Andrew Sachs, including comments about Sach's granddaughter (a former girlfriend of Jeffries), has seen a new puritanism affecting British comedy. Boundary pushers such as Burns, Jeffries and Minchin have come under renewed scrutiny. "The PC brigade [has] gone, 'Right! The floodgates are open!'" Jeffries says.

"I think everything is taboo if you don't know why you're saying what you're saying," says Perth-born Minchin, who is chatting to British

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actor-comic Ricky Gervais when I arrive to meet him at a members' club in central London. (Gervais, who co-scripted Hugh Jackman's gags at last month's Oscar ceremony, first approached Minchin backstage at the QEH after being bowled over by *Storm*). "People who criticise have to be aware of their own hypocrisy," he adds. "It's amazing how many aren't."

His British success is all to do with seizing opportunities, he says.

"It's only five years since I was playing keyboards in a covers band in Melbourne. I exploited music for comic purposes and did silly gigs over a couple of years before an Edinburgh Festival producer put me straight into a 350-seat venue there. Then I had all these London agents bidding for me." Minchin smiles. "So it's not like I thought, 'I'm going to try Britain.' Britain said, 'Come here and we'll give you a career.'"

Minchin's requisite piano meant he went straight into playing British theatres, neatly subverting the need to cut his comedy teeth in the basements and bearpits of the British stand-up circuit, as most other Australian comics have done. So are they competitive? "I get the feeling there's a sense of ownership of the scene, so the arrival of any new overseas person on the scene might annoy some people," he says.

Comedy audiences, of course, get the last laugh. "Laughter is a release of tension and the world is very tense right now, so it doesn't take more than a poke in the ribs. The more tense we are, the greater our potential for relief."

Minchin flashes a grin. "It's like having a full bladder," he says, ever the stirrer, "and comedy is the urinal."