

thing, the stuff I started out doing when I was 17, so I had a load of new confidence.”

His blue eyes — free of any traces of last night’s kohl — twinkle. “I thought, ‘Right. I’m going to write the world’s first comedy show that needs an arena. It’ll be an epic celebration of stupidity.’”

Reviews of the show (which took in Birmingham, Manchester and elsewhere) have been overwhelmingly positive. Praise has been showered on Minchin’s ingenuity and bold virtuosity. On his serious songs as well as his satirical ones. On his catchy melodies, versatile singing voice and formidable keyboard skills; the way they ride the epic sound of the orchestra instead of stubbornly trying to control it.

Praise for his musicianship seems to please him more than compliments about his wit. He goes on at length about the hi-tech nature of the show: the dynamic range and levels of amplification. The fact that each musician wears an “in-ear foldback monitor”. Throw in on-stage asides about his honorary membership of the British Humanist Society; the fact that he quotes Mark Twain (and calls him by his real name, Samuel Langhorne Clemens); and his predilection for books by atheist intellectuals including Richard Dawkins — oh, and his love of the Beatles, the Kinks and the Rolling Stones — and there we have it. A real-life rock ‘n’ roll nerd.

“I am a rationalist-empiricist-humanist-atheist-sceptic,” he says of this art-life crossover. “And a lover of rock,” he adds with a sniff.

Orchestras have not been used in comedy like this before, he continues in his good-natured, direct way. “Barry [Humphries] is a genius but he is not a muso, so it is not the same game at all. Other orchestra comedy shows have just had someone arrange the songs for an orchestra. This show had six different orchestrators” — including Melbourne Benjamin Northey, who will conduct on the Australian tour — “and I wrote all the new songs with an orchestra in mind.”

Songs such as *Lullaby*, a Dahl-esque ode to Minchin’s sleepless baby that descends into burlesque discord; and *Cont*, a Burt Bacharach-style number that suggests to the audience he is being terribly insulting to minority groups until the clever conceit is revealed (he is similarly subversive in *Prejudice*, with its ‘Only a ginger can call another ginger ‘ginger’ ’ refrain). There are older tunes: his expletive laden, oompah-ed up *Pope Song*; the twisted love ballad *Grew on Me* (“which has the absolute sincerity of this huge arrangement when I’m talking about cancer”); and *White Wine in the Sun*, one of two genuinely beautiful serious songs.

The laughter of the crowd at the O2 ripples around the stadium in waves. It is only when Minchin stops and places a copy of the Koran on top of his baby grand piano that things turn uncomfortably tense. “Why are 10,000 people nervous?” he inquires impishly. “Why is that book any different to *Harry Potter*?” he continues, fishing out a copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* to pin-drop silence. It’s a nail-biting moment, and one that encapsulates Minchin’s need to provoke thought. To set the rational against the reactionary.

“What makes something sacred is the cumulative belief it is sacred,” he says after more musing, defusing the tension (“*Star Wars!*” yells a fan). “That is your right —

but don’t tell us what we can’t criticise, or what language to use, or what cartoons we’re allowed to draw.”

It isn’t a hugely funny sequence, but it is a big and clever one. When I tell Minchin what a punch it packed, his pale forehead furrows. “Do you think it’s too much?” he frets. “I don’t want some idiot seeing it on YouTube and you know . . .” He pauses, his marmalade hair, dry from constant teasing, sticking out at right angles. “I treat the Koran with respect but I want people to be thinking . . . about the nature of what we hold sacred before I go straight into the *Pope Song*. There is nothing more empowering than holding an audience before a joke breaks,” he says. “This is why comedians do what they do.”

He has said he has an uneasy relationship with comedy, nonetheless (“Though I think I’m less vexed now”). And with fame: “I’ve had people stand in line to get my autograph, and they’re shaking,” he told me in an interview for this newspaper in 2009, just after he’d finished chatting to British comic Ricky Gervais at a club in Soho. “I come from a theatre background so I know how to look people in the eye and stuff, but I can already see how you can become a paranoid narcissistic c . . . t so easily.”

Not that he’s immune to criticism himself. Far from it: his song *Phil Daoust* names and vilifies the reviewer for *The Guardian* who gave his Edinburgh debut one measly star. It’s puerile, and hilarious. Phil Daoust shrugs it off: “I haven’t listened to it,” the critic says. “I didn’t enjoy his act when I saw it, so why should I sit through another three minutes of it?”

Minchin’s wit is lacerating, even a bit hectoring, but his army of fans doesn’t seem to mind. They find him hilarious, as do his collaborators. “Working with him was just a laugh,” says Danny Kelly, the playwright with whom Minchin collaborated on *Matilda: The Musical*. “He’s a funny f . . . ker, so even when things get difficult you’re still enjoying it. He tends to think in music and his natural enthusiasm forces him to put it in a sentence — ‘and then we need it to go boo-dom, tak-kaah’. This gets very interesting when you’re on the tube and you’ve got this great big ginger-haired Aussie talking half with words, half with music at full volume.”

It’s no wonder, really, why the RSC invited this mischievous polymath to add words and lyrics to Kelly’s book, which is based in turn on Dahl’s dark children’s novel about a gifted girl who is a voracious reader and opponent of injustice. Happily, Minchin loved the book so much when he was younger that he’d applied to the Dahl estate for stage rights 10 years ago.

“I was writing children’s theatre for the Barking Gecko Theatre Company in WA,” he says. “The Dahl estate wrote back and said, ‘Send us a score and we’ll consider it.’ I was like, a score? What does that mean? So that was it — the first and last time I ever wrote to anyone about rights.” Critics are calling *Matilda* the best British musical since *Billy Elliot*. Minchin flashes a grin. “It’s all pretty mind-blowing. That it’s transferring [from Stratford-on-Avon] to the West End later in the year is a dream come true.”

Minchin’s success is well deserved, says Melbourne Comedy Festival director Susan Provan. “Tim is a virtuoso musician, a rock star and a dag,” she offers. “He can have your heart soaring one minute and get you belly-laughing the next. Plus he really cares about the world. His art is his activism, and

he uses it to surprise people into fresh perspectives.”

So just where does his broad world view stem from? His penchant for big themes? How come he didn’t end up cracking silly jokes about, say, the tram from St Kilda to Fitzroy? Minchin isn’t sure. “My slightly morbid sense of humour was affected by an early understanding that people die of things,” he says, referring to his father’s medical career. He was always the one in the group who said the lines other people wouldn’t say. The boy who told the emperor he wasn’t wearing clothes. The jester who poked fun at the king. “Comedy allows you to dance around stuff,” he says.

Eleven years at the Anglican Christ Church Grammar School in Perth left him with a fondness for the chaplain, “an incredible guy who married me and Sarah in a godless ceremony in my back garden. I don’t believe in his belief but I do have time for him and people like him. I see them as philosophers and pastoral carers,” he ventures. “Where else do you get to stand up in front of people as a job and discuss loving one another? Much of it is benign.”

Why lampoon Christianity, then? Isn’t it an easy target? “It’s my culture,” Minchin says. “It will be an easy target when there is not one debate about abortion or euthanasia, not one question about homosexual rights, not one education debate with faith in it. The day they are evidence-based conversations, we’ll stop hassling them.” He sighs. “I’m very passionate about the distinction between people’s right to their beliefs and

people’s non-right for that imposition of belief into our lives.”

There’s more. Much more. Minchin loves to talk. We giggle about the YouTube spoof that has gay scientists discovering Christian genes, discuss Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s tough stance on religious education in schools (“Incredible for so many reasons”), segue off on everything from war and gun control to beauty and poetry. He shows me footage of his kids on his BlackBerry. “Violet’s pretty weird,” he says with a smile. “And the boy is hilarious. Yeah, I like my kids.”

He is happy with the way his career is going. Why wouldn’t he be? “I’m making a living out of what I love doing. I’ve always been a capitalist artist.” He used to say he was a musician first. Now he’s accepted he’s also a comic: “I know enough to talk about these big things seriously but I have to remember that this is my job: writing funny songs and making people laugh.”

So we might just see Minchin and his piano, sans orchestra, in an arena yet? “Who knows,” he says. “Time will make a hypocrite of me.” He pauses for a few beats and grins. “Which is another song I haven’t finished writing.”

Tim Minchin appears with Australia’s capital city symphony orchestras, conducted by Benjamin Northey, starting with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, February 25-27. WASO, March 4, 5; ASO, March 10-12; QPO, March 18; TSO, March 21; SSO, March 24-27.

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