

Matilda the Musical review – still a revoltingly subversive success

Five years is also how long Australia has been waiting for Matilda since its Royal Shakespeare Company premiere in 2010. “Not fair!” we cried, particularly as the show’s Tony and Olivier award-winning music and lyrics are the work of an Aussie – comedian Tim Minchin – alongside [Dennis Kelly](#).

But now the show has finally arrived in [Sydney](#), and boy! – or rather, girl! (“I’m a girl!” Matilda reminds her toad of a father), it looks and sounds good.

As in London and New York, four young performers share the title role, and the show lives or dies on their energy. Matilda is an introvert, not an easy thing for a young actor to pull off, but the night I’m in, Molly Barwick nails her character’s confidence and contemplation – no doubt matched by the other Matildas: Sasha Rose, Bella Thomas and Georgia Taplin.

The grown-ups aren’t half bad either. They’re 100% bad. If Daniel Frederiksen and Marika Aubrey bring out the pantomime in Matilda’s parents, then James Millar as her terrifying headmistress Miss Trunchbull is the deliciously wrong dame. Because Matilda the Musical isn’t really a kids’ show at all.

Minchin and Kelly constantly poke us where it hurts in ways Disney could only dream of, drawing a line from the fears and injustice of childhood to the inevitable failings and disappointments of growing up.

Having the pupils of Crunchem Hall school played interchangeably by child and adult actors adds to this effect. When Matilda and her kind-hearted teacher Miss Honey (a pitch perfect Elise McCann) duet in the heartbreaking second-half opener, When I Grow Up, they’re not just singing as one – they might as well be the same person.

Small quibbles: the story-within-a story Matilda tells her librarian (a hearty Cle Morgan) distracts a little from Dahl’s original narrative and Miss Trunchbull, while an awe-inspiring mix of bulldog and camp, could do with being as scary as she is in the book.

But this is still a revolting success – the show’s climactic song even puns on that most Dahlian of words. “We are revolting children / living in revolting times / We sing revolting songs / using revolting rhymes,” scream the kids as they dance out their frustrations in Peter Darling’s attitude-laden choreography.

In a country where Dahl’s book *Revolting Rhymes* was [taken off the shelves of Aldi in 2014](#) after conservatives complained about the use of the word “slut”, this takes on extra meaning. As Imogen Russell Williams [wrote of that incident](#): “Children need darkness, grotesquerie and gore, and the sense of being trusted with ‘the real story’ that Dahl has always given them. Even if (perhaps especially if) that makes grown-ups uncomfortable.”

Matilda the Musical does feel uncomfortable at times, and it’s all the better for it. It’s also a riotously uplifting love letter to the power of story and the stage.