

## Andrew Lloyd Webber interview: the second coming of Jesus Christ Superstar



One sunny day last week, a group of very excited people were crammed together in a darkened room. They were the band and full cast of a new production of Jesus Christ Superstar – and this would be the first time that they had performed together.

The event is the sitzprobe, or sitting rehearsal. "This is always my favourite day," says Tim Minchin, hardly able to contain his enthusiasm, recalling the magical moment his first musical, Matilda, reached this stage in its development at the Royal Shakespeare Company. Perhaps more surprisingly, Andrew Lloyd Webber, West End veteran of 40 years, who sits listening keenly to the score he wrote when he was 21, is every bit as thrilled.

When the first guitar chords ring out, the chorus leap up and start dancing to the beat. The sitzprobe becomes a standing-room-only rock concert. As the soloists step up to a line of microphones, spontaneous applause ripples through the room.

The cast are a varied bunch: Minchin, a musician and comedian, is Judas; Melanie Chisholm, better known as Spice Girl Mel C, plays Mary Magdalene; Ben Forster, cast from Lloyd Webber's own Superstar television show is Jesus; the musical theatre star Alex Hanson is Pilate; and King Herod will be played by the DJ Chris Moyles.

Each leans into the music, giving it their all. By the time the entire company come to perform the famous Superstar chorus, the show has been brought to fierce life, no longer a dusty period piece from 1970, but a rock musical that still sounds unique. Lloyd Webber stands up, slowly. "You know," he says, "I think that is the best I have ever heard Jesus Christ Superstar sung."

He is 64 now, and slightly thinner and frailer than you might imagine. But the boyish enthusiasm that first propelled him to fame alongside his school friend, the lyricist Tim Rice, still peeks out from beneath the carapace of lordship and success.

It is in full evidence when we sit down to lunch with Minchin, wild-haired and voluble, to discuss this production, which will play in arenas around the country, beginning at the O2 next Friday. "The funny thing is that Jesus Christ Superstar as it was this morning is what we actually intended it to be," Lloyd Webber says, beaming. "When it is done in a conventional proscenium theatre production it feels

shoe-horned in. That is why I wanted to do this."

The tour has cost £6million and is fully staged by director Laurence Connor. Lloyd Webber believes it is "quite a radical take on the story". It was the dean of St Paul's who suggested Rice and Lloyd Webber should tell the story of the last days in the life of Christ as a follow up to their popular show for schools *Joseph and His Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. But they couldn't find a theatre producer interested.

A single – "Superstar from the musical *Jesus Christ*" – led to a record deal, and so the show was written and conceived as a concept album. "It is very much a child of its time," says Lloyd Webber. The LP was respectfully received in England, "but the verdict was that it would be too unhip for the young and too controversial for the old. So we thought that was that."

But in America, the album became a sensation and quickly spawned an arena tour; stage versions in both London and New York followed in 1971 and 1972. Yet they did not satisfy Lloyd Webber. "I hugely objected to the original New York production, which was probably the worst night of my life. It was a vulgar travesty," he says, with some force. He is equally vehement about the film, which put a rather fey Jesus in the desert. "I hate the film. I can see what [the director] Norman Jewison was trying to do, but I could never look at it. I don't see how you could do that show as a film anyway."

At this point, Minchin jumps in. "We need to talk about that. Because I want to do it." The two men, different though they are, have a warm rapport driven by mutual admiration. Lloyd Webber thinks *Matilda*, Minchin's award-winning adaptation of the Roald Dahl story which is now playing in the West End at the Cambridge Theatre (which he owns), is "absolutely brilliant".

Minchin first saw Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express* as a child and, he says, it "changed my life". Growing up in Perth, Australia, he and his siblings learnt the songs from *Starlight* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. *Superstar*, he says simply, is his "favourite piece of musical theatre of all time". "I'd love to have written *Jesus Christ Superstar* but it is still beyond me," he adds. "I am a lyricist first. I can't read music."

"And I can't write lyrics," says Lloyd Webber. So have the two men talked about collaborating? "Not really," says Lloyd Webber. Minchin adds: "If the right thing was there, of course I would. But for me the lyrics and music are so interconnected that apart from to Lloyd Webber and maybe a couple of others, I would say no." "I completely understand that," says Lloyd Webber. "I would love to have some lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, you know, but he thinks of everything, are the music and lyrics are too connected for him."

This is said with a smile: the coming together of the two greatest writers of modern musical theatre, who are always seen as standing on two sides of an unbridgeable gap, is wonderfully unlikely.

Lloyd Webber acknowledges *Superstar*'s debt to Rice's lyrics, as prescient as they are smart. Combined with Lloyd Webber's adventurous compositions they combine to give the show its ability to be simultaneously satirical and moving. "We wrote it really quickly," Lloyd Webber says. "Today one will agonise over hundreds of choices. Back then I was thinking, great, I can use an orchestra here or – with *Everything's Alright* – is it possible to write a successful ballad in 5/4 time? A lot of things were experiments."

The result is a freshness that Minchin loves. "If you look at *Rent*, which was the next big rock opera, it was huge, but it has dated," he says. "This utterly stands up." He has played both Pilate and an apostle in other productions, and lobbied hard to be auditioned as Judas in this one. "I think it is wonderful that the big new musical writer on the block is in one of my shows," says Lloyd Webber. "And he is terrific in the part."

Minchin's co-star, Ben Forster, was chosen by the same talent show format which Lloyd Webber has previously used to cast four musicals on the BBC. This time it was on ITV and stripped across a single week; viewing figures were generally below three million. "We were on at 9pm, and I think if they had put it on at 7.30pm it would have been a different story," Lloyd Webber says.

He is unequivocal in his praise of Forster. "The public have not got it wrong once," he says. "Of course, they do listen slightly to how I steer them." But he admits fallibility in the case of Jodie Prenger, cast by popular acclaim as Nancy in *Oliver!*, when Lloyd Webber preferred another contestant. "I got it completely wrong and the public got it totally right."

For Minchin the appeal of the process is its openness. "As someone who got rejected by every agent in Australia and couldn't get auditions, I know what it is like to be standing outside an industry. I don't think being voted for by the public is the perfect audition process – but neither is the real one."

Lloyd Webber admits he was surprised that the ITV programme did not receive any complaints. In its day, *Jesus Christ Superstar* was both popular and uncontroversial – embraced for the openness of its view of Christ. But as a new generation discovers it in the age of Twitter, he wonders how it will be received.

"I think people might find it controversial in a way that didn't happen originally," he says. Minchin, who has himself been attacked for the sceptical atheism expressed in his stand-up show of savagely funny songs, thinks speed of communication may make a difference. "This musical does not treat religion as sacred subject matter, so some conservative fundamentalist could decide to make a thing out of it," he says. "On the other hand, people who are fans of this show could object to this particular manifestation of it. Who knows?"

Who knows indeed? As Lloyd Webber muses, what would have happened if Judi Dench hadn't had an accident just before the opening of *Cats*, leaving Elaine Paige to step in to sing *Memory*? "Would it have been a hit? You just don't know. That's the thing about musicals. Everything is a strange throw of the dice in this game."

*Jesus Christ Superstar: the Arena Tour* begins at the O2, London SE10, tomorrow. Details: [jesuschristsuperstar.com](http://jesuschristsuperstar.com)

Sarah Crompton - The Telegraph