

Musical

Enter a fair dinkum gent

Laidback Aussie William McInnes is now every bit a gentleman, writes Sarah Lang.

FOR THE third time this morning, William McInnes' laugh has metamorphosed into a snort. "I always do that when I giggle too much, it's terrible." He grins.

The salt-of-the-earth Aussie actor is in the thick of Sydneyside rehearsals for the Auckland season of *My Fair Lady*, which opens at The Civic on Wednesday.

My Fair Lady — the adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's epic play *Pygmalion* — has been one of the world's favourite musicals for more than 50 years, since its first Broadway season in 1956 broke all box-office records.

Transporting audiences to the heart of Edwardian London, it follows the fortunes of Cockney flower girl Eliza Doolittle, who takes speech lessons from phonetics professor Henry Higgins so she can pass as a refined lady. Transforming the feisty street urchin to honour a bet, pompous Henry takes credit for Eliza's makeover. But does she need him, or does he need her?

My Fair Lady is a satirical, urbane comedy with plenty of verbal jousting and some thought-provoking themes: about belief in yourself, how (not) to judge people, and friction between the sexes.

The wealth of witticisms lend it the air of a theatrepiece and the show-stopping songs (*Wouldn't It Be Lovely*, *With a Little Bit of*

Luck, *The Rain in Spain*, *I Could Have Danced All Night*, *On the Street Where You Live*, *Get Me To The Church on Time* and *I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face*) blend in seamlessly, enriching rather than jarring the story.

Although this incarnation of *My Fair Lady* brings lavish sets and a fashion parade of costumes from last year's sell-out Australian tour, there's been no resting on laurels here.

Opera Australia star soprano Taryn Fiebig stays on as Eliza, but there's new blood in the form of New Zealand's grande dame of acting, Ilona Rodgers (as Henry's acerbic mother Mrs Higgins), globe-touring actor/singer/cabaret artist Hayden Tee (as impoverished aristocrat Freddy), and McInnes as the irascible professor Henry Higgins. It's the accomplished actor's first musical after many roles in theatre, film and TV (*Blue Heelers*, *Seabreeze*).

A new protagonist keeps the production interesting for Stuart Maunder, a veteran director of opera, musicals and concerts. Henry's are hard boots to fill, Maunder says, given the self-absorbed misogynist has been played by some of the world's acting greats; most recently in Sydney by Richard E. Grant. "William brings a very different feel. I think he's a bit more of a mimic than the other boys were. There's a wickedness about him, a delight in playing with Eliza. Which, in turn, makes her more feisty."

Maunder is speaking from the bowels of historic Australia Hall, with its faded grandeur of embellished ceilings and friezes. Giant black drapes block all natural light, props are minimal, and lines drawn on the floor mark the boundaries of The Civic's space, so the actors will know if they "fall" off the stage into the orchestra pit.

When I'm there, "onstage" rehearsals are restricted to just the two protagonists and assistant director/choreographer Elizabeth Hill, who is reading lines for the other parts and prompting or correcting McInnes. Once McInnes is sure enough of his footing and his lines, other cast members will be added, building up to full-cast rehearsals. "I'm the slow new boy," McInnes says after fluffing a line. It's a little startling to hear the highfalutin British toff accent suddenly revert to an Australian drawl.

Yet the quintessential laidback Aussie bloke looks anything but stressed. When he slips up, he more often than not cracks a joke or tells a "there-was-this-one-time" story. The laughter breaks the creative tension.

But the jokes don't mean he's slacking. "You can take your work seriously but you can't take yourself seriously, otherwise you disappear up your own arse," he says.

Whenever there's a short pause, McInnes bends over his script: making notes in the margins; reading his lines; practising

different facial expressions, stances, tones of voice, movements and speeds. He's in his own little bubble until it's time to go again. Yes, the same scene. "That's it," comes a voice booming from the director's chair.

As Maunder looks on, his internal monologue sometimes spills over into speech, with asides such as "Oh, the grandeur of human language" tossed over his shoulder.

Although McInnes has done plenty of theatre, he says his first musical is a real challenge, especially since it is "a classic piece of musical theatre. It certainly clears out some cobwebs, that's for sure."

"But I reckon you've just got to jump in and have a crack. It's good to give yourself a bit of a fright."

Although the waltz moves are fresh fodder ("I dance like an oil rig in heavy seas"), it's the singing, particularly the solos, which are the most daunting. "But you can't think too much about it or you trip over yourself."

Practising his solo *I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face*, McInnes shows off a strong voice, even if he seems slightly uncomfortable on the high notes. Still, when Fiebig breaks into song, it's obvious who is the singer who acts and who is the actor who sings. Had he sung before?

"Oh yeah, I've sung in the shower and in bars. I sang at my mother's birthday the other day with my sister and I sounded like a dying



mule," he says. Maunder differs, saying McInnes' hitherto underused singing voice is very strong in its quality, range and pitch. "He can scream certain notes so they're very poignant. I wouldn't mind betting it won't be too long before this one ends up doing a real [more musical] musical."

So how did McInnes end up so far from his usual stamping ground?

It's all down to Maunder reading a magazine article mentioning that McInnes had always wanted to do a musical but couldn't sing.

"I'd liked him as an actor, but the feel of him has always been so Australian," says Maunder, who decided to ring McInnes anyway to see if he was at all interested in playing Henry for the Auckland season.

"He just said 'Yeah, all right mate', and I thought: 'Oh my God, we're talking about the part of the quintessential English gent here.'"

But his nerves were soothed after a one-on-one fortnight in McInnes' hometown of Melbourne. "He is a chameleon and a master of acting," Maunder says.

Despite the patent pressure on him, McInnes, who jokes he wants to "Australianise" the musical into *My Fair Matey*, isn't worried. "Yeah, she'll be right."

My Fair Lady opens at Auckland's Civic Theatre, The Edge, on Wednesday for a limited season only.



Music



WORKING HARD: The band spent six years as Fear of Flying before shooting to fame within a year of changing their name to White Lies.

Emotional tunes

Stephen Jewell learns the truth behind White Lies' seemingly negative music.

WITH SONG titles like *Death* and *To Lose My Life*, White Lies have been hailed by Brit magazine

NME, as the masters of "nu gloom".

However, there is nothing downbeat about the Chiswick-based threesome's electro-pop, which is greeted enthusiastically by the Cambridge Corn Exchange audience when they play the university town as part of *NME*'s influential, annual Shockwaves tour.

"It's a bit frustrating sometimes when you talk to journalists and they say 'you make very depressing music'," says bassist Charles Cave, who makes up White Lies alongside vocalist/guitarist Harry McVeigh and drummer Jack Lawrence-Brown. "They clearly haven't listened because it's not that at all. We get comments from fans on internet noticeboards every day saying things like 'your music makes me want to cry and dance at the same time'.

It's a very emotional sound but it's not negative. Those critics should come on stage when we're playing and see the shining joy on the faces of whoever's watching."

Cave, who writes the lyrics for McVeigh to sing, claims that he is not obsessed with dying. "It was something that worried me when I was younger," he admits.

"But on the album, death is used as a metaphor for the losing of something, which was one of my worst fears when I was growing up. Whether it's the loss of a grandparent or parent or simply a new pen, I hated the thought of something being gone and being unreachable."

There is something deeply romantic about the anthemic catch-cry of *To Lose My*

Life, "Let's get old together and die at the same time".

"It's very over the top but that's what the greatest art, whether it be painting, poetry or film, is when it's dealing with those kinds of things," says Cave. "It's very cathartic music and I write the lyrics in a cathartic way. I write them very quickly and very rarely. I really don't have many more lyrics than the ones that we've used because I never write unless I have to. When I do write them, it takes five or 10 minutes and then it's finished. I seldom touch it again, but if I do I feel like I'm cutting into a moment."

According to Cave, McVeigh doesn't entirely understand the words that he sings. "There's a lot of things like that with White

the British charts in January. However, they are far from an overnight success, having spent six years together as Fear of Flying before changing their band name and musical direction.

"It's been quite a dramatic step-up in a year," says Cave. "We were heavily persuaded by pop culture and the *NME*, and it was only when we started White Lies and decided to just be ourselves that we actually found our sound."

"We were a bit nihilistic about it at first as we really didn't care what people thought, but then they started picking up on it."

According to Cave, he and his bandmates were raised on a diverse range of different music. "I was brought up on Talking Heads and Simon & Garfunkel and then I really got into metal when I was 15. We've had a good education, which means that we have no qualms about listening to something from 40 years ago or something that has just come out."

He admits to swatting up on The Cure after White Lies supported the English goth legends last month. However, he insists that they are not a

significant influence.

"The older journalists we talk to are at an age where those are the bands that come to mind, whereas any younger journalists will reference Interpol because that's their musical generation," says Cave, who like his bandmates, is in his mid-20s. "It's great that we've been compared to bands from the 80s, bands from the 90s and bands from the last decade. It shows that we've managed to tap into that rare thing of making music that doesn't have a date on it."

To Lose My Life is in stores now.

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CHARLES CAVE

Lies," he says. "We're more like brothers than best friends but at the same time we really don't know that much about each other. We're close but in a very cosmic way."

"It's not an emotional thing. That creates a sense of mystery, because I definitely don't understand the other two people in my band at all. And while Harry can make a good guess at what I'm writing about, he doesn't know exactly where all the allusions come from."

Considering that they only came together as White Lies in late 2007, it has been a rapid rise to fame for the trio, whose self-titled album debuted at number one in