

THE *Other* BEN HALL

Fresh from *Neighbours*, Ben Hall tells **Matthew Myers** about taking the gay lead in the Australian musical *Only Heaven Knows*, and not playing his famous bush-ranging namesake.

DNA: Your character in *Only Heaven Knows* is exposed to the bohemian and gay sub-culture of 1940s Sydney. What kind of research did you do for this role?

Ben Hall: I've been watching a lot of films from that period, reading and talking to people, including our director Shaun Rennie. The script is quite revealing about the period. Tim's journey is not about coming out. Rather, he's a guy who knows what he wants and he comes to Sydney to find it. It's about discovery.

What did you draw on for the character's development?

In the theatre world I have many gay friends to talk to, particularly my co-star Hayden Tee who I've worked with before on *Les Miserables*. I did a show two years back called *Falsettos* where I played a gay man. But for me it's more about connecting with the person I'm playing opposite and finding the qualities that allow an intimate connection. I want to know the character backgrounds but that interpersonal stuff is key.

Has anything about gay life in the post-war era shocked you?

Yeah, I couldn't believe how conservative it was, particularly after the war where there was that period of joy and freedom but then the Menzies era came in and it all became so conservative again. People were being pulled out for being Communists and such. There was also the issue of conversion therapy, which has a thread in our story with the character of Alan (Matthew Backer). It's scary how commonplace that was, and how many men thought it was something they should do. Many were convinced and pushed into it.

Have you witnessed homophobia in real life?

Yes, at school. I went to an all-boys Catholic school which wasn't the place

Ben as Tim in
Only Heaven Knows.



Canadian PM
Justin Trudeau

IF YOU WERE GAY, WHO WOULD DO IT FOR YOU?

"I'd probably go a big muscular guy with a beard... or Justin Trudeau. I love the ideals he stands for, too."



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Yes, in the story my character's younger brother has committed suicide because of what was happening at the school. It was a bit harrowing, especially with the research, and it happened to be topical at the time because the enquiry into the Catholic Church was taking place. We'd shoot scenes and then I'd turn on the TV to see George Pell fronting the media. Hearing the stories of what these people had gone through made me feel disgusted. But *The Devil's Playground* was incredible to be part of, and such talented people were involved.

Studying at WAAPA is a great grounding for any actor. What's your advice for anyone wanting to enter the industry?

I recommend drama school because it's incredibly useful at opening doors. Sometimes all you need is that opportunity. Getting into those schools is not as easy as it seems. You also have to spend money, which is a bit of an issue. A lot of actors are either middle- or upper-middle class because of the cost of the training, which is a shame.

Jack Martin (*Home And Away*) recently played your namesake, the famous Australian bushranger in *The Legend Of Ben Hall*. Did you consider auditioning for that role?

It would have been very trippy, especially if I'd played a different character! At the time I was in *Les Mis* so I was contracted for a certain period

with teachers who protected a lot of those guys and nurtured them. I guess that's part of what the arts culture is; protecting people who are treated like that. **In *Only Heaven Knows*, are you concerned about how your interpretation of a gay character is going to be perceived?**

Of course, but fortunately I get on so well with our director Shaun, and Matt and Hayden that I'm comfortable enough to trust them and they trust me enough to tell me if I'm doing something that isn't informed enough. They guide me, because it isn't my world *per se* and it isn't my story but I love these people. I love our team and this is a story that I want to tell to the best of my ability.

Do you ever get mistaken as gay?

I'm in musical theatre so everyone assumes I am, yes. I sometimes get hit on in clubs, especially when I'm out with Trevor Ashley! I certainly don't take offence. I love gay clubs. They're so much fun.

You must also attract a lot of teenage girls.

There's a bit of that through social media. Actually, there's a huge gay following for *Neighbours* in the UK. It's massive!

If you were gay, who would do it for you?

I think I'd probably go for a big, muscular guy with a beard.

Do you know about bears, cubs and otters?

Oh, yeah, I know about bears but I didn't know about otters!

Otters are still hairy but more slender with a swimmers build. In fact, you'd be an otter!

[Laughing] Well, I just did the Rottneest Island channel swim last week. You know, when I think about it, I'd go for Justin Trudeau. I love the ideals he stands for.

How would you sum up your experience on *Neighbours*?

I really enjoyed it. It's the second fastest show in the world in terms of how many episodes they pump out in a week. It's a nice working environment. People are happy and relaxed and know what they're doing. With many TV shows you're there briefly for a week and gone, but on *Neighbours* you make great friends.

You played Finton in *The Devil's Playground*.

Was that a watershed moment in your career?

but I would've loved to have played my namesake. I've always wanted to visit his grave and know more about him. He was the only bushranger who never hurt or killed anyone. So he's a nice one to be associated with. He's of no relation, though, as my dad's British.

Who is your diva?

Beyoncé. Those pregnancy photos were classic. You can't go wrong with that voice. *Single Ladies* is brilliant.

Do you have a more local diva?

That would have to be Trevor Ashley. I love *Diamonds Are For Trevor!*

What music gets you on the dance floor?

I like R&B rather than techno. I do like some Village People, and I can do a bit of the YMCA dance!

Who has been the biggest influence on your professional career?

There's usually someone on each show who becomes a bit of a mentor. Simon Gleeson in *Les Mis* is one of those people, and so was Simon Burke on *The Devil's Playground*, who I'd watch and ask questions. On this current production I'm inspired by Shaun Rennie's work and his passion.

This is DNA's Sports edition. What do you do to keep fit?

I've been training for the Rottneest swim, so I swim every couple of days, and back on *Neighbours* I was seeing a personal trainer because I was doing a lot of shirtless stuff around the pool. Gym and swimming are great because you can put the muscle on and then sort of lean it out.

What's your best piece of health advice?

I'm really interested in gut health and the benefits of probiotics. Recent research has shown that it affects your happiness and serotonin levels.

At the beach are you boardies or speedos?

I'm boardies at the beach and speedos in the pool. You go a lot faster when you're swimming in speedos.

And what about underwear – jocks, fitted boxers or freeballs?

I love that freeballing is one of the options! I go for fitted boxers. I'm sure my mate Chris Durling is a freeballer. On *Les Mis* he'd strip off in the dressing room and I'd be, "Mate, did you even wear jocks today?"

When he did this interview he said that while on *Les Mis* a hairpin fell down his pants and into his arse crack!

Hilarious. That explains a lot!

MORE: *Only Heaven Knows* plays at Sydney's Hayes Theatre from May 26. Go to www.hayestheatre.com.au