

Hear me roar

Miranda Tapsell brought Australian TV to a standstill with a blistering monologue on the ABC satire program Get Krack!n. Now the US has come calling.

By PHILIPPA HAWKER



'She just blew us away'. Miranda Tapsell. Picture: Johnny Diaz Nicolaidis

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Miranda Tapsell can do anything, so says the director Wayne Blair. And right now, there's plenty of proof of that. She stars in *Top End Wedding*, a romantic comedy she also co-wrote, a movie that had its world premiere at Sundance before it opens in Australia next month. And she's just played a key role in one of the most memorable moments of recent Australian television, a finale to the ABC series *Get Krack!n*, in which she delivered a scorching monologue on racism that left viewers grasping for adjectives and superlatives.

For Tapsell, these projects have at least one thing in common. The TV appearance was meant to provoke conversations, and so, in a different fashion, is the movie.

It's a romantic comedy — set principally in the Northern Territory where she grew up — that she hopes will resonate with audiences of all kinds. “I want the film to mean something to many people, and I hope that it propels a bigger conversation than the one we've been having in this country.”

In *Top End Wedding*, Tapsell plays Lauren, an ambitious young lawyer who has left her Darwin home town to pursue her career. When her boyfriend Toby (Gwilym Lee) proposes to her, she says yes without hesitation, but she's determined to get married back home among family and friends.



Tapsell as Lauren in Top End Wedding.

In Darwin, however, things are not going as planned. Her mother (Ursula Yovich) has disappeared, leaving only an enigmatic note, and her bewildered father (Huw Higginson) has taken refuge in the pantry and put Chicago's *If You Leave Me Now* on constant rotation. Lauren can't get married without her mother, she says. She and Toby set out on an incident-packed road trip across the Territory to try to find her and discover why she has vanished.

It's a film of ebullient, good-natured comedy, spectacular scenery, assorted mishaps and misapprehensions, but it packs quite an emotional punch in the concluding scenes, which take place on the Tiwi Islands: along the way, it has also become a movie about belonging, family, community and country.

Tapsell and her co-writer, Joshua Tyler, met through Baz Luhrmann. It was six years ago, at a week-long workshop for 12 young filmmakers who had won a competition organised by Luhrmann in partnership with Samsung and the National Institute for Dramatic Arts. Tapsell was working as a mentor with actors, Tyler was working with writers. “We combined our students and worked together and ended up becoming friends,” Tyler says. They discovered

that rom-coms were something they had in common. Before long, they had committed to writing one together.

Another factor turned out to be important for their collaboration, Tapsell says: Tyler had been to the NT. He had an idea of where she came from, and why it was important to her.

Tapsell was born in Darwin, to an Indigenous mother and a white father. When she was five, her parents moved to Jabiru, a small community in Kakadu National Park: her father was the town clerk, her Larrakia Tiwi mother was an education worker. They moved back to Darwin when she was 14.

She had wanted to be a performer for as long as she can remember. In high school she experienced racism and bullying in a significant way; in high school she also felt in earnest what the experience of performance had to offer. “When you’re on stage, it’s like you’re 10 feet tall. That’s when I thought, ok, this is great, I can show people that my height, my gender and my race is what makes me special; it doesn’t diminish me as a person to be short. It doesn’t diminish me as a person to be Aboriginal. It doesn’t diminish me as a person to be a woman. There are so many things that I can celebrate about myself.”



*Jess Mauboy, Deborah Mailman and Miranda Tapsell in *The Sapphires*.*

At 16, she won a Bell Shakespeare Company regional performance scholarship. She did summer classes at the NIDA before being admitted as a full-time student.

When she first auditioned for NIDA, she and her mother went to see *The Sapphires*, which was then on the Sydney stage in its first incarnation as a theatre piece. The tale, based on a true story, of four young Yorta Yorta women who sang in a band and toured Vietnam in 1968, captured her imagination.

“I saw these funny, audacious, charming women, and I felt they spoke to me,” Tapsell recalls. “I said, ‘I want to be a Sapphire’. I was so lucky that five years later, the auditions for the film came along, and I rang up my agent and said, Can you please get me in the room?”

The director of *The Sapphires* movie, Blair, a Butjala man, had been an actor in the stage production, and he’d met Tapsell when she was a NIDA student. After she graduated, he cast her in a Bell Shakespeare show that toured to schools. Yet he hadn’t initially thought of the young Tapsell as a candidate for the role of Cynthia, the effervescent party girl of *The Sapphires*, he says. “But when she came in, she just blew us away,” he says of her first audition.

Post-NIDA, Tapsell worked on stage and in TV and film, she did comedy, Shakespeare, contemporary drama. Post *Sapphires*, she played a dual role in Andrew Bovell’s *The Secret River* and was nominated for a Helpmann Award in 2013. In 2015, she won two Logies for her role in Channel 9’s drama series *Love Child*: most outstanding newcomer and best new talent. and she made a memorable acceptance speech that captured people’s attention. “Put more beautiful people of colour on TV and connect viewers in ways which transcend race and unite us,” she said. Her friend Nakkiah Lui remembers the impact it had in the moment. “The support in the room was totally overwhelming, I’ve never experienced anything like that,” she says.



Anita Hegh, Miranda Tapsell, Ethel-Anne Gundy and Ursula Yovich in Sydney Theatre Company's The Secret River.

Tapsell and Lui met several years ago in a Sydney theatre foyer, and immediately became friends. “We got on like a house on fire,” says Lui, a Gamilaroi and Torres Strait Islander woman, a playwright, actor, comedian and author. They worked together on a couple of occasions, and in 2017 joined forces for a BuzzFeed podcast, *Pretty For An Aboriginal*, that made compelling use of their friendship, their conversations, their curiosity and their willingness to tackle contentious subjects: “We talk about those things that are tricky to talk about — about “sex, relationships, dating, power, and, most difficult of all, race,” as the show’s introduction puts it — “but it’s just us, friends talking, as opposed to ideological discussions or a panel,” Lui says.

Last month, their collaboration took another turn. For the final episode of *Get Krack!n*, the satirical ABC show that dismantles the rituals, absurdities and horrors of Australian morning TV, its writers and stars Kate McCartney and Kate McLennan wanted something that would leave its mark. They turned to Tapsell and Lui. McLennan, McCartney and Lui, with input from Tapsell, wrote the final episode.



Tapsell and Nakkiah Lui as guest hosts of Get Krack!n.

Tapsell and Lui play guests who find themselves stepping in as hosts when the two Kates leave the set: their characters take their opportunity with both hands, in a comic onslaught that builds to a ferocious challenge to the status quo. “Miranda and Nakkiah decolonise morning television,” Lui says in a behind-the-scenes segment. “That’s pretty much it,” Tapsell agrees.

Reflecting on *Top End Wedding* and *Get Krack!n*, Tapsell says. “I’m an artist first and foremost, and I feel I’m allowed to express myself in a myriad of ways, just like every other artist is given permission to. I don’t just want to make art for art’s sake, I don’t think many actors want to... If you can’t speak honestly and authentically about what’s taking place around you, what are you doing?”

Talking about the aftermath of her Logies speech, Tapsell suggests that representation is about more than an individual role or a single casting decision. It’s about having the power to create and write, and it’s about not waiting to be asked. “One of the biggest things that people need to be aware of,” she says, “is that Indigenous representation was created by Aboriginal people”, by writers, directors and producers who provided opportunities for others.

Top End Wedding is significant in that it’s a romantic comedy with a young Indigenous woman in the lead. But it’s also important, Tapsell says, because of what else it shows, beyond an individual role or character. “People can forget why it’s important to help out others that have been left behind. So that when they see how caring and loving and creative and generous my community is, when they see in the film just how unique Tiwi is and how incredible the people, are on that island, the more people might start to think, well maybe we need to start caring about the issues that affect people in those communities.”

What comes next for Tapsell? There are plans and possibilities of all kinds. She and Lui have talked about working together again, and another instalment of *Pretty For An Aboriginal* is a possibility. She and Tyler have a TV series in development, and have co-written a children's book.



Tapsell and Wayne Blair on the set of Top End Wedding. Picture: John Platt.

Tapsell would like to work overseas too, she's already exploring opportunities in the US. "It's very clear to me that Hollywood is keen to hear unique voices, and a lot of them are Indigenous," she says. "So it's a great time to be an Indigenous creative."

Wayne Blair has no doubts about her potential. "I think she can do anything she wants. She just needs to make great choices." For Lui, she's "really clever and hardworking ... she's fierce, she's really strong. She's a firecracker. As an actor, she's already a star, but I think she can be an icon." She will be creating opportunities for others too, Lui believes. "It wouldn't surprise me if she started up a production company. You can't be out there doing it all by yourself, you need industry and community and people around you. I think Miranda is such a good example of that, because she is so generous with her friendship, with the space she creates for people."

Top End Wedding opens on May 2