



Beauty, delicacy in slow Turning



THEATRE

The Turning

By Bill McCluskey

Western Edge-Perth Theatre Company
Playhouse Theatre

Review: Karen Marais

Tim Winton is a master of capturing both the filtering power of memory and the urgency of the moment in *The Turning*. His collection of unified, eloquent short stories employs a group of inter-related characters who experience turnings of all kinds — the way an entire life can be shaped by one disillusionment, betrayal, surprise or awakening.

With extraordinary insight and tenderness, Winton explores the demons and frailties of ordinary people whose lives are overlaid by disappointment and frustration but whose fundamental humanity remains poignantly transparent. Yet these same broken lives are illuminated and redeemed by nature, by the sheer magnificence of the Australian sky, land and sea.

The most constant character is industrial lawyer Vic Lang, son of a cop turned alcoholic who leaves his wife and family after he discovers his fellow cops are corrupt. Living with his father's abandonment, Vic absorbs his former role as defender and protector of all and sundry.

Twenty-seven years later, at the request of his dying mother, Vic searches the Goldfields for his reclusive father, Bob, finding him sober and alone and they experience an uncomfortable reunion.

In the final story, Vic, tormented by shingles and soul-sickness, returns to his small, wind-swept coastal hometown of Angelus and takes a few tentative steps towards a

strange resignation: "He realised that the darkness had fallen around him and he was happy."

Winton bestowed artistic freedom on Bill McCluskey, in his first major production as a writer, and director Steve Jodrell to offer what promised to be an intimately epic, layered, theatrical "re-imagining" of the uncompromising grimness of 12 of the 17 stories in *The Turning*.

Seamlessly blending filmed sequences with live action, the stage production takes us into a snapshot of south-west coastal Western Australia — classic Winton harsh, rural territory.

McCluskey has, in the main, faithfully rendered the story of the Lang family in an episodic form similar to that in the book but has overlaid some of the stories with additional material of his own.

It is at these occasional points of departure from Winton's written journey where *The Turning* tends to go off the rails.

Some of McCluskey's additional scenes — such as Vic's cathartic fireside rant and one gross caricature involving Vic's Uncle Ernie and his Russian girlfriend — are jarring and antithetical to the delicacy of Winton's vision.

At not much less than three hours to act out, there is ponderous slowness to the script which would have benefited from a more succinct tightening.

The series of projection screens to the rear and side of the stage are the highlight of the show. They allow a variety of formats and scale that viscerally and emotionally capture the multi-faceted, shifting inner landscapes of Winton's protagonists.

Mood-setting location footage shot by designer Sam Hobbs and image designer Jon Green delicately

evoke sea and landscapes juxtaposed with human brutality and hideousness.

Hobbs' assemblage of abstract built forms evokes the different man-made worlds, from an Angelus jetty to Vic and Gail's apartment and Bob's shambolic goldfields hut. Three big organic forms (dunes, Albany granite forms and desert landscape) help to express a strong dimensionality to the natural worlds in the play.

The realistic elements — such as the bashed Boner McPharlin's hospital bed and a .22 rifle handled by the teenage Vic — convey, in McCluskey's production notes, the "meetings of abstracted form, virtual reality with real objects and live action".

Nine actors play 21 different characters in Winton's set of tales. Nick Simpson-Deeks effectively captures Vic's ageing from a teenager to a middle-aged man over 30 years.

Newcomer Jai Courtney gives a no-holds-barred performance as the tortured soul of Boner and some of the other roles feature well-known actors including Reg Cribb, Michelle Fornasier, Steve Turner and Alison van Reeken.

On the whole the stage adaptation is ponderous and slow while the relationships between the characters (particularly that between Boner and Jackie) leave the audience strangely disengaged.

There are some strong theatrical moments of beauty, delicacy and poignancy in this play but the overall effect is undermined by an over-long production and the occasional jarring disjointedness of the script.

The Turning runs until March 8.



Broken lives: Jai Courtney and Reg Cribb in a scene from *The Turning*. Picture: Jon Green