



# Retooled Winton tales travel well

## THEATRE

### The Turning

By Bill McCluskey  
Perth Theatre Company.  
Playhouse Theatre, February 22.  
Tickets: \$55.  
Bookings: 9484 1133.  
Until March 5.

**D**URING the first two weeks of the Perth International Arts Festival, big crowds have flocked to events (most theatre shows have sold out) and the new Music Box festival club, sited between city and Swan River, has been a hit.

But a couple of local offerings were disappointing, among them *Jandamarra*, the epic Aboriginal story that eventually underwent ruthless pruning of a tediously long show. The abridged *Jandamarra*, which ended last Saturday, still pulled in large crowds because theatre-goers seem keen to see homegrown drama.

If so, *The Turning*, which has just opened its two-week season, may enjoy even larger houses because it is a beautifully executed and emotionally powerful show.

*Jandamarra* and *The Turning* were commissioned by incoming festival artistic director Shelagh Magadza, whose stated ambition is to see more large-scale West Australian productions during her four-festival term.

Where *Jandamarra* falls short, *The Turning* triumphs. This stage adaptation of Tim Winton's short stories was "re-imagined" by playwright Bill McCluskey, who demonstrated real courage by leaping over rows of theatre seats after the opening night show to confront Winton and hear his verdict.

"Well?" asked McCluskey, who had never met the writer before. "A good journey, mate," replied pony-tailed Winton, shaking his hand with evident appreciation.

So it was: this show is an assured theatrical tour through the psychological and real landscape of protagonist Vic Lang's life, as he navigates his way towards adulthood. McCluskey has pulled off a mean feat, melding a dozen Winton short stories into a cohesive plot and creating out of it McClus-

key's unique if not entirely perfect gem.

Most visually striking is the filmic quality of the production. Director Steve Jodrell, also a filmmaker, translates Winton's acute sense of place into poetic, brooding images on large screens that frame the actors, from wide panoramas of Albany Harbour to a desert bush camp. Designer Sam Hobbs's set is a model of restraint and economy, two wave-like forms evoking endless sand dunes.

But most impressive are the performances of the nine-member cast. As Vic, Nick Simpson-Deeks acts out his painful transformation from child to angry adult in a sustained and powerful performance. Alison van Reeken is compelling as his vexed wife Gail, and she masterfully handles a second role as "moll" Jackie Martin.

But a stunningly raw performance came from newcomer Jai Courtney as the wheelchair-bound Boner McPharlin. This charismatic young West Australian Academy of Performing Arts graduate is one to watch.

The tension is offset by hilarious scenes with Vic's vulgar relatives. His puerile uncle Ern, who votes for Pauline Hanson because his mother tells him to, is played with obvious relish by Reg Cribb.

But ultimately the play's satirical swipe at the Lang family is too heavy-handed and comes perilously close to slapstick. Importantly, it robs the pivotal role of Nan Lang of its seriousness.

Here is a malevolent matriarch as corrosive in her effect on a family as any military dictator on a nation's destiny. Caroline McKenzie's Nan, steely and precise in gesture, is a fine study in understated menace.

*The Turning* ends in a rather trite epilogue between a reconciled Vic and his wife. It's unnecessary because the rest of the play has taken us on Winton's good journey and led us to where he might want us to end, believing that most people, even Vic, can survive their past.

Victoria Laurie



Acute sense of place: Steve Turner and Samantha Murray in *The Turning*