



# Small lives, vast stage

Tim Winton's latest collection of short stories is being reborn as a play, writes **Victoria Laurie**

**T**HE word re-imagining is such an evocative, dreamy sort of verb that it could be plucked from the pages of a Tim Winton novel. But it was the word Perth actor-writer Bill McCluskey settled on to describe the creative process of putting one of Winton's oeuvres on stage.

For 15 months, McCluskey has spent every waking hour re-imagining — not, he insists, simply adapting or translating into drama — Winton's most recent book *The Turning*, and the resulting play premieres at the Perth International Arts Festival on Friday.

It is an audacious, even foolhardy venture on the face of it: to base a play on a complex book of short stories, interconnected like cogs in the workings of an old-fashioned pocket watch, by one Australia's best-loved novelists.

McCluskey has taken those spring-loaded emotional parts, dismantled and then reassembled them into a new entity.

And now he is presenting it to a West Australian audience with a keen sense of ownership of every word Winton has written.

McCluskey sat for hours with the volume of 17 short stories in his hands, reading back and forth, underlining, tracing the weft and weave of Winton's intimidatingly well-structured sentences and linked plots.

And then came the act of creative re-invention that eludes description. He took 12 of Winton's stories about protagonist Vic Lang and three generations of his family and turned them into a single narrative. The more grotesque members of Vic's family — domineering matriarch Nan, uncle Ernie and his carping wife Cleo — are brought to the fore in the play, filling out the narrative of Vic's life from the age of 13 to 42.

Further re-imagining led McCluskey to insert a couple of minor characters and scenes that aren't in the book. "But I've tried to honour all of the

stories in working out how to integrate them into a linear narrative," he says.

The large, genial McCluskey, who has the dishevelled look of a prospector too busy pegging his claim to worry about much else, says the task was a lot easier than he thought it would be. "I read the book about 12 times and each time I got further and further into it. I highlighted all the things that jumped out as the uniqueness of the story. Then I started arranging the narrative in a chronological order — I think it's so important to give the audience hooks."

Avid readers of Winton will recognise the elements: dark forces working in the coastal town of Angelus, where young Vic Lang (played by Nick Simpson-Deeks) grows up as an awkward adolescent attracted to opinionated girls.

As an adult, he is weighed down by the sinister legacy of the home-town corruption that wrecked his parents' marriage and the lives of outsiders such as Boner McPharlin and his "moll" Jackie.

It's not as if other people haven't dared to re-imagine a Winton masterpiece: Nick Enright and Justin Monjo adapted Winton's 1992 Miles Franklin Award winner *Cloudstreet*, with Neil Armfield directing. Audiences loved the result, thrilling to the sight of the Lamb and Pickles family saga unfolding on stage.

But *The Turning* is a more segmented story, requiring McCluskey to take liberties to connect "the Lang family revelations", as Vic's exasperated wife Gail puts it.

"Your history, my history," she says, begging a troubled Vic to let her in on the violent episodes that still haunt him and are making him ill. "These are the maps — all the arcs and triumphs of disaster and triumph (that lead) to where we are now. Can't we realise that we need to know about each other?"

McCluskey speaks animatedly over coffee and a sandwich at a cafe on the banks of the Swan River. His back is turned to the sight of gathering clouds over a black rippling surface; he is oblivious to it, engrossed in describing one of the play's pivotal images, which — it turns out — is all about the poetic powers of a seascape.

"Two young people are sitting on the beach and you get a sense that there's so much more to come in their lives," he says.



“They are looking at the sea, and the potency of that enormous natural force is a strange connection. It’s ominous, and that’s implicit in Tim’s story. The ominous happens, and all the twists and turns in their lives are made manifest in the book, and the play.

“I’ve lifted text from the page for some scenes, and others are completely new,” he says. “Nan, Cleo and Ernie figure in only a couple of stories but are much more significant on stage because they are great characters who lend themselves to theatrical interpretation. And they tell the story of the main characters’ journey more clearly.”

But how to convey Winton’s genius for evoking landscape, both outwardly real places and inner psychological ones? Scenes from the book are played out under a vast sky, “blue as mouthwash”, in the red dirt of Kalgoorlie and beneath the brooding granite outcrops of Angelus, the coastal town where Vic’s cop dad is tragically derailed by corrupt fellow officers.

When Vic and his high school mate Biggie flee exam failure and their parents’ wrath and head for the beach, their exhilaration is tracked within and without in Winton’s prose. “The air was

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soupy, salty, and as we padded up the sand track with birds in the mint-scented scrub all around, I just couldn’t imagine disappointment,” Vic says. “The world felt new, specially made for us.”

McCluskey says: “In my mind, I had this strongly visual story because Tim is such a visual writer. But I didn’t want the play to be too reliant on vision, I just wanted it to highlight and not replace the text, which is masterful on its own.”

The filmic qualities of Winton’s prose are obvious, says *The Turning*’s director Steve Jodrell, and they conjure images of landscapes that are both confronting and have restorative powers. “You take the first story in the book, where the boys go north in the Kombi, and that understanding about light and landscape is there.”

“Landscape also means vastness, and the distance between people, emotionally and spiritually,” says Perth-born Jodrell, who headed east in the early 1980s to carve out a career in film and television directing (*SeaChange*, *Stingers*, *McLeod’s Daughters*) and who has returned to the West to work in theatre after a two-decade gap.

“There’s something psychologically daunting about the flatness of the West Australian

landscape, as against the rugged ranges that break up the horizon line or dip down to the bays of Sydney. In the urban culture of Melbourne, everything is smaller, more contained under a sky that shifts. More European. It’s very easy to be small in a West Australian landscape.”

And the light is different from anywhere else in the country, Jodrell adds. “It’s sharp, it’s direct, it’s sometimes unforgiving.”

Much time has been spent distilling those qualities into video footage shot by crews in Perth, Kalgoorlie and Winton’s childhood haunt of Albany (his fictitious Angelus) on the state’s southern coast. Throughout the play, a sophisticated series of projected images will add atmospheric layers to the live action on stage.

Production designer Sam Hobbs, whose film credits include *September* and *Monkey Puzzle* and the children’s TV series of Winton’s *Lockie Leonard* books (screened last year), has installed a widescreen frame and screens each side of the proscenium arch, with another that descends from the flies above the stage.

“We’re attempting to use a lot of vision on stage,” Jodrell says, motioning from a seat in the back row towards a large white backcloth on Perth’s Playhouse Theatre stage.

“Sometimes it’s landscape-based and we show pastoral landscape or the moodiness of the Albany seascape. Other times we’re exploring the internal landscape, what Bill (McCluskey) imagines is happening in Vic’s mind.”

Other atmospheric layers will be added by composer Iain Grandage (who composed and performed the music in *Cloudstreet*), soundscape designer Kingsley Reeve and stills photographer Jon Green.

Jodrell suspects it’s easier to explore the internal landscape of Winton’s novels on stage than in film. “I’ve read most of his books and been associated with trying to get a couple of them up as films. It’s very interesting. When you read a Winton, it’s seductive and you think, ‘I can see it all.’ But a lot of Tim’s work is about internal landscape and that’s very difficult to pull off in terms of films.”

Jodrell adds hastily that the play is not Winton prose in picture form. “The first rule I set myself was ‘do not try and tell the story in image’; the imagery evokes rather than replaces the narrative. We tried to get as much as we could on stage and the bits we couldn’t for physical reasons, we put on vision.

“The other rule I set myself was to trust Winton,” Jodrell continues. “Trust the words, the imagery, the characters. That hasn’t been difficult.”



*The Turning* is a personal turning point for McCluskey, who has been an actor for two decades, since appearing in *Evil Angels* and *Shame*, Jodrell's 1987 film starring Deborah-Lee Furness. Most recently, McCluskey played a police sergeant in the Broome-based SBS TV series *The Circuit*, for which Jodrell directed an episode. *The Turning* hooked him in so deeply, and so convinced him the time was ripe for a new Winton production, that he set up Western Edge Theatre Projects and took out a line of credit to start writing.

Then luckily the Perth Festival came on board last April to commission the work. Suddenly, there was money to work seriously with playwright Stephen Sewell and Perth scriptwriter Ken Kelso, a close friend of Winton who acts as his script adviser. "They were both immensely valuable," McCluskey says.

Kelso returned the praise in a script adviser's

report, writing that McCluskey's script contained "just the right amount of risk to match what Winton is after in the prose".

McCluskey claims to be nervous that Winton — "a long-haired gentleman I've never met" — is likely to be spotted somewhere in the audience during *The Turning*'s two-week season.

But there's also an air of quiet confidence; at this point in his career, he feels fully equipped to tackle a Winton re-imagining.

"The great thing about this project is it's so big you can approach it in a completely comprehensive way. It's just epic in its size, execution and cost. It allows you to practise all the conventional and unconventional thinking that I've been involved in over the last 30 years as an artist.

"To be absolutely honest," McCluskey adds, beaming, "I feel as if I have finally connected with the real world of art."



**Using his re-imagination:** Bill McCluskey has created a dramatic narrative from Tim Winton's *The Turning*