



Back on the boards: Steve Jodrell is directing *The Turning*, based on Tim Winton's book of short stories

## RON BANKS

Steve Jodrell admits that directing the theatre version of Tim Winton's book of short stories *The Turning* is no easy task.

"It's daunting and it's challenging," says Jodrell after a long day's rehearsal with his cast at the Playhouse Theatre.

He also confesses that he has not directed theatre of any kind for a very long time — not since he left Perth for the Eastern States 17 years ago.

His career since crossing to the other side has involved mostly TV and film direction, working on such popular series as *SeaChange*, *McLeod's Daughters*, *Halifax f.p.*, *Something in the Air*, *The Circuit*, other series and documentaries.

His career in film began in Perth as first assistant director on the teenage love story *Windrider*, starring a 16-year-old unknown named Nicole Kidman and another

youngster in Tom Burlinson.

He also directed episodes of a Barron Films' children's TV series shot around Perth, directed the Perth feature-length film *Shame*

early in his career and an award-winning short, *The Buck's Party*.

Jodrell's film and TV career may have taken him away from the theatre but acting and directing for the theatre was always his first love. While studying English at the University of WA he appeared in many plays, once taking the lead role in *Hamlet* as a young actor

determined to make his mark.

He even took a student job cleaning the toilets at the Octagon Theatre, so it could be said that he knows the world of theatre from the bottom up.

"Even though I enjoyed acting as a student, I always knew that I wanted to be a director," says Jodrell. He was able to achieve this goal in the theatre from the mid-70s while lecturing in English and drama at the WA Institute of Technology (now Curtin University).

In 1984 he decided to leave the security of academia to pursue his interests in theatre, film and television — working in Perth as an actor, producer of corporate videos and director of children's TV shows. His experience on the Perth scene led to a one-year contract with the Australian Children's Television Foundation and his subsequent move into east coast film and TV production.

"I haven't done any theatre since I left Perth, so coming back to direct Winton's *The Turning* is really a gift," says Jodrell.

"I'm a great fan of Winton and had actually worked on a



couple of projects over the years to turn his novels into films but that never worked out. So when Bill McCluskey, who had gained the rights to some of the stories, invited me to collaborate with him, I couldn't really say no."

McCluskey, best-known in Perth as an actor, made the offer more than a year ago in Broome when he was being directed by Jodrell in the SBS legal drama, *The Circuit*.

Last April, they ran workshops for *The Turning* in Perth with a group of local actors, beginning the lengthy and sometimes difficult creative process of bringing Winton's characters to life for the Perth International Arts Festival.

Jodrell's theatre production will include some film sequences shot on

video that will add to the atmosphere of the staging. These include beach and fishing shots, the kind of imagery that cannot be convincingly conveyed on stage.

"Winton's writing is very much about interior states of mind and the external landscape of WA," says Jodrell. "With the use of film we're trying to convey the sense of these interior states, and, of course, the very physical landscape for which Winton is so much loved.

"The visual imagery opens up possibilities of reflecting the interior and exterior landscape in ways not possible on stage.

"Even the nature of light is strong in his stories. But it will be mood-setting stuff, not used to tell the story on film."

Telling the story will be the responsibility of the cast of nine, who will play 21 characters in Winton's set of tales of adolescence, the growth to maturity, the weight of the past and the disappointments and human tragedies that come the way of many families.

"Bill McCluskey has concentrated on the Lang family in *The Turning* stories," says Jodrell. "But he has overlaid some of the stories with additional material of his own. It's incredibly exciting to be working on such a new work, and a great challenge to take these characters from teenagers to adults with their own crises."

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**The Turning opens at the Playhouse Theatre on Friday.**