

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Adelaide Review

Last Cab to Darwin

by Reg Cribb

Pork Chop Productions
Dunstan Playhouse

It is not surprising that playwright Reg Cribb saw the story of Max Bell as ready-made for the telling. It has all the elements of a mythic quest with a sturdy, self-deprecating hero meeting a host of different characters as he travels a last time through his native land. Like Alvin Straight, the elderly American who travelled hundreds of miles on a lawn mower to visit his dying brother (a journey recreated in David Lynch's memorable film, *The Straight Story*) Max Bell is a codger who won't take no for an answer.

When he is diagnosed with terminal stomach cancer Max decides he will leave his shack in Broken Hill and drive his taxi to Darwin to be the first to die with dignity under the newly legislated euthanasia laws. It is a true story, filled with incident and political irony, powerfully captured both in Reg Cribb's literate text and Jeremy Sims's engaging production.

It is interesting to consider what makes an ordinary person do something quite remarkable. And Max is a very ordinary man, as we learn from his account of his habit-ridden life. A cabbie in Broken Hill he lives alone with few interests beyond the cold tubes in his esky and the cricket mellifluously unfolding on his old black and white TV. He has his friend Pol, the Aboriginal woman from next door, and a few drinking mates at the local pub. It is a life of few needs and very fixed routines but when Max gets stomach pains and has trouble keeping his food down, he knows that something is amiss. It is Pol who encourages him to take his destiny in his own hands, but it is Max who amazes his friends by actually doing something about it.

Director Jeremy Sims, and designer Andrew Raymond use the spacious Playhouse stage to good effect with the scattered detritus of Max's backblocks yard. We see him sitting on his porch on an old car seat in the opening scene, then, to begin his odyssey, he picks up a steering wheel and, with a little propulsion from the other performers, is on the highway. Sims uses simple staging - a plank here, some chairs there - to create general stores, outback bars, packpucker offices and other ports of call.

And the cast creates a procession of characters, stereotypes and oddballs - playing reporters, drinkers, backpackers, standers-by and salts of the earth. Justine Saunders brings conviction to Polly, Jackie Weaver has fun as an eccentric store owner, Andrew McDonnell is Dougie, the town drongo, Alan Dukes plays a local mayor and Sean Taylor is a totally dissipated Tidy Town judge. At the centre of the narrative is Barry Otto, outstanding as Max Bell. Otto brings to the character a convincing ordinariness while at the same time capturing his spiritual transformation. It is portrait full of comic nuance and tender detail and the falling cadence of Barry Otto's marvellously mannered voice carries the story and anchors it dramatically.

This is important because Cribb's text takes some notable liberties with broad comedy, dream sequences, even the song and dance number - "It's been a bugger of a year". I have to say that at this point I thought that writer and director had lost it completely. But when the sequence shifts to a speech from the Tidy Town mayor about the "mess" of community decline, financial hardship, youth suicide and so on, the effect is suddenly and unexpectedly strong. As for Max's battle for his right to die; the medical and ethical realities are well presented, as is his frustration when he is politically outflanked.

Last Cab to Darwin has toured extensively in regional Australia and deserves its wide audience. Reg Cribb is an inventive and outspoken new voice in Australian theatre and Jeremy Sims's lively direction and Barry Otto's memorable performance make this a distinguished production. It meanders at times but is also full of rich surprise. The final scene of Max's death beneath a huge sheltering tree - bathed in Andrew Lake's bold red ochre light and serenaded with a soundtrack of chortling magpies - is an image that stays in the mind long after the play has ended. .