

RED STITCH ACTORS' THEATRE PRESENTS

AN INK WORLD PREMIERE

WITTENOOM

BY MARY ANNE BUTLER

26 January - 19 February 2023



CAST

Emily Goddard Pearl
Caroline Lee Dot

CREATIVES

Susie Dee Director
Dann Barber Set & Costume Design
Rachel Burke Lighting Design
Ian Moorhead Composition/Sound Design
Cassandra Fumi Assistant Director
Susie Dee Dramaturg
Spencer Herd Assistant Lighting Design
Olga Makeeva Costume Maker

PRODUCTION

David Bowyer Production Manager
Cassandra Fumi Stage Manager/ Assistant Director
Georgina Bright Deputy Stage Manager

THANKS

Janine Baines, Bro Barber, John Fleming, John Ford, Harry Gill, John Gordon, Michelle Heaven, Olga Makeeva, Jo Roach & Lindsay Templeton.

This play was developed through Red Stitch's INK program.

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WRITERS NOTES

Witteenoom the play wouldn't exist without a hugely fortuitous combination of people and factors: Susie Dee, Janine Baines and Red Stitch's INK program were crucial in my finding the story. An Australia Council Literature Board grant provided me time to write it. Actors Caroline Lee and Emily Goddard, composer/sound designer Ian Moorhead and Ella Caldwell joined Susie to form the development team, giving intelligent feedback to early drafts. A Brown's Mart Build-Up grant helped me find what this play was not.

...but in truth, it first started when I stalked Susie Dee at a PlayWriting Australia conference in Brisbane, in 2010...

The pieces Susie worked on at that conference were dynamic, engaging, intense. I plucked up the courage to ask if I could speak with her. She looked around the crowded room full of massive networking potential, nodded her head and gave me fifteen minutes of her full and undivided attention: every bit of her keen intelligence, innate curiosity and big heart focussed on an unknown playwright in an act of immense generosity. She gave me her email address and told me to send her what I had. I walked away from that conference on a glowing cloud of hope.

Susie couldn't do the dates for that project – but theatre being a long game, in 2018 I asked if she'd consider my play *Broken* for a Melbourne season. Her fortyfivedownstairs production was riveting. Between our meeting and the production, Susie made her own trip to Central Australia to experience the unique environment where the play was set. She pored over research: images, articles, sound grabs - and her production was sparse, evocative, enticing; capturing this world with such integrity that it made me hungry to work with her again. In 2019 I proposed working on a new piece together, and we applied to Red Stitch's INK program as a writer/director team. I started writing about the death of my mother - Sally Butler - who died of lung cancer in 2001. I came across Barbara Kingsolver's poem *Hope; An Owner's Manual* with the line: "Tiptoe past the dogs of the apocalypse that are sleeping in the shade of your future." I saw my mum, dying of cancer, with the Dogs of the Apocalypse lying at her feet, waiting for her to die. I gave myself a fortnight of intense and uncensored writing without thinking about form, or structure, or storyline; and this became a record of my mum's death, from her initial diagnosis to her end.

Susie arrived in Darwin for dramaturgical development, and I handed her these pages. She took them into her room, emerged 30 minutes later, and said "I love it. It's not a play yet, you know that, don't you? But we can definitely work with this."

...we were on...

The next week I headed off on a research road trip to Broome for my PhD; a novel and exegesis exploring the question: How do you write hope into the realist fiction of the Anthropocene? I stopped off in Kununurra for a night with my friend Jo Roach, whose daughter Janine Baines played Midnight Oil's, *Blue Sky Mine*. Janine told me this was written about the blue asbestos mining town of Witteenoom, in WA's remote Pilbara. I'd never heard of Witteenoom before, or blue asbestos. I was gobsmacked by what Janine told me, and ashamed I'd never heard of the town. John Gordon's Foreword in the publication offers up a deeply informed context of Witteenoom's history and ongoing issues, so I won't repeat his vast and detailed knowledge here. But Witteenoom lodged in my gut, and I knew I'd found the other half of my play.

I hunkered down to do my research, and the characters of Dot and Pearl came to me through reading stories told by Witteenoom's ex-residents. While facts found on public record are mentioned in the play, *Witteenoom* and its characters are entirely a work of fiction.

Several developments at Red Stitch with intelligent interrogation by the development team helped shape the script, Red Stitch programmed *Witteenoom* for 2023, and the development team grew into a stellar production team, welcoming Rachel Burke as lighting designer, Dann Barber on set and costume design, Cassandra Fumi as AD/stage manager, and Georgie Bright as ASM. Input from each of them has been pivotal in shaping *Witteenoom*, and my gratitude towards the entire team is boundless.

So many to thank for this journey: Susie Dee, Ella Caldwell, Caroline Lee, Emily Goddard, Ian Moorhead, Rachel Burke, Dann Barber, Janine Baines, Lyniece Bolitho, Tanya Heaslip, John Gordon, Gail Evans, Ciella Williams, Kelly Beneforti, Red Stitch, Brown's Mart, the Australia Council for the Arts, Michelle Broun, Jo Roach, Martin Pritchard, Robin Chappel. My siblings, Sarah and Michael Butler, Jenny Butler, Geoff Mensforth and all my playwriting peers near and far, from whom I continually learn my craft.

Mary Anne Butler



DIRECTORS NOTES

As a theatre director, I am always hungry and on the lookout for works that are bold, current and vibrant, works that resonate and are unafraid to tackle all corners of the Australian psyche.

I was lucky enough to meet Mary Anne Butler at a National Playwriting Festival many years ago in Brisbane. I remember her eyes, her directness and her liveliness.

But I was a director based in Melbourne and she, a playwright based in Darwin.

She contacted me a few years later, sending me her award-winning play *Broken*. Having read it, I was immediately taken with the characters, the poeticism and the vivid landscape she had managed to capture. We joined forces and pitched it to a couple of mainstage companies, but with no joy. Then, we were lucky to have Lab Kelpie, (a small independent company) pick it up and produce it at fortyfivedownstairs theatre in Melbourne in 2018. Mary Anne joined us for rehearsals, and it was a joy to have her in the room - she was thoughtful, insightful and gracious, and we both knew this would be the start of an honest, dynamic working relationship.

We started a dialogue again in 2020, this time on a new work originally titled *Tiny Bones of Love* (part of Red Stitch Actors Theatre's INK Program), a work we both found ourselves struggling with. After a couple of early drafts and a flurry of emails and zooms I finally had the chance to visit Mary Anne in Darwin in 2021, where she showed me for the first time a new monologue that started like this:

The dogs of the apocalypse lie at her feet, ears alert.
...waiting...

They can feel it in their flesh-bones; under their fur sense the rising of the soul into the night as she floats, barely present;
not quite ready
to face the great emptiness.

I was immediately hooked, excited and curious to see where it could lead. Mary Anne was just about to depart in her campervan with her beauty of a dog, Chet, on a road (and research) trip from Darwin to Broome. Then, on this journey, she came across the story of a town in the Pilbara called Wittenoom - and its deadly legacy. She then saw how to frame and house this vivid story of death and dying.

In *Wittenoom*, the play, we see a mother and her daughter move to a remote mining town where a joyous life and looming death dance side-by-side in the blue asbestos dust. Two narratives slowly unfold, one set in the past where life is in full swing and the other in the present, about a body that is diseased and dying. They are, first and foremost, stories about fecundity and the giving of life, but also of the taking of it and an awareness of time running out. They revolve around loss, love, memory, betrayal and grief and in them Mary Anne manages to capture 'humanity' in its most raw and fragile state.

In both *Broken* and *Wittenoom*, Mary Anne gives us a series of rich and multi-layered characters while also capturing the vast Australian outback, all in her typically spare, poetic style. Her writing, rich with imagery, visceral in its rendering, is also full of ideas that challenge and surprise. She has a gift for embedding humour and pathos into all of her plays, her wit sharp and bold and her heart ever present. For a director, all these elements are a gift, and in working on *Wittenoom* in preparation for its recent Red Stitch season, we had the luxury of having a short development with the two actors and composer present. Hearing the voices come alive off the page gave Mary Anne the opportunity to rethink the structure of her script, which in turn brought a whole new dynamic to the work.

Mary Anne's writing is in so many ways potent, exemplary and courageous. She tackles and unpacks ideas head-on, with boldness, craft and gusto. She understands the demands of theatre in a way few writers do and working with her once again has been an absolute pleasure.

Susie Dee

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