

**MALTHOUSE
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GOD'S LAST ACRE

BY VIVIENNE WALSH

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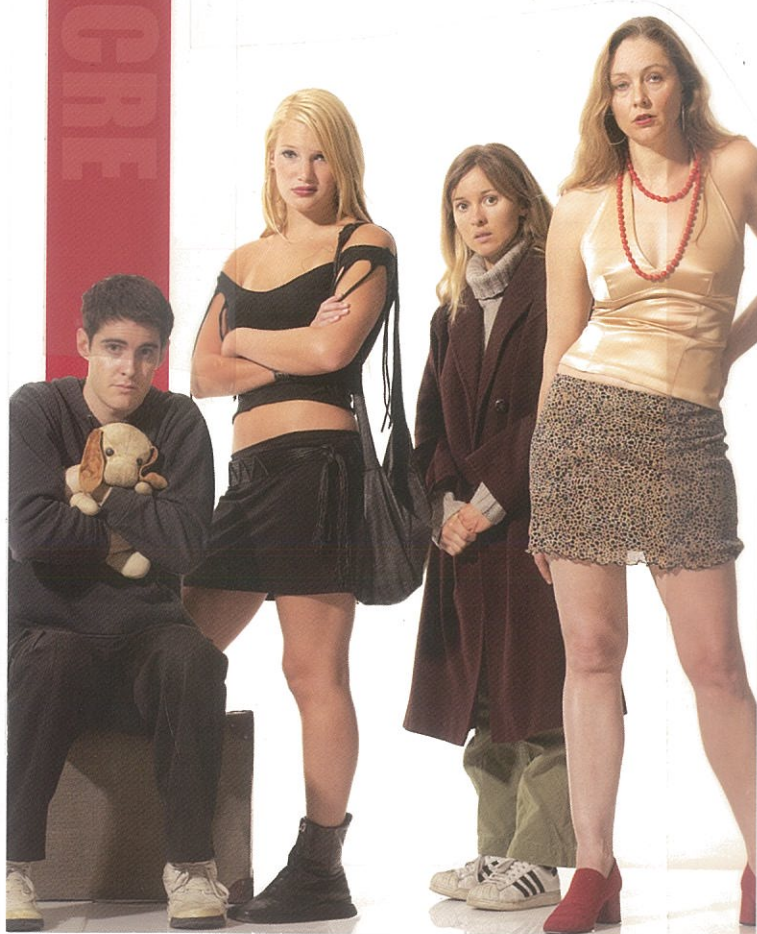
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play
box.

GOD'S LAST ACRE

By Vivienne Walshe

They're making the best of it in a world that keeps handing them the worst.



BACKGROUND NOTES

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God's Last Acre

by Vivienne Walshe

Background Notes

Playbox Education has prepared these Background Notes to assist students in their study of the play. They are not a document that provides a definitive statement about 'God's Last Acre'. As Playbox we very much see the need for students to respond to theatre in order to address the demands of the VCE Theatre Studies curriculum, but we also want students to discuss *their own* experiences and understanding of 'God's Last Acre'. We hope that students will voice their own opinions about the play; its style, its characters, its story, its stagecraft, the themes and ideas that they believe a contemporary Australian play such as this one explores, and to discuss its relevance to their lives and to their future.

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Interview with Vivienne Walshe, playwright of 'God's Last Acre'

What was your initial inspiration for writing God's Last Acre?

I'd written a play a couple of years before which was a play that didn't have a very strong narrative. With *God's Last Acre* I sat down to write something that had a really strong story, a strong narrative and a play that was very moving. I think I set out to write a story to end all stories, one that was less about ideas and more of a four act structure about a family. I was 26 when I wrote it and I think I was just making sense of the fact that all families come to an end and that was something that really struck a chord with me. In the last couple of years I've had a strong emotional response to this because I guess at 26 you're becoming an adult, you're making sense of what your childhood and your adolescence was and what family is. There is a kind of tension that exists with being a young adult or even being a child in a family and then knowing that this particular role is about to end. There's an emotion about that which I responded to and I wanted to write about.

In this play you've created a very vivid sense of the world of the family. Did you need to do any research as part of your writing process?

No. This project was something that I didn't feel needed much research at all. A lot of it was a collection of experiences that I'd had in my 26 years of life. The role of Kerry is a mix of three or four women who've been very predominant in my life and I guess they've been figures that I've been enamoured of. They have a kind of carefree, wilful, nature, one of total self indulgence. There's a way they have whereby everything that comes out of their mouth is framed for effect. There's a way they have of sweeping into a room and dominating the room, so as soon as I saw Kerry on the page I saw a woman walking into a room and she was twirling her new outfit, and I thought I had the tone immediately. When Kerry says things like, "What do you think? Do you think it's silly that it matches? This jacket and skirt?" I just knew that this was a theatrical female character that I've totally been drawn to in my real life, and one who has come alive on the page.

So this is a play about people and families, not necessarily about ideas?

This time was the first where I'd really written a play that was thought through, hashed over and structured before I even began. So I had a sense of the themes and the structure and the fore-act, and I saw the movement of it like a piece of music before I began. I felt like the ideas were interesting enough to be buried underneath in order for the story and the characters to really fly.

I've been to a lot of theatre that's been quite conceptual and I'm just not impressed by the intelligence of a playwright as much as I am about the beauty of fragile characters. And also being 26 it was the first time I realised that everybody's doing the best they can and are often so easily devastated.

Did you have any dramaturgical input into 'God's Last Acre' and, if so what was that process about?

This is the first time I'd written a play or I'd written a piece without thinking about my audience's response, or without the idea of writing for a dramaturg or writing for a director. I just had total confidence that if it gave me pleasure, then the audience would respond. So because I'd done all my structural work beforehand, it meant that I could move from A to B to C because I knew where my plot points were.

When I had finished my first draft I gave it to a woman called Nancy Black and she worked through some of the threads of the text. She ran through the characters, she really pulled and stretched them out, she made me think about very specific moments and made me feel fearless about the emotional drama in the script. I began looking back over the text, squeezing every moment so that there was always a power, a power that never let anybody off so that the tension was always building. That struggle over a telephone call - who's picked it up first? who's on the phone? This is a particular scene with Christine and Kerry where I had them in some way originally trying to make peace with each other. Nancy's suggestion, however, was that you really don't take the pressure off them until the end of the play. Every time I wanted them to have a kind of touching moment, she would introduce the idea of not letting them have that - yet.

Nancy had so much confidence in the script. She had a wonderful response and she had such an empathy with the characters that this was really reward enough. I felt warmed that I could give it to somebody who is so widely read and have a response whereby she was so emotional and so touched by it. Sometimes my tendency as a writer, if I'm getting scared about going for the drama, is that I'll tend to be a little bit perverse, I'll go off left of centre. It's a way that playwrights have I think of disguising themselves. They get scared that if the play is an emotional piece, people will either laugh at them for being so bold or will see who they really are. I'm not saying that all playwrights who write do feel that, but for me there is always a tendency or a tension to either reveal myself or disguise myself. In this case I was more interested in revealing myself, because my assumption as a writer is that people are more likely to be similar to me than completely different.

Were there any particular themes that you were wanting to highlight in the play?

On my desk I had post-it notes of themes that struck a chord with me and that I wanted to constantly touch on, and one of them was 'we keep our secrets'. There is a line in the play which is, "We keep her secrets for her so she can be free".

That for me captured a dynamic between a family of women who love each other so much that they want to protect each other from the ugliness of the way the world. The things that they do when they're on their own or away from each other is sometimes 'unbeautiful', it's ugly, and it's about having your back against the wall and really trying to scratch your way out a little bit. I think one of the themes is about these women trying to protect each other from the brutality of their menial jobs or their sex work by keeping it a secret. It is the character of Kerry who finds it hard to keep anything to herself, to keep her secrets and she finds it easy to offload with whoever's around her, like her children. In this instance it becomes a kind of a reversal of roles for these women. Kerry probably confesses to each of them, 'Don't tell the others but I'm finding it very difficult at the moment'. In this way she'd feel like her responsibility is shared amongst the children and I think that this is what I was trying to touch on.

Is there one character you particularly like?

Kerry, the mother, was probably the one that I loved the most, but Cassie, the younger daughter, is probably the one that I saw the most clearly. Every time I thought about the story as a film I had this image of her lying in a backyard, in one of those suburban backyards like the backyard of an Oakleigh home, with green grass and very few trees and all you can see there is just the blue sky and the occasional plane flying overhead to Moorabbin Airport. An image of her staring up at the sky just dreaming. She's sixteen so she's really biding her time before she can find her ticket out.

How would you describe the style of your play?

I often find it difficult to define this. I was searching for a tone that was not too feminine but one that had a musicality to the chatter. I stretched my thoughts towards the contemporary Irish playwrights and that was really my influence in terms of style. If you look at the work of Colin McPherson, Martin Dyer and Brian Friel, they don't mind taking their time, and they don't mind using realistic language. Their work is not really action-based or physical theatre and it's certainly not necessarily exploring innovative ideas, but the dynamics and the characters within them unfold in a kind of chat.

So 'social realism' - is that a way of describing the style of the play?

Yes, I think so. I was thinking about Mike Leigh a playwright and director. He's very idiosyncratic but again it's the vulnerability of his characters, the way they stutter through their interactions that has been a kind of inspiration for this play.

The setting of the play described at the beginning is very specific. Do you see the action taking place in this space as you write and how important is that physical environment in telling of your story?

I had a sense of the space that I was writing in and an image of it in my mind but it was quite a liquid image. I never saw it as a real theatre space, so I never saw the characters moving about it was really just 'hearing it' in that space. I think that playwrights work in different ways and some are very visual. I'm totally aural, so if there was any space at all, it was an aural space inside my imagination. So, then I went back to imagining it was not only a suburban home, but an elderly woman's suburban home which is kind of captured in time. I tend to hit the wall if I constantly think about it in a visual way.

What brought you to the point where you actually described this home in such a detailed way?

It's almost a prologue to the play by having it there. I wanted a quietness before the play started instead of just beginning with the action of them just arriving. It's almost like the quiet before the storm, and it lets you see. Arthur Miller does this in *The Crucible*. Tennessee Williams will write long descriptions like to introduce the actors and directors to this imaginative space. It's not quite real – it's a space in between where the play hasn't yet begun rather like an incision where you can see the characters in the quietness of the night. The description gives a sense of refuge and that the characters have been lost as a family, and just holding onto each other like in a storm.

Is working on creating that incision, creating that space – is that part of the design brief for the designer?

I guess because I've been an actor in the theatre I was always very aware of props. 'She lights a cigarette', 'She puts a teacup down'. I think that's probably because I worked with Robyn Nevin [Artistic Director of Sydney Theatre Company] a lot and she loves a prop. So I wrote in much of the description and stage direction because of my acting background. As an actor I knew when the teacup was settled and I knew when the teacup had to be returned to the sink. I really couldn't help but put it in and I think directors would probably find it a little unusual the fact that I've written it.

Some playwrights like David Hare will always write that. I think I do it because, as an actor, I remember that the teacup is tremendously important. Not only is the tea cup there but the direction sets up an image of a woman sipping that particular cup of tea and layers it with the fact that the tea also has Mogadon in it. These props have a life of their own – the cigarette, the ashtray, the tea cup - and so I created them and I was aware of them from an actor's point of view.

As a result, when all this is written down on the page it looks overly specific. It's how I intended it, just in case it doesn't communicate. To read a play off the page, the play sometimes has to be a separate document to the way you know it's going to sound and look. So the directions and descriptions are a way of translating for the reader in order for them to understand that this is how it's meant to sound.

How do you see the role of playwrights in our society?

Well this would seem the most common response but the only thing that makes sense to me is that a playwright is a storyteller. People I think have a very visceral response to stories and everything's kind of shaped around a story. I think that for people who want to change the world in a very *active* manner, generally the theatre isn't the most effective way. It would possibly be more beneficial for me in some ways to devote my time to aid work but play writing is something that gives me pleasure, and I can't think of anything else I want to do. So I think that for a playwright, this is what they're good at, this is what gives them pleasure and there's still a demand for people to listen to stories. Within that, a storyteller reminds an audience of that which they already know.

Sometimes I forget aspects of my childhood until I see them on screen or in the theatre and I'm reminded that that in fact happened to me. It's like a shared memory of how to make sense of our past and to make sense of the present.

Do you feel there are some playwrights whose work does have a capacity to have impact or change?

I always wonder how much of all the movies and all the films and the thousands and thousands of stories that I've heard over my lifetime, shaped the way I think. It's hard to know. The jury's out on whether television can change an audience's opinion. This play may change the way people see single mothers living, but will that make them more active in social change? That's a big leap. Maybe I'm a bit cynical but then maybe thinking is all that is needed to be effective.

Being a playwright is very different to the work that I've done with television because with theatre there is no particular brief; I don't have to write to sell anything. Theatre is really the only space where the writer is still free to express themselves. Nobody's kidding themselves when they sit down to write for television. The number one motivation for writing for television is to make something appealing and charismatic and to maintain a common denominator as a tension, whereas, for me, going to the theatre is the only time you see stories that haven't been watered down to sell.

When I have written for television I've watered it down before I've even begun, because nothing can ever be tangential, everything has to be completely understood by the largest number of people. I think it will always be so. In the theatre you can say things as you see them to be, with more expediency and with less people telling you that it's too much for people to handle. It is perhaps more truthful, more honest.

What would you like the audiences to be thinking as they leave?

I think the experience of writing the play was the first time I'd ever felt a sense of compassion about how vulnerable women are when they're in their late 30s or early 40s looking after children. Quite specifically for me there was the sense of 'no one's going to help you'. Cassie, one of the characters in the play, asks her sister JoJo, 'Why doesn't anybody help us?' and JoJo responds, 'Well they don't have to, do they?'. For most of the women I know who have children, the fathers aren't with them any more and the women may have a new boyfriend but the family unit is changed. Often it's no longer the nuclear family that came along in the 20th century, now it's something else. I think I want the audience to think about the fact that when you're on your own, nobody's necessarily going to help you.

Seeing the play is different from reading an article about women who do too much or aren't coping. When you actually see the interaction of a woman not coping with her many responsibilities – a child with intellectual disabilities and two girls - and actually get to see that it's beyond her that is something to think about.

The character of Teague adds another layer to this play because he is intellectually disabled. Was that a deliberate choice? Is this something you want the audience to think about?

I know that I wanted the boy to be young. Also, many of the children whom I've spent any time with have been intellectually disabled either because it's in the work I've done or the families that I have hung around with so I had a sense of the family interaction, it was within my experience.

The extra pressure on Kerry means that you see her not always engaging with Teague, not always knowing how to speak to him, saying 'I don't understand him, I don't'. There's a lot of mothers of children with disabilities who feel guilty that they don't get along with their children, they haven't bonded or they get angry and smack them and then feel guilty. I think this experience must be quite different to having a child who doesn't have these disabilities. There is the question, 'Is it my fault?' which I don't think is ever explored and there is the question, 'Is this is my responsibility for the rest of my life?'

This is the situation in quite a lot of people's lives and then there is the relationships between the siblings to consider as well. I think a lot of the boys who came to audition for *God's Last Acre* hadn't had a lot of experience with this, they hadn't been around children with disabilities nor adults and they appeared a bit uncomfortable. If you're not used to a particular thing, like if you don't take public transport regularly and you have to suddenly take the tram, you just get that feeling where you have to readjust because it's not your every day environment.

In the end though, Teague was created more for literary pleasure than to change public perception and he is a character that I really respond to.

Is there anything else you would like to say about your play?

I think that *God's Last Acre* captures a social change that has happened in the last 50 years, where it's possible for women to leave their husbands and men to leave their wives. Certainly when I was at school it was becoming more and more common. Parents divorce - men leave women or women leave men - and I guess the play examines the impact of what happens when the primary breadwinner leaves the home.

INTERVIEW WITH PETER HOUGHTON, DIRECTOR OF *GOD'S LAST ACRE*

In reading the script of *God's Last Acre*, what was your initial impression?

The first thing that struck me about the play, was that it was so well constructed. A lot of new plays that you read often have two or three characters that don't make sense or a plot line that isn't followed through properly, or contains inconsistencies. With Vivienne's writing she's gone a very long way to solving all those problems and succeeded in creating very distinct characters, all of which have strong objectives in the play. This makes the director's job a lot easier. Reading the play I was reminded of some of the great naturalistic playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller and even some of the pre-war Irish writers like Sean O'Casey and people like that.

Vivienne has created this fantastic drama set in one room, which is very dense, personal and intimate without ever feeling like you're in a soap opera. I was always aware of some larger theme going on as well; a political theme about the forgotten people in modern society. That's when I started to get really interested in the play and when I first expressed an interest in directing it. I think it's quite rare to find something that works on both a political and personal level. And whilst the material was heavy in some ways and the outcomes not great for some of the characters, it was dealt with using a lot of humour. And that's a very useful weapon I think when you're working on socially motivated material, because it takes away the potential self indulgence of people feeling sorry for themselves. I really loved the courage of the characters and the way that despite their obviously dire circumstances, they are still quite optimistic and still fighting to get out. So you empathise with them and you care about them, which is vital.

When you read the script did you have a clear understanding of the themes and style of the work?

As Vivienne is a new playwright she didn't want to try and run before she could walk, she really wanted to write a good classical piece. And so she's dedicated herself in the writing period to doing that and not relying too much on montage or other styles of writing. She's concentrated on bringing all the drama out by dialogue and so there's no clumsy big monologues or dangerously boring exposition. She dumps you right in the room and you are right there while the characters thrash it out which is really refreshing.

Did you do any research in approaching the directorial role for this play?

I did a little bit from a design point of view. Shaun Gurton [set designer] and I went for a drive around the kind of area [Oakleigh] where the play is set and tried to get a feel for that architecture of suburban Australian.

There's also a character in the play, Teague, who has a condition which is unspecified in the stage directions but you gather he has a kind of cocktail of problems most of which are caused by a birth injury. He's got a cerebral palsy feel about him, but he's also suffering from autism of a kind. He can be out of control and has large mood swings. He's a 14 year old, but he has the sort of emotional age of a five or six year old. So I've tried to address that and the actor who's playing the role of Teague will actually go to a special school in Port Phillip to do some research. Most of the time I find that experiencing is usually better than reading. So when we were auditioning, the intuitive response of the actor was first and foremost what I was looking for in regard to this particular character.

You have one actor playing two roles that of a teenager and a young man. How are you going to make this work effectively? Is he going to look different or is he going to convey the role physically?

The older character, Cameron, is about 21 and the younger boy, Teague, is about 14, so when we were casting I was aiming at somewhere between those ages. We saw a few people who were 17 and 18 and I thought, well, actually this is a very complex acting challenge, and what we really need to do is to find the right actor. We started from that, so there was never any possibility of him actually being believably 14 to the audience, but there was a possibility of him embodying those drives and presenting that kind of physicality. So we didn't concentrate too heavily on the make up stuff at all. It's about the actors. There will be a costume change which is just to help differentiation really, particularly the older character of Cameron.

Were you involved in any dramaturgical process during your direction of the play?

I've been working with Vivienne since the beginning and we've had quite a lot of sessions. She had probably written two or three drafts and I think she went through another couple of drafts before then. There's been some reasonably major sort of changes in terms of dialogue, but nothing really has changed that much in terms of structure. There are a few little things that have been cleaned up or details that have been untangled.

Vivienne actually changed the period the play was set in just after we started working on it. It was originally set in 1983 and now it's contemporary because we both agreed that there was no need to create a distance that didn't need to be there.

So I've had reasonably close involvement, but it's been a stress free process because we've both been in agreement about most things. Probably more stuff will come up as the rehearsals progress and as she becomes more influenced by what the actors are doing. But so far there's nothing major that's come up for me.

The relationship with the writer/director, can obviously be one of tension if the writer feels strongly about the work or sees a particular phrase in a particular way. Has your relationship been a coherent one?

Yes. I think one of the reasons why is because I wanted to spend quite a bit of time with Vivienne before we started rehearsal, to keep talking about my ideas so that nothing came as too much of a shock when we got into the rehearsal room. I think with a play like this it's better to go for the full naturalistic feel, and Vivienne was relieved to hear that. As this is Vivienne's first play there's probably a lot she gets anxious about. Especially as what you see in the first week of rehearsal is not what's going to be there in week four. As the writer you naturally start to panic that things aren't going to be done right.

The advantage that Vivienne has is that she's been an actor so she understands the actor's process and that things need to be worked towards rather than just laid out early. She also understands that everybody has an interpretation of some kind to what they're given. So the theatre making isn't really just a process of rendering what's written, there is also a degree of interpretation that comes from a director and from an actor and from a designer. I think she's pretty good about that. We'll see what she says when the play has opened.

'God's Last Acre' is very naturalistic in style and setting with very specific stage directions. Does that curtail your ideas in some way?

I had a conversation with Vivienne last night about the prologue she's written at the beginning of the play. It is a self contained little story about the family arriving in the house. Then there's a sort of black out and then the lights come up and it's three weeks later. So immediately when you get into the rehearsal room, you start working on that on the basis of performing in a kind of modern theatre where we don't have curtains and we don't necessarily even have effective blackouts because of emergency signs and things.

My fear about that is that you set up quite an elaborate moment right at the beginning of the play and then it abruptly ends. It's potentially a clumsy way to enter a play. I was looking at the idea of having an arrival moment but because the audience doesn't know who anyone is yet, they don't really care about who's handing a box to whom.

The most important thing which is suggested in the prologue is that there's a gang of people who are trying to get into a house very late at night. People fumbling with keys, trying to get a door open, finally it opens and the intellectually disabled boy walks in on his own, and then other people bustle in with bags. They stand in the middle of a space and they don't even know where the light switch is. Then the others move off into the body of the house and the mother stays on stage alone and you see that she's kind of going to be trapped in this place.

The design that Shaun's done is very different from the ground plan that Vivienne had in mind. The main reason we changed it was because she specified two rooms and I didn't want to do parallel rooms on a stage as small as the Beckett because I knew that if you had action happen in one of them you'd have half the stage dark and everyone else cramped up in the corner. So I really wanted to open the room out and create a feeling of claustrophobia which was at least manageable in that size. And I also thought the veranda, rather than being something that was really only a transitory space, was better as something that was outside and was seen as somewhere outside and that they were all locked in this room together with the suggestion of the world outside.

With a new writer and a living writer you have to negotiate the steps. At some point you have a run of the play, or half a run and in week two when she comes in and says, 'I don't like this and I don't like that', which is fine then you talk about why and see if there's any benefits in what she's saying or what I've done.

Are there any particular themes you're trying to highlight in the production?

The title *God's Last Acre* is suggestive of the theme of the play. That there's one last place or a last chance or a last hope for these people. That all the other territory of 'belonging' has been taken away from them and they're left with this one space in which to sort out their lives for the rest of the play.

Would you discuss the significance of the relationships between the women in the play.

We've got Sue Jones playing the older woman, Christine, the mother-in-law/grandmother, and Nell Feeney playing, Kerry, a mother of two teenage or young adult daughters and an adolescent son - three generations in one house. So in some ways these relationships are about *legacy*, what you pass onto the next generation. Can you get away from wherever it is? Is it a given that you're going to walk in the same footsteps that they walked through?

I'm not entirely certain that the writer's actually sure of what the answer to that question is, and so I think Vivienne's sort of posing that question to the audience and asking - are we really just treading over the same old garbage that our parents and grandparents did or are we making new tracks? I believe that the ending is quite deliberately ambiguous about that.

I find the ending hopeful but a lot of people don't agree with me. I've had a lot of strange conversations of a dramaturgical nature with people who've been advising a more uplifting ending. However, I've always felt the ending's quite hopeful because, whilst it's a little bit misdirected, and whilst it may not necessarily be the right thing to do to leave, the children do at least *create* out of their generosity; they create room for the mother to make a decision. And that's what she's never had, she's never had the opportunity to make a decision because she's been looking after a family of three people. And she's never had a chance to be on her own and decide what she really wants. So that's the gift that they give her. They give her the gift of choice and in that kind of world where people are pushing against circumstances beyond their control, to be given the gift of choice is a quite potent gift. I find it quite heartening that they do that, because it suggests to me that they have some spirit and that they're going to survive.

Could you describe your collaboration with the designer?

I've worked with lots of different people over the years and the thing I like about working with Shaun is that he's fantastic at working with workshops and he's got an understanding of geometry and architecture of sets. So what you see in the model is what's going to be on stage which is a big help. I hate getting to the theatre and the designer coming up and saying it's not quite the way it was.

The house is very particularly a cream brick veneer in Oakleigh and that has particular architectural features, the low ceiling and the floor to ceiling windows in this kind of mass produced sort of artificially constructed suburbs that they did after the war - I quite like them actually, but some people find them a bit claustrophobic. So it's skill I think, or a kind of faith that you have to have in yourself as a designer to render something on stage which is potentially boring and which is famous for being boring, but to have the courage to throw it up there and go, 'Well, that's what it is!' It's not going to be an elaborate metaphor or an attractive series of sunsets or something. It's actually going to be the kind of house that they were living in. So you walk straight in, you go right that's where we are.

As a collaborator he's good because you can have an ongoing conversation with him and he doesn't lock things down too early. Shaun always shows you a card model a fair way before the actual model is presented to the workshop so you get to look at the set while you're reading the script before you start the rehearsal. And I usually like playing with little toy soldiers and things to see how it's going to work in terms of sightlines and if the blocking is balanced.

INTERVIEW WITH SHAUN GURTON, DESIGNER FOR GOD'S LAST ACRE

As a designer, what were your first impressions of the script of 'God's Last Acre'?

Vivienne Walsh has written a strong play about a group of people struggling to find their individual voices within a claustrophobic environment. Each character in the play has a clearly defined image. The playwright has meticulously researched the sort of home and the clothes of the characters. My job as the designer is to work closely with the director, lighting designer and the actors to fulfill the needs of the play.

The play is quite specific with regard to description of the set and costumes. How does this affect your role as a designer?

The set comprises various rooms and spaces in a 1950's house in a suburban area of Melbourne. It could be set in any city. My job is to provide a working space for the actors where the action is made clear to the audience. The scale of the house is very important. It must not appear too grand. Because the play is being presented in the Beckett Theatre which is a small intimate theatre I am able to create a small slice of realism which the director and I believe is the correct style of presentation for the play. The house is home to the grandmother, Christine so it must represent her world and all the things she has accumulated over her life. I have selected an eclectic design look for the house. The rooms are not furnished in any style. They are the remnants of memory and the years of living. The clothes for the actors reflect this eclectic design look. Nothing should look too *designed*.

Have you had to do any research?

The playwright has provided a lot of visual research already so my job was to articulate this material into the design. The director came with me to look at the sort of areas the house was located in. So many houses that were built in the 1950's had characteristics that repeat themselves over and over. Brick veneer exteriors, similar verandahs, styles of windows etc. We used this imagery to create our slice of realism.

The script of 'God's Last Acre' requires a number of set elements to be 'functional' eg. the actors need to be able to prepare food, make cups of tea etc on set. What does this require of the design?

When designing plays that are realistic in their presentation the designer must use the skills that an interior designer would apply to a real house. You must work out the space to be as practical as possible for the actors. Certain things have to be real as pouring and boiling water. But you can fake certain kitchen elements such as practical ovens and refrigerators. You must make the audience believe that it is all real.

How would you describe the style of your set design?

We have chosen a style of design called *selected realism*. Selected because we don't show all the aspects of the interiors and exteriors. The task is to select the key elements of the house that support the needs of the play and the demands of the action.

The script suggests that the costumes are very naturalistic but are also important in describing or defining the characters. Will you work with the actors playing the roles when designing the costumes?

It is essential that the designer works closely with the actors in the choosing of their costumes as they are a visual key to the character they are portraying. Discussion must take place in the earlier days of rehearsal so that the actors and the director are clearly reflecting the desires of the playwright. On many occasions the designer and wardrobe supervisor will take the actors from the rehearsal room to try on various ideas as the character develops. This will lead to costumes being bought or made according to the character.

Would you describe your collaboration with the lighting designer, Rachel Burke?

The lighting designer is an essential person in the design process. Light can supply many practical and emotional aspects of the play. I always try and design a set that allows the lighting designer to not only light the actors clearly but also to create an atmosphere true to the realistic style we have chosen. The use of windows and realistic light fittings all help to create the illusion we desire. Rachel and I, together with the director, discuss the model and the colour scheme so as the rehearsal continues, the lighting designer creates the lighting plot to follow the action.

INTERVIEW WITH RACHEL BURKE, LIGHTING DESIGNER FOR GOD'S LAST ACRE

Rachel, as a lighting designer, how did you respond to the text of 'God's Last Acre'?

The question is always, 'Why does this piece of writing belong on the stage and not on the television or in the radio studio or in the pages of a book?' The answers reside in the text and this is always my entry point to the design for any play. It is the script which stimulates and sparks the imaginative process before anything else and hopefully provides the visual clues to the eventual look of the play. Vivienne's writing of the dialogue and stage directions is very descriptive and atmospheric. She imagines specific light sources and describes the quality of them in her stage notes. Examples of this are the way she describes the car headlights and the security light outside the front door. There is also a strong sense of time and place in the text of *God's Last Acre* which in turn stimulates strong visual pictures for the stage.

What are the main challenges in the lighting design?

The main challenge for this play is in knowing the rehearsal room work intimately enough to ensure that the timing and placement of the lighting cues blend perfectly with the action. This necessitates not only a detailed knowledge of the blocking, but also familiarity with the actor's intentions and motivations. The focus for the audience must be in exactly the right place at the right time and the changes ought to be virtually imperceptible to them. The lighting must seek to completely support the emotional nuances of the characters and the situations.

What is it like for you as a lighting designer to light such a naturalistic piece?

Lighting design, almost by definition, is *non-naturalistic*. The choice of light sources, focus choices, patterns and colours is made through a metaphorical process. A set of decisions is made to assist the telling of the story through light. Whilst the text and settings of *God's Last Acre* could be described as *naturalistic*, I don't think 'naturalistic' is a word that Shaun Gurton [the set designer] and I would use to describe the look of the play. It is perhaps more of a 'pushed' or 'heightened' naturalism, a feel which is derived from the way things appear to be in the real world, but a feel that has taken on an edge to it, one that is not completely natural. A visual artist that typifies this look is the American painter, Edward Hopper, and I find his work a continual source of inspiration.

This type of design is an enormous challenge nevertheless. Many more lanterns and dimmers are required to achieve the look than in a more expressionist piece where one or two sources may be all that is required in any given cue. Colours must be chosen with great care to fully support the emotional climate of the piece and the costume and set colours, whilst also appearing to mimic the natural appearance and behaviour of light. It is important to consider a sense of real direction, in terms of where dawns and sunsets might occur and how light hits surfaces of the set.

How important is the lighting design in creating the mood of the play?

Crucial, it is one of the final components that is capable of making or breaking the mood. The responsibility of this can weigh very heavily during the technical week. Actors, director, writer and stage management have spent many weeks rehearsing and refining the play, the set has been built, decorated and installed and the sound track has usually been finished to the extent that it can be used in the final stages of rehearsal. Then the lighting design, which has hitherto only existed as paperwork, must be added. Ill-conceived choices in colour, timing, focussing and lighting cues are capable of undermining all of that other work.

Could you describe your collaboration with the designer, Shaun Gurton?

Shaun and I work easily together because we have a well-established, shared vocabulary about design and process that has been built up over many years. I trust Shaun's intuition about the design choices he makes and know that he will be very clear with me about the way he envisages the set and costumes to look regardless of the theatrical style we are working in. As the set for *God's Last Acre* is essentially a house, we needed to talk about practical fittings for the set, such as lamps, light fittings and furniture dressings. The textures in the room were very important, especially the floor surfaces and the colours of the carpet and benches. The treatment of the windows in terms of frosting, blinds and fabrics was also discussed at length. I think for both of us what is revealed by light is as important as what is hidden and we had interesting conversations about colour choices in terms of the overall sense of optimism versus pessimism in the play.

INTERVIEW WITH ALYSON BROWN, STAGE MANAGER FOR 'GOD'S LAST ACRE'

In General, what are the major tasks that you are required to do as a Stage Manager:

(a) The Rehearsal room

Before we start rehearsals, I read the script a couple of times to gain a good understanding of what the story is about, who the characters are and when the play is set. After I have a good understanding of the play, I begin to make numerous lists outlining all the props, set, costume, sound and lighting cues. I also make notes of any dangers / features that may be incorporated in the script such as fight scenes, singing, shouting etc I then ask the director if I need to organise specialist people to teach those skills.

Next I put together a rehearsal schedule, production week schedule and a contact list of all artists involved, and I begin collecting props and set pieces for rehearsals.

In the rehearsal room, I start by marking up the floor – which involves putting masking tape down on the floor to identify the size and shape of the set and also any walls, doors and windows. This gives the director and actors a better sense of how the space will look and feel.

At the start of each rehearsal I set out props and set pieces. I then assist the director by writing down all the blocking (the actors movement in the space), sound cues, lighting cues, prop placement and movement of set elements in the prompt copy (a copy of the script that contains notes about the production). During the rehearsal process I maintain and update rehearsal and performance schedules and pass on relevant information to different areas of the production team i.e costumes, props, set.

(b) During a performance

I co-ordinate the *bump in* – with the removal of prop and set pieces from the rehearsal room to the theatre space. In the theatre I make sure all prop, set and costume items are accounted for and that the environment is safe for all involved. I then check that all the actors and production team are aware of the production schedule and show times requirements.

It is then my responsibility *to call the show* which means I indicate when to start the show and signal for light [LX] sound effects [Snd] and fly cues at the right moment to keep the show moving.

E.g LX Q 30 – Go Actor switches on lamp
 Fly Q 10 - Go After Actor walks through gate
 Snd Q 4 - Go Actor hangs up phone
 (Fade up A & B to – 20 Slowly)

At the end of each show I write up a Stage Manager's report which outlines things that have happened in the performance such as: lights not working, actors hurting themselves, noisy audience members etc. The items that I can fix I will do so before the next performance.

Are you involved in the design process of a set? If not when does your involvement start in relation to the management of set and props?

As a Stage Manager you are not involved in the design or development of the set, that is mainly discussed between the director and designer. The Stage Manger's involvement takes place during pre production (the week before rehearsals start), after the initial production meeting has taken place. The designer then shows a set model to the cast and production team followed by a reading of the script. It is then my job to talk to the director and designer and ascertain what props are needed for rehearsals.

What aspects of the design and style of 'Gods Last Acre' make it similar or different to other productions you have worked on? Does the style of a show impact significantly on your role?

There are a few similarities in *God's Last Acre* to *Nowhere* (by Barry Dickens) and *Face to Face* (by David Williamson) as they are all naturalistic. This means they are all set in one time and place with a realistic set design. There is not much movement of set elements and it happens over real time. *God's Last Acre* is vastly different to another show I stage managed called *Sweet Road* (by Debra Oswald). In *Sweet Road* the set was a large open space, symbolic of places and items. Instead of having real cars there were shells of cars and every thing was on wheels, so it could be moved in to different positions to represent different places in Australia.

In the set and prop design, there are often practical and decorative elements. Would you explain the difference and how this difference impacts on your role.

In *God's Last Acre* we have many practical sets and prop pieces including lamps, which are a source of light in the set, a television that flickers and has sound coming from it, a radio that works and a kettle that really boils water. All this means is that when I call a lighting cue or operate sound cue it has to coincide with the actors' movements, to look 'real' so the timing needs to be perfect between yourself and the actor. There are also many props that are practical as we have a set in a kitchen so the food needs to be real and edible.

A good example, is that three quarters of the props in the fridge are there to make it look like a fridge and one quarter are actually used.

Would you talk about what aspects of your role would involve working with the director.

As a Stage Manager you work very closely with the director. We will discuss props, the set, costumes etc and he will rely on me to pass that information on. We will work out the schedule as to what needs to be incorporated in it for the up and coming week eg. actors availability, meetings, media calls etc. It is through the director that you will get a sense of where some of the cues will happen, as he brings the picture together. Safety issues are also discussed.

GOD'S LAST ACRE ***by Vivienne Walshe***

Questions for Analysis and Discussion

Context & Themes

1. Vivienne Walshe says that she wanted to write about 'being a young adult' and knowing that the role of 'being a child in a family' is about to end.
 - how do the characters of JoJo and Cassie respond to the transition from childhood to adulthood in the play?
 - how does Kerry respond to the responsibilities of adulthood?

2. Vivienne Walshe says that at the age of 26 she realised that 'everybody's doing the best they can and are often so easily devastated'.
 - how do the characters in *God's Last Acre* 'do the best they can'?
 - do you believe the play invites the audience to judge the characters or to empathise with them?

3. What do you believe is the significance of the title of the play, *God's Last Acre*?

4. Director, Peter Houghton, describes the relationships between the three generations of women in the play as being about legacy - 'what you pass on to the next generation'.
 - what do you think has been passed down between the generations?
 - do you believe JoJo and Cassie will lead similar lives to their mother and grandmother? why/why not?

5. Peter Houghton believes one of the themes in the play to be about 'the forgotten people in modern society'.
 - who are these 'forgotten people' in our society?
 - who have they been forgotten by?
 - do you think the characters in *God's Last Acre* are 'forgotten people'?

6. *God's Last Acre* explores, according to the director, 'the impact of what happens when the primary bread winner leaves the home'.
 - what is the impact of Kerry's partner leaving his family?
7. Vivienne Walshe talks about 'the beauty of fragile characters', while Peter Houghton believes it is 'vital' that the audience empathise and care about the characters in *God's Last Acre*.
 - how did you respond to each of the characters?
 - what are their **fragilities/vulnerabilities**?
 - what are their **strengths**?
8. Director, Peter Houghton, believes that the ending of the play is 'hopeful' as JoJo and Cassie give their mother 'the gift of choice'.
 - what do you think he means by 'the gift of choice'?
 - do you believe the ending is hopeful? why/why not?

Comparing the script with the play-in-performance

1. If you had already read the script before attending the performance of the play, what was the experience of viewing the production like for you?
 - were any of the director's or designers' choices particularly striking for you?
 - were there any surprises?

The style of the play

1. Playwright Vivienne Walshe says she set out to write 'a strong story', a 'strong narrative'.
 - how engaged were you by the story in *God's Last Acre*?
 - do you believe that the story is more central to this play than others you have seen?
2. Director, Peter Houghton, describes *God's Last Acre* as 'a good classical piece'. What do you think he means by this?
 - what is the relationship between performance and audience in this production? is there a fourth wall?
 - does the audience play any particular role?

3. The playwright talks about the play as 'a four act structure about a family'
 - what are the four acts in the play?
 - how does this structure assist with the dramatic tension in the play?
4. Designer, Shaun Gurton, describes the production as 'a small slice of realism'. Lighting designer, Rachel Burke, refers to the style of the overall design as 'pushed' or 'heightened naturalism'.
 - what do you think is meant by these definitions?
 - how would you describe the **style** of the production?
5. What are some of the techniques the designer and lighting designer have used to help create the 'illusion of reality'?

Stagecraft

1. The director and designer both used words like 'trapped' and 'claustrophobic' to describe the characters and their environment in the play.
 - how has the designer created a sense of claustrophobia in his set?
 - how does this affect the movement of the actors and the way they relate to each other in the space?
 - how does this enhance the meaning of the text?
2. Designer, Shaun Gurton, describes the space created by the set as 'the remnants of memory and the years of living'.
 - what particular aspects of the set design help to create this sense of memory and 'years of living'?
3. The designer comments that 'each character in the play has a clearly defined image' and that the costumes are 'a visual key to the characters'.
 - what is the clearly defined image of each character?
 - how do their costumes help to define this image?
4. Lighting designer, Rachel Burke, states that 'the lighting must seek to completely support the emotional nuances of the characters and situations'.
 - do you believe this is the case with her lighting design for *God's Last Acre*?
 - can you think of scenes in the play where the lighting particularly enhanced the emotional mood of the play?

5. Rachel Burke says that 'lighting design almost by definition is non-naturalistic' and that choices in lighting design are made through 'a metaphorical process'. What do you think she means by these statements?
6. Designer, Shaun Gurton, and Lighting Designer, Rachel Burke, had 'interesting conversations about colour choices in terms of the overall sense of optimism versus pessimism in the play'.
 - what are some of the more *optimistic* and *pessimistic* moments in the play?
 - can you recall how the colours in the lighting enhanced these moments?
 - do you think the audience should be aware of the lighting designer's choices or that the lighting should be so much a part of the scene as to be unnoticeable?

Sex to Salvos

SHAUNAGH
O'CONNOR reports
on the colourful life of
Vivienne Walshe

YES, Vivienne Walshe put her tongue in when she kissed Evan on *The Secret Life of Us*. And yes, it was a good experience.

The actor and playwright with the striking blonde curls says she asked actor Samuel Johnson if she should do it when she played his girlfriend.

He said yes.

"I think there's nothing more sexy than having to kiss somebody because you have to, because you're paid to," Walshe says.

"It's like truth or dare behind the shelter sheds when you're getting paid for 60 people to wait for you to kiss him."

With *that* kiss behind her, Walshe the writer is now sitting in the shadows — rather than the spotlight — of the entertainment industry as she watches her first play in professional production by Playbox Theatre this month.

God's Last Acre takes a family of four, adds a good dose of dysfunction and sets the group on a path where turning back is not an option.

"It's about a family's last chance to find refuge and stick together," Walshe says.

The brood's mother "has been in love with her husband her whole life and always will be, but he's done a runner, he's a free spirit and comes and goes as he wants.

"She would give anything to run off with him next time he comes through town, to jump on the back of his bike and leave the kids behind."

"The kids" are scared. JoJo, 21, knows no other life than the one she



Reality play: Vivienne Walshe says she knows what it's like to have little money. Picture: NICOLE CLEARLY

has led as carer for her intellectually disabled, 14-year-old brother.

Then there is sexpot Cassie, 16, who can't wait to flee the family who are shackled up with the children's grandmother as the play begins.

The cast includes Sue Jones, Nell Feeney, Beth Buchanan, Samantha Tolj and Matthew Robinson.

The characters feel it is the last summer the family can cling together, as the pressures on each will see the group blown apart — there is usually little food or money.

"The first crack in the mother's fantasy life the kids notice is when she comes in with the 'tragi-pack' — food from the Salvation Army," Walshe says.

"She reveals she has been shopping, which is a bit of an achievement, and she disappears to try on her matching acid-wash jacket and skirt."

How did she get the extra cash for the outfit in such desperate circumstances? The scene is set for the audience to find out.

WALSHE, 28, says the play pays homage in part to a history of Irish women who, like the mother of *God's Last Acre*, have been abandoned by a man they can't help loving.

The playwright, who still retains a soft, difficult-to-define accent after her first 10 years of life spent in Canada, has created an award winner with *Acre*.

It won last year's Malcolm Robertson prize, awarded by Playbox to an "exceptional new and emerging Victorian playwright".

Walshe, a performing arts graduate, has been lucky enough to get constant work as an actor, both on screen and as a line reader to take the place of characters opposite those auditioning for roles on *The Secret Life of Us*.

"And I'm Gary Sweet's piece of fluff on *Stingers*, or he's mine," she says of yet-to-be-screened episodes.

She says of her play: "I'm on a very low income and I don't know anyone with money, so it's very real."

God's Last Acre at the Beckett Theatre, CUB Malthouse, from Wednesday. Tickets from \$33. Bookings: 9685 5111.

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