

Bustown

by Lachlan Philpott



A Playlab Publication

for bob
how i miss your twinkling circus

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Introduction

In the winter of 2014, I was asked by the Oz to Oz program committee at Kansas State University if our theatre department would be willing to host an unnamed playwright and Australian Fulbright scholar as a guest speaker for a couple of days in 2015. At the time, we were in the process of selecting plays to be produced for our 2014-2015 season. My area of research and creative activity, as a director, is the development of new plays and I'm always looking for ways to involve students in the process, especially if it means it will give them the chance to observe the playwright in rehearsals. There is an exceptional amount of growth that happens when students are allowed to witness and participate in writer/director conversations and negotiations.

I had been recently promoted to the director position of the K-State theatre program, which means I was in a unique position to ask for (and perhaps to get) what I wanted! I am sure there were moments that my fellow faculty members thought I was crazy to invite a foreign playwright into our sphere and to take on, in my first year as a leader, the task of realising not only a new work, but a play in Pidgin English. I realise now that it could have gone horribly wrong. We ask our students to take risks; even it means they might fail. If we are not willing to model the same, how are we able to face our students with integrity day-after-day?

We entered the unknown and agreed to host this, as yet unnamed, playwright. We asked to read some of his plays to be considered for production in our season. After reading several of Lachlan's plays, I was moved by his sensitivity and deep understanding of the Australian youth. In the US, we are more likely to call this same population adolescents or young adults — which includes college students — the same group that would make up my pool of actors. I had a difficult time choosing a play. I could envision us producing several of them, but ultimately I chose *Bustown* for the variety of roles offered and for the creative opportunity it provided our student and faculty designers.

After a couple of Skype conversations during which we felt an immediate kinship, Lachlan agreed *Bustown* was a good choice. We included it in our season for February 2015 and Lachlan made arrangements to be in residency for a month. Subsequently, I agreed to travel to San Francisco to visit him in October 2014 while he was in residency at the American Conservatory Theatre (A.C.T.) in San Francisco. A.C.T. was helpful to both of us, allowing the talented and generous MFA actors to read through the play to identify what, if anything, needed to be “Americanised” in *Bustown*. We were struck by how little was misunderstood. Lachlan is truly a universal writer.

It wasn't until we wandered the streets of San Francisco together, both emotionally paralyzed by the severe problem of homelessness in that city and the discussions that ensued, that I realised Lachlan and I were simply meant to work together. That two artists from opposite sides of the world could encounter one another in such a unique way made for a very strong beginning.

When Lachlan arrived on the cold and snowy campus of Kansas State University in January 2015, I observed our confident and talented cast freeze with the fear of disappointing a playwright who was now *in the room!* Lachlan's immediate warmth and encouragement thawed our student actors as we began the collective work of discovering the world of *Bustown* and identifying the unknown "Otherness." He praised their efforts, he validated their discoveries, and he included their suggestions. He was present and thoughtful and made all of us participants in his play and its execution.

When he wasn't in rehearsal, Lachlan visited classes, sharing his talent and demystifying the job of the writer. He taught on the power of observation, the importance of place and community, and the responsibility of being an international artist in today's global environment. This cultural exchange in a college atmosphere was a rich experience for our students and faculty alike. I am not sure I have ever met a more generous artist.

Ultimately, I found Lachlan Philpott to be a keen observer of the human condition and a dynamic and important collaborator, as evidenced in this excerpt from his program notes:

"There was the Sunday drive with my brother Nik when we discovered a town of buses. It was tucked into this forgotten part of suburban Sydney — an unexpected find there. What was even stranger was that a collection of people were living in the buses. You could see the washing hanging and the remains of fires shouldering.

We got out of the car and walked about the site for a while until a snarly big dog chased us back to the car. And laughing as we drove away, we named the place Bustown and started playing the sort of carnie role-play games two brothers who have been brought up in theatre play.

A few months later, on another Sunday afternoon, we went back to Bustown.

But when we got there it was gone. There were no buses, no nickers blowing in the wind, no cranky dogs. What happened? Did the authorities find them move them on or do they move about like a circus?

We stood in that empty field and stared at the dust and wondered: was it ever there at all? It reminded me of standing in a theatre the day after the show's done and bumped out. The strange sadness you feel at ephemeral magic. Perhaps it's that which led me to use it as inspiration for a play. And why I keep going back to rewriting Bustown.

This play has been on a long journey and I would never have expected to be working on a brand new version of it with a fabulous team of artists in Kansas in 2015. I am extremely grateful to K-State and Fulbright for bringing me from Oz to Oz to work on Bustown.

My experience at K-State has been the highlight of my Fulbright experience because I have encountered the most wonderful, dedicated, passionate, patient and professional people here. And we have done what I think is most important in theatre making besides getting the work done — we have had a lot of fun.

I thank all the actors and creative team for their warmth and spirit of willingness to enthusiastically dive into the unknown. And for bringing genuine care and commitment to the process ...”

I am grateful also, to have been included in Kansas State University’s Oz to Oz program as a theatre director. The program is designed to enrich the US experience of faculty and professional level Australian Fulbright scholars while they are in the US. The ambitious program goal is to forge new connections between the two countries, the scholars, and to develop partnerships and friendships through mutual understanding of education and cultural exchanges. I hope I have proven here that we far surpassed those goals. Lachlan and I have already begun a new collaborative, international project!

Without the vision and support of Kansas State University and the Australian-American Fulbright Commission, we could not have had this opportunity. I know how fortunate I am to work for an institution that supports the arts and understands the value of new play development as important research for artists, educators, and students. My hope is that it inspires a variety of institutions to dive into the unknown and to keep the wheel turning!

Jennifer G. Vellenga
Associate Professor/Director, Theatre Program
Kansas State University

Foreword

“brave and sad, sad but true, lachlan philpott’s bustown un-invents everything and then re-invents it, in the truest way, in a way that honors life and honors the fact that living everyday means, everyday, discovering that there’s more behind you than ahead of you. though, it must be said, everyday, those fewer and fewer things ahead of us become stranger and more beautiful, everyday, because of their very scarcity. bustown moves us into a time when silly television shows, international terrorism, and fast food are sweet and very distant memories that must be kept alive, for the sake of having a history, because we are animals that understand there must always be somewhere else than here. this is a great play and a heroic act of fear and re-membling.”

Will Eno

Acknowledgements

Bustown was originally developed as a ten-minute play through collaboration with members of the NSW Public Schools Junior Drama Ensemble. The play was extended to a twenty-minute play in 2003 with contribution from members of Forest Youth Theatre, Sydney. In 2009 *Bustown* was developed into a full-length play with young actors at Australian Theatre for Young People Sydney and the first edition was published and has subsequently been widely performed in Australia and the UK.

This version of *Bustown* was adapted for presentation in the USA and premiered at Kansas State University in 2015. The script was created through a playful collaboration with staff and students at K. State Manhattan Kansas led by Jennifer Vellenga as well as with and MFA acting students at the American Conservatory Theatre San Francisco. This was made possible by the support of The Australian Fulbright Commission, Inscription and K. State's *Oz to Oz* program.

I would like to thank all the actors and artists who have contributed to the development of the play and make special acknowledgement the following: staff and students at The American Conservatory Theatre San Francisco and K. State University Manhattan Kansas, Bea Basso, Saffron Benner, Alyson Campbell, Fraser Corfield, Will Eno, Jane FitzGerald, Ross Gannon, Tim Gooding, Elise Hearst, Kathy Lambert, Verity Laughton, John Leslie, Jo Martin and the students of Brisbane Girls Grammar, Michael Paller, Mark Pritchard, David Smith, Ben Stark, Elizabeth Troyuer, Marcus West, Jennifer Vellenga and Paul Viles.

First Production Details

Bustown was originally developed as a ten-minute play in 2002 through collaboration with members of the NSW Public Schools Junior Drama Ensemble. It was extended to twenty minutes in 2003 with contribution from members of the Forest Youth Theatre Company and again in 2009 with members of the Australian Theatre for Young People. The ATYP production included:

CAST Ellen Bailey, Sarah Bishop, Heather Campbell, Michael Cutrupi,
Kate Goodfellow, Dashiel Hannoush, Sarah Hansen,
Peter Jamison, Joshua Longhurst, Dean Mason, Chris McInnes,
Emily Morrison, Max Rapley, Angela Sceats, Stefanie Smith,
Jacob Thomas, Laura Turner

DIRECTOR Amy Hardingham
DESIGNER Tobhiyah Stone Feller
LIGHTING DESIGNER Alex Drummond
SOUND DESIGNER David Kirkpatrick
STAGE MANAGER Sophie Berry
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Mark Pritchard

Bustown was workshopped through *Inscription*, with valued insight of Will Eno, Tim Gooding, Elise Hearst, Verity Laughton and Marcus West.

The version of *Bustown* published in this edition was updated for a production at Kansas State University, United States of America in 2015. This production included:

CAST Catherine Huck, Elizabeth Cook, Blake Cordell,
Deontae' Hayden, James Sherwood, Samuel Johnson,
Kelli Young, Danielle Levings, Brooke Merriam,
Madison Plouvier, Benjamin Deghand, Clay Massingill

DIRECTOR Jennifer Vellenga
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Fatemah Al-Qadfan
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Logan Jones
SCENIC DESIGNER Deborah Bruner
COSTUME DESIGNER Dana Pinkston
LIGHTING DESIGNER John Uthoff
SOUND DESIGNER Chelsey Eimer
PROJECTION DESIGNER Kathy Voecks

Bustown is:

SYLVIA [top dog and mother of cressida]

CRESSIDA [daughter of Sylvia and next in line]

punkbirds three: Y-MIKE, X-IKE and Z-SPIKE

AXEL [corvette's brother]

CORVETTE [axel's sister]

FAITH [mother of corvette and axel]

JUDE [mother of corolla]

COROLLA [daughter of jude]

CEDRIC

DAVE

Bustown

on an endless flat plain is bustown, a circle of buses, some rusted cars and a truck, a faded ice cream van, bus and car parts, tyres and things fallen off or out of moving vehicles. stuffed bears, ponies and flies everywhere. only double decker bus shines and next to the rest of the rusted old mess it sparkles like it's new.

partially hidden under a faded circus tent in the middle of it all is greengarden where insects frolic and pigeonmelons flourish.

folk in bustown are filthy victims of the sun. all skin red and cracked, plastic things like COROLLA's rhinestone glasses melted to them by the heat.

if you were to stand on doubledeckerbus you could see the surrounding plain, empty except for a gash that was once the highway and now a crumbling scar. above, PUNKBIRDS circle in the sky, shrieking before they come back to their post on the top of the buses.

surrounding bustown is the otherness: a mythical space that is everything bustown is not.

before dawn.

we see CRESSIDA and SYLVIA asleep.

CRESSIDA wakes up.

she notices something in her mother's hand. she moves closer, closer, peels it from her grip.

it's a small photo album.

she has never seen anything like it before.

she opens it and is mesmerized.

dawn. the birds awake.

X/Y/Z

we circle above,

Y

past a wisp of a cloud,

X

close to the reach of the rising sun.

Z

ants circle below.

Y

and between us?

X

between us birds and the ants?

X/Y/Z

bustown.

Y

breathe in deep, can ya smell it?

X

smell of bus seats. vinyl and sweat.

Z

nothing nowhere beats that.

we hear a long bus horn sound.

PUNKBIRDS

wake up bustown. get the wheel turning.

CRESSIDA hides the photo album as SYLVIA wakes with a start.

SYLVIA ya late. what ya fussing over?

CRESSIDA not fussing.

SYLVIA you is, ya fussing.
 ya should be out turning the wheel.

CRESSIDA you're not.

SYLVIA what you say?

CRESSIDA you're not.

SYLVIA i be turning it in me head.

CRESSIDA that be useful.

SYLVIA it be me right. i be in charge here. nobody but you be
 questioning that. and that be called respect girly.

 what ya up ta?

CRESSIDA nothing.

SYLVIA is something, i smell it. what?

 SYLVIA looks about.

 you been lookin through me things? i tell ya to keep your
 rotten little mitts away. have you?

CRESSIDA no ma. ya things be just the same as they always be.

SYLVIA know what i tell ya.

CRESSIDA hard to forget when ya never stop saying.

SYLVIA when i ya age/

CRESSIDA *when i ya age.* any of it true?

SYLVIA i never be talking to me ma that way.

CRESSIDA did ya ma keep ya awake with her coughing and moaning?
Never take her eyes of ya?

SYLVIA /no. me ma never looked at me.

CRESSIDA play the sadsong.

SYLVIA it be the one that fits.

CRESSIDA sighs.

and at least ya wrinkling old ma cares.

and you girl, ya not know how ya dripping be droppin. living
in a paradise like this.

CRESSIDA huh!

SYLVIA the north was sad and we were poor. know what i wore? /
spud sack.

CRESSIDA /spud sack and it match ya skin.

SYLVIA throw it over me head and out i be gone. the north be so cold.

CRESSIDA looks at herself in a little mirror.

CRESSIDA yeah ma.

SYLVIA there be no time to be vain back then ya just had to work.
granted i be nothing to look on. even as girl i be /plain as a scab.

CRESSIDA plain as a scab. yeah ma.

SYLVIA but you, you got looks girl and it wasn't from me ya got em.

CRESSIDA i got them from my pa. not that he stuck around to see.

SYLVIA he'll be back to see you someday.

CRESSIDA when?

SYLVIA doesn't reply.

CRESSIDA did he leave to get away from you?
 or was it this place? did he hate it as much as me?

SYLVIA ya don't hate it.

CRESSIDA i do and i hate me job.

SYLVIA well learn to love it cause it be yours.
 one day ya take over from me. one day ya be top dog.

CRESSIDA of this scrapdump.

SYLVIA nice.

CRESSIDA not going stay. kill me from the inside with how small and
 dull it all be.

SYLVIA ya think is better out there?
 you know, out there you not last the time it take to pee.
 the meatheads smell ya coming and before you know it ...
 they be sucking on your eyeballs and tearing off your arms
 and chewing the bones. get with the busschedule girlie.

CRESSIDA i not listen to this. gotta go and do the job ya telling me i
 have to do.

SYLVIA get ya ma an egg first.

*CRESSIDA rolls her eyes and gets a large brown egg and
 pokes a hole in it.*

*SYLVIA remembers the photo album she was looking at
 before she slept and looks about for it.*

CRESSIDA [*bringing the egg*] looking for something ma?

she goes to her. SYLVIA grabs her by the hair.

ma/

SYLVIA /what i'm looking for be respect and a little bit of gratitude girlie.

now be gone. /turn the wheel.

CRESSIDA /turn the wheel.

CRESSIDA leaves.

she stands outside in the sun, looks around to check she is alone and then gets the album out. she looks up to the sky and speaks to the birds.

[to birds] what this be?

ya mangy old skeletons should know so look.

the PUNKBIRDS look at the photo but say nothing.

ya be scared the wrinklie pluck the feathers from bones if ya let it slip from ya beaks?

she spits and hides the photo again.

tssh. i find me own answer.

she looks out to the otherness.

X the scar across the plain, the highway, is quiet.

Y it was busy once.

Z all sorts of traffic bustling up and down between northcity and south.

Y trucks full of anything you can name,

Z truckies tooting their horns.

X families on vacation,

Z kids squabbling in the back.

Y salesmen,
X honeymooners,
Z retirees in rv's.

CRESSIDA goes.
X a circus travelling across the country/
Y a procession of trucks,
Z strong men at the wheel/
X cotton candy, corndogs and clowns who swallowed ping
 pong balls/
Y giraffes and elephants sneezing in dust.
Z but then the traffic thinned out.
Y the traffic slowed down.
X then one day ... / it stopped.
Y/Z /it stopped.
Z here she comes.

CORVETTE comes out and shouts at the PUNKBIRDS.
CORVETTE off! i say get off the buses ya ugly old crows, dripping ya
 shit down the sides. splattering on where we sleep.

the PUNKBIRDS mock CORVETTE.
X what's she gonna try today?
Y more rocks.

*CORVETTE picks up a handful of rocks and the
PUNKBIRDS scatter.*
Z look out.

AXEL passes CORVETTE on the way to the lookout. he stares out into the distance, the otherness. CORVETTE brings pigeonmelon and joins him.

they stare out for some time, eat and spit pips like bullets.

CORVETTE it be today?

AXEL dunno.

CORVETTE could be today that driver come.

we'll see his shadow coming across the plain.

they spit pips.

key shining round his neck. he'll see us all and wave, ma will get weepy. and then he'll be taking us and driving us back.

then we all get onto doubledeckerbus and he take us back. can't wait, til he comes.

AXEL me too. he can save me from all ya boring talk.

CORVETTE think you'll miss it here when we go back?

AXEL miss what?

they look out to see if the driver's coming.

X see the yellow bus? that's where corvette and axel were born.

Y and the silver bus with the fox along the side, how its tail's peeling off and it wags in the westerly?

Z inside that bus sylvia still in bed.

X next door to that is corolla and jude then ice-cream van

Y and a rusted circus truck full of eyes. stuffed ponies and teddies,

Z sideshow prizes that never got won,

X they're staring out and waiting.
the birds wait.

Y the circus was stopped here that day.

Z they heard it when it happened,
X even this far away,
Y they heard the explosion /and panicked
X /and panicked.
Z shot off in different directions sprouts from a pod.
X clowns north,
Y fat ladies south,
Z acrobats east,
Y the psychic west, she knew the right way.
X and left in the middle of bustown?
Z doubledeckerbus doors locked and shining,
Y glimmering in the sun; doubledeckerbus.
X brown vinyl seats calling to be sat on,
Z ignition gaping ready for the key.
Y waiting/
X waiting/
Z waiting/
X/Y/Z for the driver!

*AXEL watches CORVETTE step gingerly about out in
the otherness.*

CORVETTE this be otherness or bustown?

AXEL bustown.

she takes another step away.

CORVETTE otherness or bustown?

AXEL bustown. you got to be going way farther sis.

AXEL laughs as CORVETTE takes more steps.

faith enters and stares at CORVETTE in horror.

FAITH mitsubishigoddam what you doing girl? get back to bustown now.

CORVETTE gets back fast.

how many times we told you. /the meatheads'll get you

AXEL /the meatheads'll get you.

CORVETTE none out there look.

FAITH you think you see meatheads coming do you? cause i'm telling ya, ya don't.

AXEL na, they just appear and eat you eyeballs first.

FAITH don't joke boy that's just what they do.

i got bones to be picking with a pair of scum twins.

AXEL/CORVETTE what ma?

FAITH bus be left a mess and ya know what i /said.

CORVETTE /wasn't me.

FAITH /about sleeping in dust if you ... was it punkbirds then was it who muck up bus?

CORVETTE maybe it be meatheads.

FAITH bus look like dogs be breeding all over.

 ya think i ya maid?

 do yez?

 not this lifetime. don't need no skankbus hear? no
 skankbus. this happen again — seatbelts. seatbelts for both
 of yez every night for a week.

AXEL sorry mam.

FAITH you will be. must be clean must be tidy must be/

CORVETTE why?

FAITH what do ya mean?

CORVETTE why must be tidy ma?

FAITH what a question. do you think we be wanting the filth and
 disease like the otherness here? And what if driver comes
 and the whole place be skank as you. what'll he think girlie?

CORVETTE maybe he like skank.

FAITH he won't.

CORVETTE no ma.

FAITH you gonna do what i tell ya?

CORVETTE yes ma.

FAITH and while you be at it, do your job n clean all the shit off
 the windows.

AXEL laughs.

CORVETTE i hate me job.