

Griffith University, Australia

Linda Hassall

Motel chronicles

Abstract:

Motel chronicles is an investigation into Hassall's preoccupation with a land/culturescape (Chaudhuri 2002) experiences. Set within the sceneographic framework of a motel, the play makes a claim for the value of atmospheric landscape as central to behaviours investigated within the fiction. The chorus of characters convey the stories secreted within the motel walls. Experimenting with form and style, the work is a heightened theatrical expressive experience. *Motel chronicles* harbours the detritus of society into a momentary refuge, hiding those who wish to be hidden. Inspired by the early dramatic works of Sam Shepard and the poetry of artists such as Penny Arcade, Fritz Hamilton, David Learner and Lisa Martinovic, who are identified as outlaw, renegade poets in *The outlaw bible of American poetry* (1999), *Motel chronicles* is a rock and roll psalm of faith and forgiveness.

Biographical note:

Dr Linda Hassall is a lecturer at Griffith University in Contemporary and Applied Theatre. Linda has over 20yrs experience as a director, playwright and dramaturge in professional and independent contexts. Linda's first published play *Post Office Rose* won a Matilda Award for Best New Play (2006). Linda's published play *A Contemporary Hymn* (2012) in *I Will Kiss You in Four Places*, examines the effect of urban landscape on youth culture behaviours. *Salvation* a performance piece derived from her 2012 PhD research was published by TEXT in 2013. Linda recently directed *Debris* (2004) by Dennis Kelly at Metro Arts, Brisbane as part of her research into urban landscape and its effects on socio cultural behaviours. *Motel Chronicles* extends this field of artistic research while investigating forms and styles of performative communication and expression. Her latest commissioned work; *The Return* - the final phase of *The difficult return* (three year ARC funded project) was produced in June of 2014. *The return* explores the impact of combat experiences on returning veterans and their families.

Keywords:

Creative Writing – Urban landscape – Post-dramatic writing – Australian Gothic

Motel chronicles

Characters

PROPRIETOR - Owner/Operator of the Motel.

CHORUS - There is a female chorus of prostitutes who operate out of the Motel. The female chorus members may also take on the characters of female guests.

GUESTS - Generic male and female guests who spend short periods of time in the Motel.

Setting

The setting as described evokes a heightened atmospheric aesthetic depicting a Motel on the edge of time. It is somewhere *over there* in the distance behind the neon haze of an urban night landscape. It suggests an environment that harbours the detritus of society...those individuals' that desire anonymity. Rather than rooms the shifting scenography of the Motel is organic and created by utilising cardboard suitcases in numerous theatrical ways.

Note

This text is inspired by the works of Sam Shepard especially his autobiographical work, *Motel Chronicles and Hawk Moon* (1982). It also pays tribute to the anthology of American poetry collected in *The Outlaw Bible of American Poetry* (1999).

Scene 1: Vacancy

Proprietor: Signs on. Vacancy. Welcome. Come one. Come all. Stay with me on the corner of this side-show street! Get of the round-a bout for a while and let the circus pass you by. Be warned though. Catholics cross themselves on entering. Yes they do.

Prossie 1: You can bleed/

Prossie 2: You can breed/

Prossie 3: You can put a bag over your head and turn blue in the face. We take all major credit cards.

Guest: There's a stink of stale urine with a dash of formaldehyde.

Proprietor: There's room for you, yes you with your pride bashed all black and blue. Double or single. Flat rate.

Prossie 4: We got deterioration/

Prossie 5: Decomposition/

Prossie 6: Blanketed in a fine layer of filth.

Proprietor: Unpack your pain and your shame and your lapsing faith. Just \$25 a night.

Prossie 1: We'll provide you with a caricature of intimacy.

(soundscape of a collection of motel sounds: blue movies, sex, taps dripping, people crying. Soundscape can also identify the urban landscape: nightclub music, sirens, traffic, drunken fights).

Proprietor: Yes we will! So come talk to your god or your gun or your dead little girl. A room with a view's just waiting! Alright, there's no view but there is a room...waiting for you.

Prossie 2: We got pillows to cry on and televisions to kick.

Proprietor: 24 hours for \$25. Vacancy. Come dream your dreams. Cash or credit \$25 a night.

Prossie 3: There's relief/

Prossie 4: Reprieve/

Prossie 5: Retribution/

Prossie 6: Redemption/

Chorus: Vacancy...vacancy...

(the vacancy neon sign is a beacon in the darkness that descends as the soundscape of the night escalates).

Scene 2: The Guests

(the sign, now reading no vacancy flares. Several of the chorus members are sitting in separate suitcases littered across the space. Each suitcase represents a separate room. Off, a gunshot is heard).

Guest 1: I'm going to leave my conscience pressed between the pages of this bible in the drawer.

Guest 2: Today I am fragile. Pale. Twitching.
untamed and full of purpose.
praise Jesus and pass the ammunition.

Guest 3: He didn't die for my sins. Jesus, i wasn't even born then.

Guest 4: Today I try and concentrate on small things.
bougainvillea threaded through chicken wire.
half drowned kittens mewling in cardboard boxes.

Guest 5: I saw god cry once.
I saw him cry in the reflection in my enemy's eyes.

Guest 6: And as his enemy she said, love me. Please.

Guest 7: I whisper to god. I whisper about those bastards who can't see the beauty running under the pale crusts on my skin.

Guest 8: If try calling him...god...i keep trying... every night. I call to him.

Guest 9: I ask god about the infrequency of cleansing rain.

(it rains midnight rain).

Scene 3: Are You Lonesome Tonight

Proprietor: In one of these rooms some lucky bastard is talking with Elvis.
*'Are you lonesome tonight, do you miss me tonight?
are you sorry we drifted apart?'* (Presley, 1969)
Talking with the king. Discussing sweethearts. Or god or lost little girls.
When you check in with Elvis you're faith tags along. Your faith is sitting
right there with you under that buzzing fluorescent bathroom bulb. Faith's
holding the blade or the bullet. With a smile on her kewpie doll face. *'tell me
dear, are you lonesome tonight...'* (Presley, 1969).

Scene 4: Some Trouble

*(soft humid rain falls. There are two yellowed street lamps. These lights spill across two
prostitutes trying to drum up a little after midnight business).*

Prossie 1: I wanted to go home once. But I couldn't seem to find the house. The house i
lived in. Once. The house I lived in once. In another life. It was like it
disappeared. It was quite a big house. I lost it though. When we were kids my
sister would rub her Barbie's face in the mud under the dripping tank stand.

Prossie 2: People are selling radio-active phones to kids these days/

Prossie 1: The house that I lost had peeling paint. It was cool. Probably 'cause every
couple of months my old man'd smash all the windows. After he'd finish
smashing my mum.

Prossie 2: /and healthy cereals that make us obese. Five teaspoons of sugar per serve.
Five teaspoons of a-d-d and childhood obesity/

Prossie 1: My mother moved through that cool house in a dirty flannelette nightdress
dropping her cigarette butts on the floors. Leaving smoulder marks on the lino.

Prossie 2: We've got politicians who think scrapping a carbon tax is a good career move/

Prossie 1: The day I decided i couldn't take my old man comin' into my room anymore,
in that big cool house with the broken windows and the tank stand – I left. I
packed my mum's nightdress and just walked down the road.

Prossie 2: We've got anorexic girl-women with eyes like wet concrete peering at us from
the pages of magazines and fat celebrity chefs telling us to cook with butter/

Prossie 1: As I walked, my house started to fade. It shimmered out of my life. I walked
until i reached a road...then another... i took a left...then another. And it was
gone.

- Prossie 2: Kohl tinted baby eyes that promise to fuck you 'till you come blood and reality TV that promises you can eat all sorts of shit and still be the next biggest loser if big brothers not watching.
- Prossie 1: Did I tell you I'm having trouble finding my way back to that house. I lost it somewhere along the line. Along the road.
- Prossie 2: We should all just add little weed killer to the chocolate sauced chicken, a little rat sack to the paella.
- Prossie 1: It's hard to go forward when all you can call your own is a dirty flannelette nightdress.
- Prossie 2: If you can't make a reasonable pork belly risotto, poison the cereal. I got some. It's easy enough to get.
- Prossie 1: And it just faded away - that house.
- Prossie 2: Do you want some? Do you?
- Prossie 1: I reckon my mother would have cried when i left. When she realised I'd taken her only nightdress.
- Prossie 2: you'll make the news. C'mon just one bite.

(a guest approaches and sizes up both women and moves to prostitute 1. Prostitute 2 steps into the road. A truck horn blasts. An ambulance siren is heard off. Rain continues).

Scene 5: Early Morning Minutes

Proprietor: Faith has gone out. She's been called away in the early hours and Elvis lovers will wait in vain for her return. Heart beats tick off the minutes in time with the digitised clock radio. Faith left her belongings on bathroom sink. Just in case.

(the vacancy sign flashes quickly to no vacancy then back again. Rain is heavier. Five separate areas. Five separate rooms. Each guest has a particular action they are caught in the moment of. Soundscape: prostitutes having sex. Breathing. Hearts beating. Clock ticking. A woman screams somewhere in the distance. Someone cries softly. Nightclub music).

- Proprietor: How long is a minute?
- Guest 1: 3.30 am/
- Guest 2: Is that a rooster? Is it? Or some woman screaming out there in the distance?
- Guest 3: The sky is black. It empties me of dreams.

Guest 4: Is this a motel room or someone else's house?

Guest 5: Where the bloody hell am i!!
What the hell is this place called anyway!!

Guest 1: 3.32 am/

Guest 2: What time is it?

Guest 3: My thoughts are no longer friendly.

Guest 4: I pray for a break from thinking.

Guest 5: A clean break in a blank space.

Guest 1: 3.33 am/

Guest 2: Please let me hit the road empty headed.

Guest 3: Just once/

Guest 4: I'm not begging/

Guest 5: I'm not getting down on my knees...but just once...please?

Guest 1: 3.33 am.
I'm in no condition to fight.

Proprietor: How long is a minute? It depends on what side of the motel door you're on...

(someone in another room turns on a radio and Elvis takes up the conversation about being lonesome tonight).

Proprietor: Is that faith I can hear? Knocking on your door?

(it continues to rain).

Scene 6: I Wanna Be a Cowboy

(a guest is unpacking items from a suitcase. He pulls out a sheriff's badge and attaches it to his shirt – left breast pocket. The last thing he unpacks from the suitcase is a prostitute. Throughout she unsuccessfully attempts to get him aroused. Soundscape is the static of a tv. Every now and again there are snatches of old Westerns).

Guest: Anyone give a cowboy any shit. Bang. See ya later partner.

(the proprietor watches him).

Proprietor: Tombstone. Gunfight at the o.k. coral. Wyatt Earp.
Doc holiday. Jesse James. Now they were men. Real men.

(at the proprietors voice, the cowboy begins to show some agitation)

Guest: Women love cowboys. You know why. 'cause they're tough.

Prossie: Tough bastards alright. And we love 'em.

Proprietor: You wanna be a real man you gotta be tough.

Guest: Grit ya teeth. Take it on the chin. Spit blood. And do it all again.

Proprietor: Time you started behaving like a man. A cowboy.

Guest: Let's ride you bitch!

(he repeatedly slaps/punches her. He puts her back in the suitcase. Closes the lid and transfers his attention briefly to the tv. The soundscape escalates and the vacancy sign flares).

Scene 7: Smoko

(dawn light and dirty rain. The prostitutes are on a break. The suitcases become various chairs, stairs – objects on which they can sit. They speak their inner landscape into the distance. The soundscape is faint but orchestrates their thoughts).

Prossie 1. I pulled out that gun and shot him clean through his filthy mouth. Made myself disappear after that.

Prossie 2. God and the devil chase me every night. I run into them at the bottom of a Bundy bottle.

Prossie 3. My dad loved me. He did. Loved me so much we made a baby. He flogged me when he found out. Belted the living shit out of me. But that baby held on tight. Was born all twisted and broken. She's with god now. That little baby.

Prossie 4: It's much easier than thieving for a living. Besides it's the only thing i can do well. Well enough anyway.

Prossie 5: Everyone I know is either in jail or about to be.

Prossie 6: One day I'm going to be a beautician.

Prossie 7: My mother was a slut. That's what my dad'd always be telling her. Sort'a family tradition we got going on. My daughter'll be the same.

Prossie 8: The pension's not enough to feed two kids. Yeah I got two. A boy and a girl. I thank god every day for small things.

(as one they stamp out their cigarettes and the vacancy sign buzzes).

Scene 8: Neon Reflections

(a new day. The flickering neon lights from the highway reflect the stark motel rooms. Guest 1 is utilising the suitcase as a window, peering through it to the neon strip outside).

Guest 1: It has a window, with a dirty lace curtain. A little shredded along the bottom edge. Like someone's been clawing at it.

(guest 2 is bathing the broken bloodied body of the prostitute in the suitcase).

Guest 2: The lights evoke impotence in men. The flickering tones whisper of open wounds in women.

(guest 3 is sitting on the clinging to the bible).

Guest 3: The wall I stare boasts a shadowed frame containing a failed artists attempt at a butterscotch beach.

(guest 4 is standing in the suitcase, as if it's a shower stall. Holding a razor blade).

Guest 4: I see that the bedspread, sheets and pillowcases are stiff, puce-stained as are the matching frayed towels on the bathroom floor. The bathroom linen soaks up the same awful secrets as the bed that i will lie awake in.

(guest 5 is taking a barbie doll out of her suitcase).

Guest 5: There's a plant on the windowsill. A fern. Its leaves claw at the glass, desperate for the clean air outside.

Scene 6: A Tale That's Sad But True

(the suitcases form a double bed on which the guest and the prossie will have sex. The proprietor watches over the outcome)

Proprietor: He's seldom in town. They mostly try and catch glimpses of each other over vast distances. He thinks she looks like a kewpie doll, all eyebrows plucked and raspberry kissed lips.

Guest: A mirror faces the door.

Prossie: Too soon I will catch his reflection exiting this puce coloured room/

Guest: First we fall fiercely into each other/

Prossie: Yes...but first/

Proprietor: Momentarily the future beautician and the car salesman fall into each other.

Guest: One bed, one sink, one toilet, one wardrobe, one moment...stolen/

Proprietor: Momentarily she is beautiful. This beauty fades as quickly as the distance he travels home to his wife.

Prossie: I'm pregnant/

Guest: I see/

(he gets out of the bed, she smiles up at him).

Prossie 2: Gun lobbyist members rejoiced today at the birth of a bouncing baby bullet. The delivery took place in room 17 of motel chronicles.

Proprietor: The baby bullet was later found in the skull of a 14 year old prostitute who was later confirmed as being 9 weeks pregnant. When questioned by the police the occupier of the room stated:

Guest: I would never harm a child. I have three of my own.
Little girls in white dresses, as pretty as raindrops on roses.
I adore my girls. My little girls.

Scene 9: Empty Rooms

(chorus members are vandalising the space with the suitcases)

Chorus 1: Emptiness builds her home in me and her rooms echo with eternity.

Chorus 2: This room whispers to me. Words that come for me when i wake up again on my own.

Chorus 3: I walk through ordinary rooms as I get lost in my destiny.

Prossie: A room in motel chronicles was vandalised today.

Prossie 2: It is reported that the room sustained serious injuries, including the destruction of furniture, holes in its walls and blood on its carpet.

Proprietor: When questioned the room chose to remain silent and offered no comment on the ferocity of the attack. A spokesperson for the room claims that this is not the first time the room has sustained such a particularly vicious attack.

Scene 10: Losing The Faith

(a prossie is waiting for a client. It is raining. She is using the suitcase as an umbrella. Holding it high above her head. A motel guest has spotted her. He is watching her from under a streetlight. He ignores the rain).

Guest: I will find the Magdalene.

Prossie: Dad hit the wall after he hit my old girl in the face with an empty bottle of rum. *(she lights a cigarette)*. The embers of the cigarette she was smoking mashed against her teeth.

Guest: Somewhere in the guts of this motel I will walk on water.

Prossie: He's gone to prison and she's gone to Jesus.

Guest: Somewhere in the guts of this motel I will become a new man.

Prossie: I'd like to see that place...the place I grew up in.

(he moves to her and lays his forehead against hers. She holds the umbrella over his head sheltering him from the rain).

Guest: Faith?

Prossie: Yes?

(lights fade down. When the lights fade back up, the guest is laying out a crucifix shape with the suitcases. He places her on the cross and kneels to pray beside her).

Proprietor: Today a young man was reported to have lost faith. Faith, the young man claimed had been missing for a lengthy but unspecified time. He stated he had been searching in vain for faith for most of his adult life. The man stated that he fears that the disappearance of faith will lead to his further disillusionment with god. Both faith and god are now listed as missing persons.

Scene 10: Vacancy 2

(the stage is empty bare except for broken, open and empty suitcases. The proprietor enters and begins closing the suitcases and stacking them. The chorus enter one by one throughout and speak directly to the audience as prostitutes).

Proprietor: Signs back on. Vacancy. A couple of vacancies! You are all very welcome. You need a room on the corner of this side-show street! Get off the merry-go-round and really let your-self loose in side-show alley? A few Hail Mary's and Hallelujah Jesus's and you'll be fine. Trust me.

Prossie 1: Ignore the stains/
Prossie 2: Ignore the children crying/
Prossie 3: We take all major credit cards.
Proprietor: There's room for you, yes you with your strange ways...c'mon...just a couple of days. Relax. Double or single. Flat rate.
Prossie 4: We promise you'll find deterioration/
Prossie 5: Maybe some decomposition/
Prossie 6: And us. C'mon lose yourself. We can make you feel fine.
Proprietor: Unpack your pain and your shame and your lapsing faith. Just \$25 a night.
Prossie 1: You need some space?
Prossie 2: Or a little down time?
Prossie 3: Movies which are a little bit blue?
Proprietor: It's all her waiting for you my friend. So come on in! Come talk to your faith or your razor blade, or your dead little girl.
Prossie 2: We've got pillows to cry on and televisions to kick.
Proprietor: 24 hours for \$25. Vacancy. Come dream your dreams. Cash or credit \$25 a night.
Chorus: Vacancy...vacancy...
(a very young girl walks past the sign and pauses in front of the proprietor. The rain continues).
Girl: I think I'm lost. Please...i can't seem to find my way home...
(the night soundscape escalates. End of play).

Research statement

Research background

Situated in the field of creative writing for performance *Motel Chronicles* is an innovative post-dramatic investigation into themes associated with land/culturescape (Chaudhuri 2002, Hassall 2012) and behaviour. Unifying Hassall's research into theoretical landscape investigation with her creative influences e.g. such as Sam Shepard and the American Outlaw Poets, *Motel Chronicles* aims to explore culturescape experiences from sociological perspectives.

Research contribution

Motel Chronicles contributes to creative research in methodological, dramaturgical and theatrical fields. Uniquely the play transforms theoretical discourses relating to sociological determinants into cultural expression. Contributing to both theoretical discourses in urban landscape and practice-led creative expression as research the work contributes to a field which contextualises sociological conditions into an atmospheric landscape of performance. Through its unification of expressionistic form, musical structure and post dramatic design elements, *Motel Chronicles* extends discourses associated with urban landscape and the effect environment may have on particular psychological and physical behaviours (Goddu 2007, Casey 1998, 2002, Cosgrove 1984, 2008, Spirn 2008, Taussig cited in Leibsohn 2008).

Research significance.

Motel Chronicles is significant in creative research fields as it uniquely investigates theoretical landscape contexts as theatrical performative expression.

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