



Photo: David Hancock

MARY ANNE BUTLER is a Darwin based playwright who won the 2010 Darwin Festival Playscript Award for her stage play *Dragons* and the 2012 Birch, Carroll and Coyle NT Literary Screenwriting Award for her feature *Hopetown*. She has received Australia Council Literature Board, Theatre Board and Arts NT grants for her work, and was the recipient of a 2010 Bundanon residency for playwriting. Mary Anne's first play *Half Way There* was co-produced by Darwin's Knock-em-Down Theatre in 2009, premiering at Just Us Theatre Ensemble in Cairns before featuring at the Darwin Festival and touring regional Northern Territory and Queensland. Her second play *Highway of Lost Hearts* premiered to a sold-out Darwin Festival season in 2012, with a second season at Browns Mart in 2013 and a three-month national tour in 2014. Mary Anne holds a Masters in Philosophy (Creative Writing) from the University of Queensland, a Masters in Arts Education (Theatre in Education) from the University of New England and a Diploma of Arts (Acting) from the Victorian College of the Arts.





MARY ANNE BUTLER

HIGHWAY OF LOST HEARTS

A woman. A dog. A campervan. And 4,500 klm of wide open road.



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For John Butler, who gave me the words
And for Lee Lewis, who helped me to shape them

In memory of Savannah (Jessica) Holloway,
13 May 1983–1 May 2008

And in memory of Piglet,
canine co-pilot and furry friend





FOREWORD

I am sitting on a train to Washington DC, looking out on the cold winter landscape of the American northeast. It's about as far away from Darwin as I can be. And yet as we wind through some of the poorer suburbs of Philadelphia and Baltimore, and I see row upon row of boarded-up houses, broken windows and bleak public schools, I am reminded that a play like *Highway of Lost Hearts* is exactly the kind of work that drew me back from America to Australia.

The writing, development, production and now publication of Mary Anne Butler's play is emblematic of what is still possible in theatre in Australia and what is becoming less likely in places like America. It has been a process that is certainly driven by the energies of a motivated and talented writer, but it has been supported along the way by a series of individuals and organisations reflecting the continuing governmental belief in the need for Australian audiences to see plays written by our writers for us in our own time. It is by no means a perfect system but it still houses possibility.

At one of the performances in the first season of the work in Darwin a woman from Mataranka came up to Mary Anne afterwards and in her attempt to say thank you burst into tears. It was the first time she had ever heard the name of her town said in a story: it was the first time she had existed in the creative world of Australia. It was her first encounter with the idea that stories are not always about other places and other people, not always about kings and queens or fairies, but about us, and that the 'us' of Australia can include Mataranka. The possibility of this very interaction is what drew me to the play in the first place.

That all sounds like a very ordered and institutionalised and celebratory process, whereas the reality was messy, passionate, idiosyncratic and often frustratingly slow as it is for most playwrights in this country. My original program note from two years ago will give you some idea of how far this play has travelled to end up in this book.

'Three years ago I got an email from a writer from Darwin asking me to look at a play she had written. I said yes. Politeness mostly,





but a sprinkle of curiosity about who was writing way up there and what story she was interested in telling. It sat next to my bed. She hassled me. Gave me a deadline for an answer. I picked it up late one night and started to read. After skyping; a bit of flying; many drafts; much courage on her part; the leap of faith from Browns Mart; the cobbling together of bits of funding; two workshops; the extraordinary talents of local designers; much laughter about my inability to comprehend what to pack when I come up here; much patience on their parts in explaining to me not only the landscape of their creative lives and process up here but where the best laksa is to be had; generous and detailed feedback from a variety of people who care very deeply that a story be told well; a bucket more courage from her in being willing to perform this story; and voila!

A tale of traveling from one end of the country to find yourself, told by a woman with often more courage than sense, who always bites off more than she can chew, who has now become a friend and welcomed me in to her story of what it means to be an artist up here. And every time I go back down south I carry with me more stories of this remarkable place, and every time I come back it is with more excitement, fewer jumpers, a craving for Paul's Iced Coffee, joy at the people I will be seeing again and the hope that one day I will get to live here for a bit, but that will be a different story.

The story for now is made. For you. By a remarkable woman. Who went to the effort of connecting with me across the whole country so that she could tell the story of a woman driving through the whole country so that one day we will be able to speak to each other as a whole country.'

And now, nearly two years on from that production the work is beginning to tour through the country it describes and in being published it will reach people who have never and maybe will never drive down that highway. These pages are still one of the most effective ways for our coast clingers to hear the voices of our interior. This play is a demonstration of how theatre is one of the most powerful tools we have for weaving a whole out of the bits of country called Australia.





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For a play that dwells in the tiny roadside towns that exist along our central artery, thinking about it always sends me into a spiral of questions about national conversations and international identity. Never more so than looking out the window now at the outskirts of Washington. I don't pretend that *Highway of Lost Hearts* could, would or should speak to the populations existing along this train track—it wasn't written for them. Truth be told, I think Mary Anne originally wrote this for herself. Then she wrote it for her friends. Then she wrote it for Darwin. Then she wrote it for the whole country.

Lee Lewis

Washington DC, March 2014

Lee Lewis directed the premiere production of *Highway of Lost Hearts* in 2012.





INTRODUCTION

On 1 May 2008, a boat accident on Sydney Harbour killed six young people. Darwin-based Savannah (Jessica) Holloway was one of them. She was 25 years old: a dedicated youth worker, passionate refugee advocate and head of Amnesty International's NT branch. Savannah was a bright young woman with a strong social conscience, fierce intellect and irrepressible personality. She lived life to the full, and her death made no sense.

Savannah was a big part of Darwin's close-knit social community as well as being my work colleague, and her death forced me to look at my own life. In the few years prior I'd lost both parents to cancer, separated from my husband and witnessed the death of my dog, Crumpet. I was utterly empty.

In December 2009 I packed up my van, hurled my new dog Piglet into the jumpseat, and headed south for Bradley's Head—the point of Sydney Harbour closest to where the boat accident took place. I needed to see the point where Savannah had died; to witness something tangible.

I'd never done a road trip alone before, let alone a trip of the magnitude of 4,500 kms. I set off at the hottest time of year following a long drought, and death was everywhere along that highway: bleeding out of the roadside carcasses, fusing into the skeletal trees, winding its way along arid riverbeds and leaking out of the thick red dust. Piglet propped herself next to me; eyes fixed hungrily on the road ahead, or body curled up fast asleep. I remember envying her capacity to just live in the moment.

We stopped at remote little places: Wycliffe Well, the 'UFO capital of Australia'. Kulgara, the 'last pub' in the NT (or the first if you're heading north). Barrow Creek, its shameful history of Aboriginal massacres overshadowed of late by the disappearance of a single Caucasian tourist. And then other scabs of our history. Woomera, where 1,500 refugees were crammed into facilities designed for 400: razor wire around a concrete compound. Coober Pedy, where massive holes are still being carved into the earth to obtain opals to adorn rings or pendants.





Once, we drove for half a day and met no other traffic. Other days, road trains four carriages long swept past us; their latter carriages slewing sideways just enough to remind me that the difference between life and death can be the matter of a split second. Kangaroos and emus at dusk, skittish and unpredictable. Buffalo and cattle bolting onto the road. A wedge-tailed eagle, wingspan two metres across, swooping for road kill just metres ahead of my van; dipping upwards nanoseconds before I might hit it. (A party boat on a harbour in the dead of night: to get on it, or to go home to bed.)

We met the strangest people en route: alcoholics, lonely souls, hardened characters who seemed to have lost the capacity to care. And the incongruous ones: a massive truckie with an orphaned joey tucked carefully into his belly; him feeding and toileting it gently into adulthood. A toothless chef who handed my dog scraps from his kitchen and told me he was stuck out here because he was lost.

We finally journeyed into Sydney's urban sprawl, and reached Bradley's Head. I sat there that night and thought of Savannah, and I remember getting an undeniable response: a strong sense of her in the water, right in front of me. Her presence was as real as the night. And I realised that although she was dead in the corporeal sense, bits of her were still here in some form or other: small bits of her DNA, swilling around in this massive body of water, becoming a part of the whole. I also realised that to all those she touched, she had left the legacy of a life fully lived. And what a gift that was.

I wrote up the events of our road journey in a workshop with the legendary playwright and director Jenny Kemp, and the character of Mot emerged. Writing from an outside character's perspective enabled me to distance myself; Jenny's lateral tasks helping me to lose the boundaries between 'fact' and 'fiction'. Thirty-five pages of typed notes: scraps, scenes, diagrams and dialogue became a first draft, to which the road journey itself lent a certain structure—but I was still unclear of the central 'human' core.

Then Lee Lewis agreed to direct the work, and early in our working process she observed that: 'Mot's journey to find her heart is a metaphor for a country which has lost its heart'. This gave me the core I needed, as well as a 'bigger picture' perspective. *Highway of Lost Hearts* became more than just a road trip, and turned into the very human journey of a





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lost woman crossing a lost country, trying to retrieve the pieces of her missing heart—and with them, the will to move on.

Mary Anne Butler
February 2014

Postscript: Piglet let go of life on 9 September 2013. As she went under, my friend Huni and I fed her a bag of dried liver treats. She died smiling.





Highway of Lost Hearts was first produced by Browns Mart Productions and Mary Anne Butler, and presented by Browns Mart Productions and the Darwin Festival at Browns Mart Theatre in Darwin on 21 August 2012, with the following cast:

MOT

Mary Anne Butler

Director, Lee Lewis

Designer, Kris Bird

Lighting Designer, Sean Pardy

Sound Designer, Panos Couros

Highway of Lost Hearts was developed with the assistance of the Theatre Board of the Australia Council, the Literature Board of the Australia Council and Arts NT.





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Jenny Kemp for the generative writing workshop in which the story first took shape.

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Darwin's extended creative community; you are gorgeous.

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The talented production design team: Kris Bird (set), Panos Curos (sound) and Sean Parady (lighting). The production teams: Aimee Gray, Mark Gray, Brad Fawcett, Chris 'Wolfie' McBride.

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Piglet, beautiful co-pilot and canine road warrior: for the many laughs and comforting kilometres.

My parents, John and Sally Butler: for all you gave me.

My beautiful siblings, Sarah Butler, Michael Butler and adopted sibling Jennifer Butler. Thank you: for love and sustenance, and for just being you.

Finally, *Highway of Lost Hearts* would not be where it is without the commitment of director Lee Lewis: for helping to refine the script, taking an unknown quantity on as writer and actor, bringing *Highway* to life on stage, and empowering me to trust my own voice. I thank you.





CHARACTER

MOT, a woman.

SETTING

Mot's journey takes place on the road from Darwin to Sydney.

ERA

Now.





MOT:

I wake up one morning to find that my heart is missing
from my chest.

I can breathe, I have a pulse, but I feel...
nothing.

So. I decide to go and look for it. I pack up my van, hoick the dog up
into the passenger seat, and head down the Highway of Lost Hearts.
And as I reach the outskirts of this city, I realise that my heart has
been missing for some time.

Or if not missing, then at least...
empty.

At Katherine, I stop for provisions. I leave the dog in the car with a
bowl of water and the windows open, and promise her a bone from the
fresh meat section on my return.

As I juggle my goods back to the car, a can of tomatoes falls at the feet
of a woman in a wheelchair. I bend to pick up the can and offer her a
small smile of apology.

She reaches out a gnarled claw at me; upturned and fused like a dead
inverted crab.

And I think: she wants money.

But no.

She's trying to touch me.

And my body jerks itself backwards and I'm on my feet, walking
away.

... leaving my tomatoes lying there.

The dog greets me with a thump of her tail, and asks me where the
bone is.

I tell her she's not eating it in the front seat. She can have it when we
stop.

... and she sulks all the way into the next town...



At Mataranka we dwell amongst a motley collection of gravestones, glowing in the heat of the day. The dog hunkers down with her bone while I wander through the plots, bringing the names of dead people back to life:

Burkey the Builder

Ginty

Bruno Kutschki

Doogs—all 21 years of him

KW—no date, no name

Elisa Lambert; born seventh of the third, 1892; deceased eleventh of the third, 1892

—and the shock of her five short days on this earth makes me look away.

The slideshow starts inside my head:

Night.

Ocean.

A body: floating.

Ruptured; wafting and shapeless.

There is no map for this journey.

The dog huffs at me; her jaws bloodied. I haul her twenty-seven kilos up into the jump seat, and she issues happy meaty farts all the way to Larrimah.

* * *

At the Daly Waters pub, a curtain of bras hangs down from the ceiling. A bearded, barefoot version of Wild Bill Hickok straddles a bar stool, a stubby of Fourex fused to his hand. ‘I Eat Pussy’ proud across his chest. I ask him if he’s seen any hearts pass by this way, and he leans towards me like he’s got a secret:

‘Dunno about hearts, love. But you’d be wantin’ to find some mojo first, wouldn’tcha?’

He pisses himself laughing and goes back to his beer, tipping it upright and draining the last dregs before calling for another.



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I go back to my van and add 'find mojo' to my list.
And as I drive, I think of dead people.
The weight of them in the silence of my dreams.

A ute full of young blokes passes, pig dogs in cages on the back.
Rifles primed, 'Khe Sanh' blaring out. One of them checks me out
as they pass, but I'm invisible: too old for desire, and too young for
ridicule—so he averts his head, cracks a stubby and drinks instead to
the passing tarmac. White lines like a road map, towards his next kill.

The dog picks up the scent of the pig dogs and props up, ears alert,
whimpering to go on the hunt as well.

No.
Sit.
SIT!

I teach her to drink from a plastic water bottle while we drive. It rests
at her paws and she licks it when she wants a drink. I pop open the
nozzle and squeeze it while she schlurps the drops. If I do it too fast,
it goes up her nose and she issues a snuffle-cough, so I slow down.
Gradually, we get the pace right and work together in a soft rhythm
until she turns her head to one side, refusing to schlurp any more.

As night draws close along the Highway of Lost Hearts I stop in at
Dunmarra to camp for the night. I wait at the counter while this big
bloke ambles across...

'Drivin'?' he says.

'No,' I say. 'Teleporting.'

'Smartarse as well?'

'Ah... fair enough. Fuel, thanks. And a stubby of Coopers Green.'

'You out here all alone, are ya?'

'No. I've got a dog. A big dog.'

He nods, holds out my change but won't let it go.

'Where ya stayin'?'

'Um... not sure.'

'Well, the next town's Elliot. It's a blackfella town, just so's ya know.'

'Well, they were there first. So yeah; I guess it is.'





He goes suddenly still. ‘You wanna watch it,’ he whispers. ‘A girlie could get herself in trouble talking like that, way out here.’

He puts my change down on the counter halfway between us, so that I have to reach towards him if I want it.
‘Right,’ I say. ‘Okay. Thanks for the warning.’
... and I leave my change lying there...

Down the track me and the dog pull over to rough-camp it for the night. I hide the van behind some scrub, lock the doors, wind the windows up and keep the dog close by.

Late in the night she lets out a long, low growl.
... and all night long, I feel like I’m being watched...

* * *

The energy of grief barrels me down the highway, day upon day, and I think: I am empty. Truly empty.
And I want to drive myself into oblivion.
Away from memory; from my own imagination.
I want to leave myself on the side of the highway and drive on without me.

But the country’s central artery takes me straight to Tennant Creek, where I order the most expensive steak sandwich in the world and get a thin, tired piece of gristle in return—wedged between white bread sheets; sexed-up with burnt onion and mounted by barbeque sauce as thin as blood.

I sit outside in the 40-degree heat; peel off the gristle and handfeed it to the dog. The chef wanders over with scraps in a plastic bucket. ‘M-m-mind if I f-feed the dog?’ he asks.

I nod okay. The man is toothless and wizened and skinny as string—a rollie drooping from the corner of his mouth; fingers stained brown with the rolling of ten thousand others. He lets the dog forage into his greasy, salted palms; peels back her gums to look at her teeth and notices the two rows of missing top ones.





‘L-like me,’ he laughs. ‘T-t-toothless and g-g-gummy.’

He looks at my van with something like longing.

‘You l-l-live in there?’

‘Me ’n’ her.’

‘You want c-company?’

I shake my head. ‘Nah. I’m flat out looking after myself. Don’t need anyone else to care about right now.’

‘I d-don’t take much c-c-care.’

‘Everyone takes care,’ I say. ‘That’s the whole problem.’

He nods fair enough, gives the dog’s ears a final scratch, and heads back to his kitchen. He hurls his cigarette butt onto the ground, coughs up a small piece of his lung and hawks it out from between his lips. The flywire door creaks open and slams shut, and he’s gone.

‘You ready?’ I ask the dog.

She grins her toothless, panting grin. I give her a leg-up and we hit the road.

In my rear-view mirror I see the chef, looking at and beyond us into his own past or future, and I think: I want to fuck this man—if only to help him get rid of his sadness.

But then I think: that’s just weird. I put Bob Dylan on loud and sing even louder and ‘Shelter from the Storm’ rings through the car like a last farewell to happiness.

... and in between verses, a small piece of my heart leaks in through the radiator vent and snuggles back into my chest.

* * *

The roads are paved with carrion: flat-strap roo back, paper-thin on the surface,

truck tyres pounding out their currency in kilometres per hour.

McLaren Creek

Wauchope

The UFO centre of Wycliffe Well.



Barrow Creek, Population eleven. The local publican leans on his bar fuelling stories of blood to the thirsty tourists:

‘Skull Creek massacre. 1874. Ninety-one Kaytetye slaughtered. No prisoners taken. Named Skull Creek for the number of bleaching skulls left to rot in the earth, now there’s an interesting fact. Coniston Massacre. 1928. Seventy Kaytetye slain. No prisoners taken. William George Murray, Chief Protector of Aborigines. Exonerated for his pains. ’Nother beer there, matey? 2001. Peter Falconio disappears behind a Kombi Van and hasn’t been seen since. One prisoner taken.’

I buy a juice, and ask him if any stray hearts have come through of late.

‘Only used ones,’ he says—and the beery blokes at the bar heft up a laugh and scratch their awkward balls while the one-eyed woman behind the counter raises her dish-soaked eyebrows at me, and shakes her head slowly.

‘No hearts here, love. Just us.’

I stand outside and drink the juice
stare at the compounded corrugations of red dirt
sand and dust
tufts of spinifex
sky which never seems to stop.

I think of a husband who left me, in search of his own dreams of youth.

The dog coughs politely to remind me that we’re on a schedule—as much as she’d like to chase the rabbits in this three-dog town. So I lug her up into place and she props in co-pilot mode—ears alert—while I contemplate the dead-straight road ahead. My TomTom tells me to hang a left at Winninowie in one thousand, five hundred and eleven kilometres time. Now there’s something to look forward to.

Just past the pub is a burn-off, close to the road. Smoke haze hangs low. Kite hawks and eagles circle for smoldering rodents, and the road