

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



# Last Cab to Darwin

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by Reg Cribb

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EXTRACT

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# LAST CAB TO DARWIN

Reg Cribb

## CHARACTERS

*'Last Cab To Darwin' was performed by an ensemble of 8 actors.*

MAX – Taxi driver from Broken Hill

POLLY – Aboriginal woman. Max's next-door neighbour

DOCTOR – Darwin doctor and euthanasia advocate

JULIE CRADDOCK – Max's palliative care nurse

G.P. – Broken Hill doctor

MR. BROWN

MRS. BROWN - Publicans at Federal Hotel

DOUGIE

COL. – Max's Broken Hill drinking buddies

SIMMO

CES

DOT - Characters at Outback local store

BOB

TED MINGLE

FRAN - Residents of Todmorden

TOWNSFOLK

JACK DEL BORELLO – Tidy Town Inspector

TILLY – Aboriginal hitchhiker

BARMAN – Daly Waters Hotel barman

BIBI and JONTINA – Swedish backpackers at Daly Waters Hotel

2 CANADIAN BACKPACKERS

MR. STANTON

MR. PEMBROKE

MRS. GRATTON - Northern Territory Parliamentarians

MRS. STILTON

MRS. CHESTER-BURNHAM

SPEAKER – Speaker in Northern Territory Parliament

THE SHADOW – Keeper of ‘Pussy Willow’

CURLY RUMBLE – Publican of Daly Waters Hotel in the 40’s. Max’s real father

SHIRL – Barmaid at the Daly Waters Hotel in the 40’s. Max’s mother

REPORTERS – Journalists reporting on Max’s story.

DOG

# ACT 1

## SCENE 1

*A single light on the stage reveals an elderly man sitting on the floor. He has a yellow bucket next to him. He is staring out over the audience with a kind of listless intensity. Every now and again he scratches his head then stares intently at the clumps of hair that fall out every time he takes his hand away. Eventually he starts picking inside his ear as if removing a small animal then feels inside his mouth for any remaining teeth. He suddenly looks up at the audience as if he has just remembered something then grabs his bucket and peers inside it intently.*

*Lights go up. We are inside an old weatherboard house. Probably built around the '40's.*

*We see now that he is sitting on the floor in front of a dirty mattress. A black and white television set is placed on a rickety old coffee table in front of it.*

*A reporter enters. He looks around the room then starts poking into corners. He doesn't notice Max who is staring at him with contempt. The reporter sniffs the air, then tries to find a description with his pad and pencil*

REPORTER1: The room was ... soaked in ...

*Shakes his head.*

The room was ... drenched in ...

In ... in um ... ah ...

*Another reporter walks in. They eye each other suspiciously.*

REPORTER2: Giddy.

REPORTER1: Giddy.

*Reporter2 starts poking around the room as well.*

*He applies pencil to pad as well.*

REPORTER2: The room ... smelt of ... Of ...

*Thinks about it.*

Of ... um ...

*It eludes him.*

“The Herald” right?

*Reporter 1 nods.*

REPORTER1: “Telegraph” yeah?

*He nods.  
Another two reporters walk in. A male and a female.*

REPORTER1: Giddy.

REPORTER2: Giddy.

REPORTER3&4: Giddy.

REPORTER2: "Australian" right?

*Reporter 3 (The female) nods.  
No-one asks who reporter 4 is but he speaks up anyway.*

REPORTER4: "Broken Hill Times."

*They all give him a condescending stare.  
Reporter 3 looks around the room.*

REPORTER1: So what's it like working on the local rag?

REPORTER4: Well it's ... okay. I'm a cadet actually.

REPORTER1: So you're doing it for nothing.

REPORTER4: Well...it's all voluntary actually but um...I'm hoping to make some contacts in Sydney. I'd love to have a chat with you afterwards if that's okay.

REPORTER1: Sure mate sure. Love to help. You supply the beers and we'll divulge the font of our wisdom to you.

REPORTER4: Oh... um...well...

REPORTER1: That's how we normally work it.

REPORTER4: Sure, that...that sounds great.

REPORTER1: See this lady here? War correspondent. Four years reporting from the most far flung corners of the globe.

REPORTER4: Really? They let a lady do that?

REPORTER1: Oh yeah, she's seen some real action. Cut her teeth on the "Campbelltown Post". She'll have some contacts for you.  
So who's stuck here tonight?

REPORTER2: Me.

REPORTER3: Not me.

REPORTER1: What about you?

REPORTER4: "Broken Hill Times" remember? I live here.

REPORTER2: Yeah? Anywhere around here for a decent feed?

REPORTER4: Fisherman's basket is good down at the Federal...apparently.

*Reporter2 writes this down.*

REPORTER3: Is it? You're a long way from the sea here.

REPORTER4: Well you take your chances...don't you.

*Reporter2 scrubs it out on his pad.*

REPORTER2: Don't we get the glamour jobs eh?

REPORTER3: You could die in this heat.

REPORTER1: I will die if I don't get a beer soon.

REPORTER2: Look, few notes, few photos, pretend we care, 15 minutes tops, outta here.

REPORTER3: Maybe some of us do care.

REPORTER1: Only if Rupert pays you to.

REPORTER3: Popular old bugger wasn't he?

REPORTER2: Well he had no family.

REPORTER3: Or friends obviously.

REPORTER1: He had a next-door neighbour. Aboriginal woman.

REPORTER3: Yeah? Where is she now?

REPORTER1: No-one knows. She just disappeared.

REPORTER3: This room stinks. Smells like...ah...like...

*The Broken Hill reporter speaks up.*

REPORTER4: Death. That's what death smells like.

*They all take this in and write it down.*

*A doctor and a nurse enter. They take a position in front of the mattress directly behind Max.*

*The doctor looks poised and confident. The nurse next to him is staring at the ground uncomfortably.*

DOCTOR: I'd like to thank you all for coming today. Max would be so proud to see such passionate interest in his story.

*Nothing is said.*

Well I don't have a lot of time as I have to catch a ten o'clock flight back to Darwin so let the questions begin.

*Again nothing is said for a while.*

REPORTER3: Sandra Craig, "Australian". Is it true that Max drove all the way back from Darwin when he should have been on his death bed?

DOCTOR: He was a remarkable and desperate man.

REPORTER1: James Darkan, "S.M.H.". Did you sanction his returning to Broken Hill?

DOCTOR: No I did not.

REPORTER2: Simon Telfer, "Telegraph". Did you try and stop him?

DOCTOR: Max got up and left in the middle of the night. The fact that he made it all the way home is nothing short of a miracle and testimony to his tenacity.

REPORTER3: Did you ever consider ignoring the legal challenge to the Bill and complying with Max's request?

DOCTOR: I'd be lying if I denied that.

REPORTER1: Even though you risked imprisonment.

DOCTOR: I think you all know my stance on this matter ladies and gentlemen.

REPORTER3: Do you believe the Federal Parliament should have the right to overturn State Legislature?

DOCTOR: I am not a politician. I was simply here to restore some dignity to a dying man.

REPORTER3: Are you going to continue the fight for your cause?

DOCTOR: With all my heart and soul.

REPORTER3: Has Max paved the way for the fight to continue?

DOCTOR: I believe him to be a true hero. As you know the law was in place for the briefest of times and I was able to administer the “right to die” for four other patients before it was overturned. My great regret is that Max never got to see his wish fulfilled.

REPORTER1: Is it true that he would’ve been the first?

DOCTOR: That’s correct.

*The local reporter speaks up for the first time.*

REPORTER4: Um... What was he really like?

DOCTOR: What do you mean?

REPORTER4: Well... was he a good bloke or...

DOCTOR: Who are you with?

REPORTER5: Oh Dave Dixon, “Broken Hill Times”.

DOCTOR: I see. Well he was... he was... one of a kind and...

JULIE: He liked cricket.

*Everyone stares at the unassuming woman standing beside the doctor.*

DOCTOR: This is ah... Julie Craddock, Max’s palliative care nurse.

REPORTER2: How well did you know Max, Miss Craddock?

JULIE: I watched him die.

*PAUSE*

He liked cricket.

*No one says anything for a while. Then they all tentatively write this information down.*

REPORTER1: Do you stand behind the doctor in his cause?

JULIE: I’m just a carer.

REPORTER3: Were you at Max’s side when he died?

JULIE: No, when I found him he was already gone. He was just laying in his own faeces. Right there.

*Points to where Sandra Craig is standing. She moves hurriedly away from the spot.*

REPORTER2: Is it true that he used to talk to his bucket?

JULIE: Um... sometimes...yes. I think it...soothed him somehow. He used to see things inside it.

REPORTER3: What things?

JULIE: Truthful things. The end and the beginning of things.

DOCTOR: Right. Well we've got time for just a few more questions.

*The sound of a dog howling and barking drifts in from outside. Everyone stops and looks in the direction of the sound. It is a mournful sound.*

*The lights slowly fade around the action and once again we see Max in a single spotlight.*

*He eventually speaks to the audience.*

MAX: Ya hear that? That is the loneliest sound in the bloody world. A mongrel barkin' on a country road. Every day at this time it barks. Ya could set your watch to it. Someone's not feedin' it or someone's not lovin' it or... Some bastard's just walked away from it. Wouldn't 'ave give it a second look just...left it behind. Everything gets left behind in this town. Houses. Pubs. Littered with 'em. People just...walked away. Boarded up and left to rot. Ahhhhh... Ya spend all ya time here avoidin' road kill. A town full of road kill. It's like a plane flew over one day and dropped a whole fuckin' abattoir on us. Even the Xmas decorations look like road kill this year. But that won't keep the tourists away. Oh no. They keep flockin' in just to take photos of us before we all turn to road kill. They should put up a sign up outside the town:

“DANGER. TOURISTS AND REPORTERS HAVE BEEN KNOWN TO END UP AS ROAD KILL TOO!”

My name's Max. It's not short for anything, it's just...Max. When you say the name over and over again it doesn't sound stupid either, it just kinda hangs in the air like an annoying blowie. I'm a taxi driver and I have been all my days. Well at least since I left school. I thought it was an honest way to earn a crust and now...well that's all I've ever done. So...there ya go.

I was born in Broken Hill and I been here for 65 years. That's how old I was apparently when I turned up to my last birthday. The fellas had a few lagers with me down at the Federal. There's 27 pubs in Broken Hill but that's where we drink. Don't ask me why... They wrote a little speech for me. “To Max. The bloke who has never left Broken Hill and doesn't look likely to.” Wasn't much of a speech.

Ya meet a lot of people drivin' cabs. Real characters. Trouble is I been doin' it for that long, I keep meetin' the same characters. Some of 'em give me the screamin' shits and some of 'em make me laugh. I like the ones that make me laugh. Then there's Col, Dougie and Simmo. They give me the screaming shits AND make me laugh. Dougie told me a joke last Sunday and I can only remember the punchline.

“Your Grandmother was playing up on the roof with her ball.”

It's drivin' me bloody mad.

"You should get out and see stuff mate." That's what they keep tellin' me. Stuff... I never had a reason to.

Well one day I did. One day in the summer of our last Ashes series, I just left and kept drivin'.

I always thought I'd need a bloody good reason to get outta here. Maybe I just like drivin'...

Oh, did I tell ya about the dust? It gets into everything. Into ya ears, ya clothes, ya hair, ya bones, every God-given orifice ya possess. It crawls into your furniture and your porridge and... Will ya shut that bloody mongrel up!!!! Somebody? Will ya!! It's in pain! Anyone can hear that?! Somebody put it out of its misery. If you don't, I will. It's easy. Ya hold its snout down with ya boot and... Bang! A 22 in the back of the head! Simple!!

Only someone who loves it will do that for it. So... It's not gonna happen.

*He begins moving off towards his front porch.*

But ya know the worst thing about the dust? It gets into your beer...

Mind you, I'm not one to complain.

Actually I'm feelin' pretty good today. I was feelin' real crook but... there's no pain anymore. I wonder how that happened?

*Max looks into his bucket*

I wonder...

## SCENE 2

*Lights go up on Max's front verandah. One of his favorite songs is playing. Maybe a bit of Willy Nelson. Max sits in a well-loved chair with a beer, staring impassively out at the stars. As the song fades, his neighbour Polly, an Aboriginal woman, enters. She is carrying a bag of rubbish. She lifts the lid on her garbage bin, looks inside, then closes it again in a huff. She stares at Max.*

MAX: Hey Polly. Whadda ya know?

*She says nothing.*

MAX: Is that a new dress you got on? You're lookin' pretty flash.

*(Like a parrot)*

Pretty Polly, Pretty Polly.

You must've been down at Carols By Candlelight. How was it?

I couldn't drag myself down there this year. Couldn't do it to myself. I don't know who was singin' last year but they sounded like the Hounds of the Baskervilles. There was a lotta torment comin' offa that stage. Your cousin Lyle, now he's got a good voice. But he was the only one.

*She still says nothing.*

Not speakin' to me? Hey, I heard you screamin' again last night. You been dreamin' those bad dreams again woman? Or maybe you got Lester sneakin' in your back door, eh?

Dougie told me a joke the other day and I can only remember the punchline. "Your Grandmother was playing up on the roof with her ball." Can ya help me out with that one Pol? Nah?

*Silence, broken only by the sound of a dog barking from inside the house.*

Hey! Shut your stinking hole! Bloody dog. Only family I got left in the whole world. Me and the little mongrel. Whadda ya reckon? I'll get him a job as a carol singer...

POLLY: *(Shrieks)* Maaaax!! Maaax!! I seen you. I fuckin' well seen you! You! You bin dumpin' your rubbish in my bin. I don't want your trash mate! Put it in your own bin. And if you got no room in your own bin, you can keep it in your fuckin' house. You and all those other white cunts who been dumpin' their bottles in there as well. You think you can just throw your shit at me anytime you want, eh?

MAX: You finished?

POLLY: Aaaand! I don't want your pissy excuse for a dog on my side of the fence! She been diggin' holes and sniffin' around my Charlie. One day Charlie gonna play with her too hard and he gonna squash her flat like a mongrel patty. Okay? The other day I come outside and Charlie was choc-a-block up her. She couldn't grip her paws onto the ground. Dog-knotted they was. Charlie's an alsation. It looked like he was tryin' to shake a possum off the end of his old feller!

MAX: Woulda been a sight.

POLLY: Most disturbin' thing I ever seen! I mean whadda you reckon their puppies would look like if my Charlie got your mongrel up the duff, eh?

MAX: Well...they wouldn't look like anything. My dog is not a she.

*Polly grimaces loudly.  
She looks uncomfortably at the ground.*

You *have* been down to Carols By Candlelight haven't you?

POLLY: Yeah.

MAX: You wanna beer?

*She goes up the stairs and sits down next to Max. He passes her a beer.*

MAX: Another stinker tomorrow.

POLLY: Yeah.

MAX: 43 degrees they reckon.

POLLY: Another one just like the other one. You gotta get yourself an air conditioner Max.

MAX: You aint got one.

POLLY: Yeah, but I don't feel the heat. While you're at it, maybe you could get yourself a *colour* telly.

MAX: And why would I be needin' a colour telly?

POLLY: How can you watch the cricket in black and white? Everyone looks the bloody same.

MAX: Exactly. And the pitch always looks perfect.

POLLY: And while you're at it you could get yourself a microwave or one of them computers...

MAX: Now you've gone too far woman. I've never even seen a computer.

POLLY: *(Takes a swig from the bottle)*

Hey...I hope you don't think this is a personal question but are you wearin' any underpants?

MAX: And why would you wanna be knowin' that young Pollyanna?

POLLY: You just got that look on ya face that blokes have when they're not wearin' any underpants. My cousin Clive has it all the time. He looks like this.

*She pulls a face.*

MAX: You sure got some strange 'lations Polly.

POLLY: I got the strangest 'lations.

*They toast each others stubbies.*

MAX: How come we never sit on your porch anymore Pol?

POLLY: 'Cause me favourite chair is bugged and I 'aint got the money to fix it.

MAX: You wanna look into that.

POLLY: Hey Max, when are you gonna give your dog a name?

MAX: He's got a name.

POLLY: "Dog" is not much of a name.