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Duty Free

By David Megarrity

DR 5

November 2010

Writer/Director's Note from Program, November 2010

Combining monologue with blog, the soliloquy with the social networking update, *Duty Free* explores the overseas experience of Australia's middle class – the 'gap year' when some young people go abroad to find themselves. It plays with the idea of identity formation in both lived and described experience.

The characters push towards a mode of expression known as 'parrhesia'; a kind of '*...verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness*' (Michel Foucault *Fearless Speech* p19-20). Thematically, the script also draws on the idea of the 'psychological moratorium' described by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (so good they named him twice) a time when '*...a young person can freely experiment and explore – what may emerge is a firm sense of identity, an emotional and deep awareness of who he or she is*'. (Richard Stevens, 1983 Erik Erikson: An Introduction p50).

Do we need to experience this emotion in order to perform it? Grumpy old David Mamet would say 'No' and plenty more: "*Emotional memory,*" "*Sense memory*" and the tenets of the Method back to and including Stanislavsky's trilogy are a lot of hogwash. This "method" does not work; it cannot be practiced; it is, in theory, design, and supposed execution, supererogatory – it is as useless as teaching pilots to flap their arms while in the cockpit in order to increase the lift of the plane." (From True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor by David Mamet P12)

We hope you enjoy your flight. Our itinerary is not inclusive of a three act structure, a hero's journey, or blinding and timely revelations where it all makes sense. It's a quiet, intimate, mess.

This is a new work, written and workshopped from June to November 2010. It's been built specifically for the scope that Production 1 demands. Raising a new work to the stage is a distinct challenge, but this has been a pleasure.

Introduction and Synopsis

Duty Free is a large-cast script intended for a company of about ten young actors, with the facility for more performers.

Combining monologue with blog, the spoken word with the social networking update, it explores the overseas experience of Australia's white middle class – the 'gap year' where young people go overseas to find themselves. They feel drawn to Europe as their destination, rather than Asia, and even they wonder why.

The accounts of these journeys are complicated by social networking, and the invention (or contrivance) of the self that occurs both online and overseas. It plays with the idea of identity formation in both lived and described experience.

Their journey finds its life not in the broad sweep of epic travels, but in the tiny details, stirs dim cultural and political awakenings in some. It raises questions about identity and authenticity, and what is private, and what is public.

Their itineraries are not inclusive of a three act structure, a hero's journey, or blinding and timely revelations where it all makes sense. The confessions are gentle and small. It's a quiet, intimate, mess.

ANNIE is concerned with where to store her passport.

SAM is looking for a seal of approval.

HELEN climbs every mountain.

LIAM is here for a good time, not a long time.

FRANKIE prepares accident or death everyday, and lives life online.

NELL is homesick, but also sick of home.

KATE grapples with fidelity while grappling with fellow travelers in dingy backpackers.

STEVIE and EMILY begin the trip as Thelma and Louise, but end it as single white females.

In this performance that knows it's a performance, the seemingly trivial is juxtaposed with the apparently meaningful, and the characters speak to us in a private mode, fundamentally asking us the question '*What is more important- the journey, or the stories told of the journey?*' – and if the stories are partly fictional, if the witnesses are few, then what is the truth of this journey?

Duty Free (Part 1) was first performed on Tuesday 9th November, 2010

In Studio L202, Kelvin Grove, Queensland University of Technology, directed
By David Megarrity

Assistant Directors: Charles Schache, Celia Warwick

Stage Manager: Phillipa Loth

Original Cast:

ANNIE	Becky Moore
SAM	Ruben Wilkinson
HELEN	Tanya Stuber
BEC	Rebecca Robertson
LIAM	Thomas Bishop
FRANKIE	Kathleen O'Sullivan
NELL	Melanie Griffith
PETER	Jesse Donovan
KATE	Toni Petersen
STEVIE	Danica Ahlhous
EMILY	Zoe Cobon

1 PREPARATION

Music. It ebbs and flows.

A single backpack is illuminated, then plunged into darkness.

A laptop is visible in the darkness, then disappears.

One by one, travelers emerge and take their places. Each one has baggage. Each one has a gesture. They strap on backpacks, stow passports, and make final preparations.

Then the stage is full. The laptop opens, illuminating a TRAVELLER, who surfs the internet, fingering a keypad.

Backpackers happy snaps flash by on a big screen. They don't linger long. National monuments, boozy drinking pix, green landscapes, a montage of Europe, accompanied by the pattering of tiny keyboards.

She reads from, information on the screen. It could be a facebook update, a blog excerpt, or an email. We're not sure if the writing is theirs, or someone else's. The other travelers declaim the text. Their delivery is flat and halting, as if they are reading. Barely audibly, a clock ticks.

TRAVELLER: I leave... tomorrow! Woot! Woot!

TRAVELLER: Should I take a ...hairdryer overseas?

TRAVELLER: I am about to embark on the most... awesome experience of my already rather.... awesome life.

TRAVELLER: Aussie aussie aussie!

TRAVELLER: Oui. Oui. Oui. Paris and Me.

TRAVELLER: See you in three weeks, Heather – the couch is fine.

TRAVELLER: They say if you don't like the weather in Ireland... wait five minutes!

TRAVELLER: Attention, women of the UK. Lock up your daughters.

TRAVELLER: Ye olde England – me and Will Shakespeare, sitting in a tree, K.I.S.S.I.N.G

TRAVELLER: I look gorgeous in my passport photo....check it!

TRAVELLER: My quote of the day: "A wise man can see more from the bottom of a well than a fool can from a mountain top."

The laptop snaps shut. The cast stays onstage.

As they speak, they are picked out of the darkness

Lights up on ANNIE.

ANNIE: Losing your passport would be a nightmare. I bought a little calico wallet, with a cord attached, to keep my passport in. I wear it around my neck, next to my skin. So I know it's there.

NELL: I found the ideal backpack. It was big, comfortable, second-hand, and cheap.

PETER: I'm not taking that much. I want to leave room for the stuff I might bring back.

LIAM: I could save money if I went to Asia, but I don't want to go anywhere too..well ...foreign.
Woah, Europe's expensive, though. Why is that? I did economics. I didn't do well in economics, but I did turn up, but nobody ever explained that to me.

NELL: My whole life on my shoulders, in neat compartments.

EMILY: Since year 9, not a day has gone by that we haven't seen each other. I couldn't stand my family. I felt like she was my family. And now we're heading off into the blue together.

PETER: I'm sure I can get what I need once I'm over there. No point in taking your whole closet with you.

ANNIE: I know Heather from church, just before she went back she gave me an open invitation. Her place in Bristol. Anytime. She's all set up there with a job and a place, it'll be a great base for me. I can't wait to get to Heather's place, I can stick my passport in a drawer, somewhere safe, and forget about it.

NELL: I'm traveling so I can cut loose a bit, but I still can't help doing it neatly.

SAM speaks. He has his backpack on, and seems worn and ruffled. He's already been traveling for a while – his chronology is out of sync with the others.

SAM: About three months into my trip, I got drunk with some engineers; not the kind of guys I'd ordinarily spend time with in a pub or anywhere else, but because I was overseas, I did. Pint after pint after pint.

- FRANKIE:** I worked for months and months at that stupid job, working for a stupid boss, with stupid co-workers, selling stupid stuff to stupid people. But it was a job, and it worked around uni. It was like a pair of brackets in my life, with nothing between them.
- BEC:** I'm going to find my roots. Laugh now. Researching your family history is quite interesting once you get into it, actually.
- HELEN:** Towards the end, I was living in the north. The city looked like an etching of itself. Looking out from the castle in the centre of town I saw this big, green hulking hill, like something from Lord of the Rings. And I thought, well I might go on over there and climb it. Because it was there.
- ANNIE:** This stringy, round the neck passport wallet thing is very inconvenient. Everything I use to identify myself is strangling me.
- STEVIE:** I think that five hundred bucks should last us for about four or five hours in London, at the current exchange rate. We'll work it out when we get there. Me and Em will pool our resources. What's hers is mine.
- LIAM:** They reckon a big Mac is the best way of gauging it, how much a big Mac is worth from place to place. Anyway, I think I'll have enough. I've done some rough maths. I'm quite confident. I feel like I'm ready for anything.
- STEVIE:** Everybody knows we're going. I've got so many followers, every single one of them has, like, written (*mispronounce*) bon voyage and the sweetest messages. They are going to be so jealous. I've sorted the phone and that so I can upload pix and keep the blog going, it's all linked up.
- LIAM:** Mum's given me a credit card, and Dad said he'll put as much money in my account as I'll need, and that if I need a top-up, all I need do is send an email. That's the advantage of them not talking to each other, you see. I can potentially double the funds without having to plead a particularly strong case to either of them. It's all good.
- FRANKIE:** But I did it. I bought it myself, that ticket, and nobody can take that away from me. Apart from the people at the boarding gate.

2 SENDOFF

Jaunty music. Brightness. In seconds, an airport appears. Queues, counters, security, baggage being X-rayed. TRAVELLERS pass through the gate. In less than a minute, the illusion is gone. Vestiges are left. A couple embraces, a mother waves. They are very still.

We're plunged into darkness again. Backpackers happy snaps flash by on a big screen. accompanied by the pattering of tiny keyboards.

The laptop opens. A TRAVELLER pokes at its keypad, and others speak what she reads:

TRAVELLER: I'm just about to board the plane...awesome!

Another joins him, operate the keyboard and search the net for other messages, They read. (Or write)

TRAVELLER: Just saw *[insert name of Australian politician here]* at the airport. So sexy LOL

The laptop snaps shut.

BEC: I decided not to make a big deal of going. I caught the train to the airport and sat there alone, waiting for my flight. That was how I wanted it.

KATE: Me and my boy. He held me. I held him. I felt his hand move the way it usually did. Downwards. But it was OK. He wasn't my boy. He was my man. My young man. We'd met after I'd booked my trip, and I fell for him totally. Clumsily. I fell. Part of my clumsiness was out of wonder that someone like him could love someone like me. But there we were at the airport. No Mum and Dad. Just me and him. I'd never seen him cry before.

EMILY: Our families watched us check in, standing on the carpeted area, while we stood on the lino. She couldn't stop giggling. It was like a performance. She was flirting with the guy behind the desk as we checked our luggage in, and I told her to cut it out. We went and had a cup of coffee and an overpriced muffin, which she took a digital photo of. And I listened to all the echoing voices bouncing around the airport through the silences in our conversation.

ANNIE: My Dad and I, we never touch ordinarily, but I found him holding me. Tightly. For a bit too long. I felt a bit embarrassed by it all, but there was a few people doing the same thing. Dads on business trips saying goodbye to their little kids, that kind of thing.

It's weird, this little time and space where people are allowed to show their feelings in public. It's still pretty tame though. Polite. Reserved. Very Australian.

Stay safe over there, he said. I think he's a bit relieved I'm going over there to meet Heather rather than going it totally alone.

HELEN speaks. She seems bright and present. Her chronology is out of sync with the others. She puts her bag down.

HELEN: I hired this red bike and rode out through the suburbs, and I noticed the buildings change from the kind of ancient and interesting to modern and drab. I realized that all my fantasies of living in this old place, in a quirky, three-hundred year old apartment, were completely off-beam, that if, in some bizarre parallel universe, I came to live here, it wouldn't be in the old city, but out here in the burbs, in the shadow of what increasingly looked like a mountain, rather than a hill.

STEVIE: There's this guy, basically groping his girlfriend in public near the duty free shop. He's crying like a baby while he's doing it. She's stiff as a board. I took a picture

FRANKIE: I went down the escalator into customs, and looked up. I could see that Mum was crying. I turned and stood for a moment, looking up at them and waving, thinking that if my plane exploded in mid air in 10 hours time, this would be how they would remember me. But it didn't, and they won't, and it felt really good walking away from them.

KATE: We promised each other all sorts of things. To stay in touch. Knowing that we wouldn't be touching at all for months on end. We talked about living together when I came back. But I had to go. We browsed in duty free together, then walked to a gate that I went through, and he didn't.

3 PLANE

Jaunty Music. Suddenly we're on the plane, with passenger cramped in, and flight attendants performing their semaphore dance of safety, and a little plastic jet taking off in the distance.

Then the performers disperse and illusion is gone.

We're plunged into darkness again. The AV screen throws the performers into silhouette. Backpackers happy snaps flash by on a big screen, accompanied by the pattering of many tiny keyboards.

A laptop opens, illuminating a TRAVELLER. She reads:

TRAVELLER: On the plane now...next stop London: Heathrow
International Airport!!

Others join her, operate the keyboard and search the net for other messages, They read. Or write.

TRAVELLER: There's a woman skyping in the seat next to me in Japanese.
WTF

TRAVELLER: I just puked up my airline food, and it looked the same
as it did before I ate it. Awesome!

The laptop snaps shut.

Over the remainder of the scene, we see the TRAVELLERS slowly arrange themselves into pairs and threes, sitting on their luggage, in a simulation of the cramped confines of airline seats.

LIAM: After I won the battle of the armrest, I seemed to spend my whole time thinking about needing to wee, or wondering when I next would have to. You either have to crawl out over someone who's sleeping beside you, or have someone crawl over you. Or if you're awake, you stand up, or they stand up, and get out of the way, but in the silence, there is a *knowing*. You are going to do a *wee*. Or a *poo*. And then you are going to come back here and sit very, very close to *me*.

EMILY: When people say 'I felt like I was flying' do they mean they felt 'claustrophobic', 'sleep-deprived', 'bored' and 'smelly'? The last thing you want is a camera in your face.

NELL: Apparently it's "Chicken mussaman with asian greens"
But that's not what it looks like to me. The bread roll looks good.
Turns out it was an antique.

- ANNIE:** I love all the bits and pieces. The sleep mask. The blankets, those funny little socks, the wet, hot towels that smell so deliciously chemically, even the tongs they hand them out with. The headsets in their plastic bags, the in-flight magazines, the envelopes and things in the seat pocket. I get a sleep mask for Heather. I pop it in my hand-luggage. My passport's still there. The little calico passport holder is getting sweaty.
- FRANKIE:** The person next to me raised the blind on the window. It was dark, and I'd left Australia. I sat there wondering what would happen if I died on this trip. Either vaporized in mid air in this plane by a guy with exploding shoes, or in a moped accident under the Arc de Triomphe.
- NELL:** I can't face the rest of the meal. I leave more than half of it. I paid for it, I can leave it if I want to. But should I eat it? What about all those poor people down in India I'm flying over who would probably fight for my leftovers? Then I realize it's my mother speaking. 'think of all the poor people' and I push the tray away and watch *[insert contemporary horror film title]*
- LIAM:** In your mind you're invisibly making excuses. *Well, it's a long time to be sitting down – I'm just preventing deep-vein thrombosis – I may not actually be going to do a poo.* But the other person invisibly knows you're thinking this – they say, *you are going to the toilet, and I know it. And you have just woken me up.*
- And you could say *sorry*, but you'll just wake up more people, so the whole exchange just becomes a series of small facial expressions made in the dark between strangers.
- BEC:** I'd been sitting in my seat, watching a funny little computer version of my jet plane crawl its way over a funny little computer world, like sitting in grade three, looking at an atlas. I crawl out over the guy next to me, hoping he's asleep, and go wait for the toilet.
- STEVIE:** I kept my eye on that little digital plane, and I deliberately stayed awake, until we were over the equator. Have you ever heard that the water goes down the plughole in the opposite direction once you've crossed the equator? I woke Em up and we went to the toilet together to check it out. I had my camera ready. But guess what? It's not true. It just goes straight down the plughole.
- SAM:** The blonde girl in the bed next to me was Scandinavian. Not next to me in the bed, but in the bed next to me. She was packing to go. It woke me. I don't want to be racist, but they're always beautiful, always clean seeming. Is that racism? Is it bad if it's good...like what you say about them?

Whatever. I had to get out. The dormitory was cold, with the morning light slicing in, and stirring, sleeping, lumps shifting all around me .Like elephant seals.

FRANKIE: Who will identify my body? Who will miss me when I'm gone? What music will I have played at my funeral? How early is too early to make a will? I don't really own anything. Can you stipulate funeral music in a will? I switched off *[horror film title as above]* and listened to the one-hit wonders station on the headphones.

SAM: I packed my bag and left the backpackers. I'd slept in my clothes I was still drunk, I think. I walked through the village It looked like a movie set, for a movie about a grim, rainy little town. There was nowhere to eat. Nothing was open apart from a service station, where I bought a Mars bar. It was all the change I had on me. I don't even like Mars bars.

ANNIE: I watch the safety video in a foreign language just to feel exotic. Maybe I'll pick up a new word, like an Asian word for 'oxygen mask', or 'brace position' both of which could be handy terms. That safety vest, with a light and a whistle to draw attention to myself. I need one of those whistles on every outfit I own, maybe that's what it would take for people to pay attention to me.

BEC: The back door of the plane's right in front of me, the door. Its instructions are clear, even in the dark. I could flick it open in a few seconds. And I realize how vulnerable we all are, together in this metal skin, alone in our own skins. How easy it would be to make us all fall out of the sky. I feel powerful and frightened at the same time. And nobody knows it except me. And if nobody knows it except me, does anybody know it?

4 TRANSIT

Music. Two queues of sleep-deprived TRAVELLERS appear, crossing the stage. They move slowly, clutching passports, inching towards their destination, then darkness swallows them and they are gone.

Darkness. A laptop opens, illuminating a TRAVELLER. Digital photos of travel flash behind him, accompanied by the tapping of keyboards. Voices come from the darkness as he surfs the net:

TRAVELLER: I'm tired & our flight doesn't leave for another 5 hours. It's going to be hell. Stopover is purgatory.

Others join her, operate the keyboard and search the net for other messages, They read. Or write.

TRAVELLER: Where do you get a good cup of coffee in Singapore?

TRAVELLER: Connecting flight is here. abft

TRAVELLER: The airport at Bangkok is awesome!

The laptop snaps shut.

LIAM: I'm at the airport, and there are these two massage chairs next to each other. You know, black ones, that do your legs as well, kinda feels like five children driving plastic trucks on your back. Maybe children who don't like you very much. So, I'm sitting there, and I must have closed my eyes for a second. When I opened them there was this girl beside me. I did all the silent things you do with your face to let people know you know they're there and that you mean no harm. A face like this.

ANNIE: I'm standing there in the queue wondering when Heather's going to reply to my emails and facebook messages, but I keep shuffling forwards and I can't hold onto my thoughts. I'm in one line and all these folks, mainly with darker skin are in another.

I've taken my passport out of its little holder, and it's sweaty in my hand. Lines on the carpet tell me which way to go. Beyond that line over there is another country. I'm really sick of lining up. But I'd rather be in this queue than a boat in the Timor Sea.

BEC: Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or something, but I feel quite affectionate towards baggage carousels. I do. I like them. And I'll tell you why: think about it from the *bag's* point of view. It's their chance to shine. It's like a fashion parade for them.

Some of them look lovely, little ribbons – others are bound up in cling wrap. Some have accessorized with lots of luggage tags. Very fetching.

It's like genealogy. All these ancestors I've researched. They come out of a hole, parade around for a bit with all this stuff inside that nobody can see, then they get taken away, or disappear into another hole. I'm sleep-deprived and delirious.

Over behind me, on another carousel, I can see one little suitcase, going round and round and round, all alone, and I wonder what its story is. I want to take it home and look after it.

FRANKIE: The stopover was weird. I just hung around in an airport hotel. I was worried that if I went anywhere else I'd miss my flight. I googled Paris.

NELL: Instead of sitting in the airport hotel, I went into the city. It was surreal. It was stinky. Diesel. Stir fry. Farts. Skyscrapers, smog, people everywhere. I'd never seen anything like it. It was so...foreign. I walked around for a bit and had some popcorn chicken from KFC.

FRANKIE: I ate at a French themed restaurant. The menu was in Chinese and English. I tried to imagine myself into a poignant, deleted scene from Sex in the City.

NELL: Mum and Dad came here for their honeymoon so I wanted to get them a souvenir. I went to this huge market district which was on the side of a hill. The district was on the side of a hill, and I noticed the higher up the hill you went, the shabbier the markets got.

FRANKIE: I handed the menu back and said "Merci". The waiter didn't smile, or speak. I realized I hadn't spoken to a single soul in 24 hours.

LIAM: It was her that spoke first. Where are you from?
At this moment I could have binged on an accent, and pretended to be from somewhere interesting.
But I said Brisbane, fully ready to have to explain where it was. I'm glad I didn't lay my French accent on her, because it turns out she was from Brisbane too.
She was on her way home from the places I was about to go to. It was hard to hold back. I wanted to ask her all about it. But I played it cool.
She liked to ride bikes. And climb things. I can't remember what else we talked about. It wasn't long, and I don't remember her

asking me to delay my flight, get a room spend the night together making unforgettable love.

PETER: I thought I was completely on my own, that my journey was mine until I noticed this guy with a red T-shirt, who was always within two, three, or twenty people of me. I'd say he was stalking me, but I'm hardly stalk-worthy, and he certainly wasn't my type.

STEVIE: I sent a cheerful email to Mum and Dad, and updated my status intriguingly on facebook from the internet kiosk in the foyer, caught the plane, then we were outta there. I slept for most of the stopover. Can I honestly say I've been to that country now?

EMILY: She thought the stopover would be a great adventure, but it was pretty boring really. She had a great time reading all the signs in a pretend Chinese accent. She'd popped her cork on the plane so she slept most of the time and I have to say I didn't mind the quiet.

NELL: Up the top of the markets, there was this old guy standing there. His 'stall' was a towel, spread out on the ground, with a few pairs of very worn shoes, a screwdriver, and some second hand sunglasses.
His face was beautiful and sad, as wrinkly as anything, the kind of face you'd see on the cover of National Geographic. I turned away and went back down the hill.
I haggled and haggled with some guy for a pair of shoelaces. That's what you do in marketplaces, I thought. Haggle. So I did. The guy looked at me strangely. I got the laces, then realized I'd haggled him down from the equivalent of 10 Australian cents to 5. Bargain.

PETER: Here I am, setting out on my own, the brave adventurer, finding my way, finding myself with 500 other brave adventurers, including red-t-shirt guy, who's now over there in the massage chairs chatting up some girl; we're all cooped up like chickens in a metal tube, or drifting around the same big polished halls. All together. For 24 hours at least.

EMILY: I didn't want to wake her so I slipped between the curtains and the window. The road down below our hotel was packed with hundreds of waiting taxis. All of them had newspaper over the windows. The drivers must have slept the night in their taxis waiting for their first fare of the day. There was something about Asia. Why on earth did we decide to go to England?

LIAM: See ya. She said. The chair gave my calves a final squeeze. Bon voyage. She said. In a perfect French accent. Well, it sounded perfect, what would I know. I spent the next eleven hours thinking of her, wondering if I'd ever see her again, and

that if I did, it would be more likely to be at the Aspley Hypermarket than under the Eiffel tower.

KATE: I look down, and there it is. I'd never seen a city I couldn't see the edges of. It's big, sprawling and grey, and I recognize some buildings. It's like the pilot's chosen a dramatic flight path for my benefit. It's shrouded in mist, which sounds a bit more romantic than smog, and the lights of the night are switching off. The Thames wiggles through a million rectangles and squares like someone's dragged a finger through the city, revealing water. In the short film of my life, this would be the establishing shot. Then we'd cut to the outside, me in the jet, pressing my forehead against the cold plastic window, framed by an oval of white metal.

PETER: Now I'm holding my passport, with the 'entry into the country' form neatly folded into it. When I filled it out, I wondered what to put next to 'occupation' I hope I got the answer right. And I've moved forward in the queue, but I'm still standing there, behind the yellow line.

I can see a customs officer, now. It's his job to point to which customs counter we go once we leave the queue. He will do this all day. 'Over here sir'. 'Counter 5' 'thankyou'. When he says something to me, should I respond? Maybe say 'thanks' but could such friendliness actually look like a cover-up for suspicious behaviour?

Thankyou. Damn. I said thankyou. I meant to be colder, cooler, like I do this all the time.

(to another TRAVELLER) Can anyone do a cockney accent?

TRAVELLER: *(in a bad cockney accent)* Kind of. Like this?

PETER: I might try someone else.

TRAVELLER: I can do a kind of Scottish.

PETER: No, that's fine. *(to another actor)* how about you

OTHER TRAVELLER: *(in a good cockney accent)* Alright? 'ow's it going'

PETER: You'll do.

OTHER TRAVELLER becomes CUSTOMS OFFICER.

CUSTOMS OFFICER: Passport please

PETER: There you go.

CUSTOMS OFFICER: Where are you coming from?

PETER: Australia

CUSTOMS OFFICER: What is the purpose of your visit?

PETER: Working holiday.

CUSTOMS OFFICER: How long are you planning to stay?

PETER: Three months

CUSTOMS OFFICER: Where will you be staying?

PETER: At a hotel in Bayswater, initially, then I'm hoping to find a backpackers...

CUSTOMS OFFICER: Do you have anything to declare?

PETER: *(rather grandly)* Yes, after 10, 000 kilometres of mildly uncomfortable air travel, I declare, that I, Peter O' Connor, formerly of Wynnum, on behalf of myself, do officially open this, my grand tour of the United Kingdom and nearby nations yet to be specified. May god bless me and all the 'mes' that sail in me.

CUSTOMS OFFICER: Do you have anything to declare?

PETER: No, nothing.

CUSTOMS OFFICER: *(handing passport back)* Enjoy your stay.

PETER: Thank you....

5 ARRIVAL

Music. We are taken behind the scenes with the baggage handlers. Two rows of TRAVELLERS pass luggage to each other in an assembly line which demonstrates every known mode suitcase torture. They are dropped, stomped on and flung across the stage.

Then, in a nifty bit of stage-craft, the baggage slides onstage a conveyor belt, and the baggage handlers become travelers once again, rubbing their eyes, and searching for their precious cargo.

The music stops. Darkness. The digital images of travel flash on the big screen. The tapping sound of many keyboards. A laptop opens, illuminating a TRAVELLER. He reads:

TRAVELLER: I need a shower!

Others join her, operate the keyboard and search the net for other messages, They read. Or write.

TRAVELLER: Never, ever fly with British Airways.

TRAVELLER: Made it.

TRAVELLER: London. Awesome!

TRAVELLER: Hi Mum, Just a quick email to let you know I'm safely here.
Thanks for all your help. Off to the backpackers now. Missing you.

The laptop snaps shut. As each TRAVELLER collects their luggage, they come to speak.

FRANKIE: Paris is 340 kilometres from where I sit, looking at a screen. I like Facebook. It asks me what's on my mind. Like it matters. And I get to refer to myself in the third person. Like action text in a film script. "Frankie always seems to end up eating lasagna no matter what foreign city she visits". That sounds like a quirky character in an indie film, rather than a sad girl from Stafford.

STEVIE: I prefer pictures to words, and that's why I take so many. It comes naturally after a while, it's quite normal. This way you're never alone. When I'm old and grey and the tattoo on my bum is hanging round my ankles, I'll still be able to go online and see myself now. I'm young. I'm alive. I'm overseas. With my best friend. We're so close, we even get our periods at the same time.

EMILY: She needs me. That's ok, she's led a kind of sheltered life. I thought this big trip might open her mind a bit, maybe help her

get more independent. We planned the trip together, and I always had in mind that we'd do the first few weeks together, then I'd set out on my own. That's why I kept our itinerary open-ended.

STEVIE: I love asking strangers to take photos of us, you get to meet so many other travelers. Often they want you to take a picture of them too, standing wherever you're standing, somewhere you've only ever seen before on TV.

HELEN: I locked my red bike up behind a fence and began to climb. The greenness is totally amazing, you have to see it to believe it. Up close it's exactly like... wet grass.

Up I climbed, soaking with sweat. I couldn't make out any path. I was making my own. The hill got steeper, and climbing became more difficult. I was puffing and panting, but I was determined not to rest until I reached the top.

SAM: I looked out to sea. A few stones in the water. Worn into round balls by hundreds of thousands of years of waves. I'm sitting, on some grass, somewhere, in a foreign country. Would I do this at home? No, I wouldn't. Would a homeless person? My head pounded. I rolled up my jacket and lay back on it. The pressure felt nice on my neck. A cloud went over the sun. I closed my eyes.

NELL: The light is different here. It feels like a different sun. I buy a postcard to send to Mum and Dad. It takes me ages to choose one. I go for one of Big Ben. I can hear it chime as I stand in the queue at the post office, but I haven't seen it yet.

BEC: I wake up at the backpackers. I can hear the noises of a city that isn't mine. Its hum has a different note. It all sounds like a sound effect of a city, rather than of a city itself. I think about the pyjamas I'm wearing.

ANNIE: I change my tampon in the toilet at the backpackers and sit there for a bit. My first London tampon. All these small achievements. Might not tweet that one, though. Eventually all these firsts will stop. The seconds will become hours, the hours days, and then I'll be doing lasts, instead of firsts. But I can't think about that now. I'm catching the train over to Bristol today. I called Heather's number but there was no answer. I was hoping she'd meet me at the station, but I guess I've got her address. She's a pretty casual chick.

STEVIE: Every photo of us we've usually got our arms around each other. People used to say we were lesbian at school but that brought us even closer together. The boys liked it.

LIAM: Normally I have a wank in the shower. I do. I'm not going to lie to you. It's one of life's pleasures. But here, I'm not so sure. But I give it a burl. It's important to keep up the routines of home even when you're on foreign shores.

But it's not happening. It's really not happening. I've failed to perform, even for myself. I could persist, but I give it away, and wash my armpits, then stand there and let the water flow over me. There'll be other times. Hopefully in less shabby surroundings. I look down at the mould on the floor of the shower and wish I'd brought thongs like the guidebooks said.

SAM: Somewhere across the water was England. Other than that, it was completely unspectacular. 'Beach' means a different thing to an Australian.

KATE: I'd write crap, never knowing what to write, never feeling I could come up with anything interesting to say on a keyboard. I used to have enough trouble coming up with anything meaningful to say on his pillow. I found myself asking 'what are you thinking?' god. It was like I was asking him for a status update in bed. But now I can't write 'what are you thinking' in a message. I'd worry myself sick if there was no reply. What can this silence mean.

LIAM: When I was little I used to stand under the shower, and pretend it was rain. Like I was some weary traveler, caught in a rainstorm, probably at night, in a movie that was all about me.

I'd stand there watching the shower rain into the plughole and wonder if this was what it was like to be a grown up. And now I am one. Apparently.

6 OE ADVENTURES

Music. The TRAVELLERS open their baggage. Clothes fly everywhere, are picked up, and flung again. One cast member stays absolutely still. Then suddenly all the clothes are packed away, and the cast take their places onstage. The other bodies onstage, are still, not frozen, dimly lit, and perform as geography can character ciphers for each monologue to come.

Darkness. Holiday snaps flash past us. A laptop opens, illuminating a TRAVELLER. He reads:

TRAVELLER: English people are rude.

Others join her, operate the keyboard and search the net for other messages, They read. Or write.

TRAVELLER: The Tate modern just blew my mind. Awesome!

TRAVELLER: What do you call an aardvark outside Buckingham Palace? A guardvark!

TRAVELLER: Sorry everyone, I've been too busy to blog! England is... simply stunning.

TRAVELLER: This is a picture of me being a square in Trafalgar.

TRAVELLER: at Charing Cross station. London to Dover, then Paris, here I come!

On TRAVELLER holds a colourful postcard, and reads from it. He holds a pen.

TRAVELLER: I'm not so sure that Guinness *is* good for you!

TRAVELLER: Hi Isabella, I'm here. Where the arrow is, on the picture, on the other side of the postcard, points to a dot, which is near where I am staying. It's is big and grey and dirty, but exciting. Found a three- storey toy store called Hamleys and I will bring you back a surprise from there. Hope you had fun on your excursion to underwater world. Missing you heaps, love, your big brother.

He draws an arrow to a feature on the front of the postcard, and clicks the biro. The laptop snaps shut.

PETER: The best meal I had was with a group of backpackers staying in the same room. We were all starving and broke. We chucked our coins in the middle and went to a nearby Tesco's, bought a chicken and a loaf of bread, and went to a park, ripped it up and ate chicken sandwiches. It was juicy as. We sucked the bones. I thought these guys were Spanish. I didn't want to ask them

straight out where they were from – I thought it would spoil the moment, so I asked them which part of Spain they came from, and they said Portugal, and laughed. I said I liked those chicken shops they've got everywhere.

I felt pretty embarrassed, but I think they were used to people like me asking dumb things like that. One of them had a nylon string guitar and sang Crowded House songs. He was like an angel. Jose. The others harmonized. Even I sang. Turns out they thought I was from New Zealand. I didn't spoil their fantasy. Jose said he was off to Amsterdam next, and I said unbelievable! I'm headed there myself!

I hope it wasn't too 'unbelievable'. Jose and I walked through the park together, and it was just... easy. The sun was shining, and...well, now I'm going to Amsterdam. I better buy a ticket. Mum and Dad think I'm going to Stratford upon Avon.

NELL: I found a B& B near the coast. I coughed up a bit extra for a bit of comfort. The backpackers are pretty awful, really. I pictured my own clean room, maybe a TV, maybe eating some takeaway in a comfortable bed. The host would be polite, but unobtrusive.

I'd found the place online. 'Just like home', it said. And it unfortunately it was.

Exactly like home. I'd traveled all this way to be sitting at a table with a Mum and a Dad again. I couldn't bear it, and so I went to the pub round the corner and drank by myself. I picked up a bottle of wine at the off-license on my way home. It tinged incriminatingly as I put the key in the door. They were still up watching TV. I planned to drink alone, in my room but I was so filled with despair I couldn't. I left the wine on the bedside table and fell asleep in my clothes.

At first light I crept out like a burglar, or one night stand, or something. I left my money on the kitchen bench. Outside the streets were wet and quiet. They probably thought the wine was a kind gift left by a good Australian girl. And maybe that's my problem. I'm homesick... but I'm sick of home.

KATE: I'd walk the streets and see the sights and wish he was beside me. I'd say to myself the things I would have said to him. I'd wonder if there was some force, some ether, some emotional wi fi that connected us over ten thousand k's. That he'd stir in his bed with a sudden image of the tower of London, viewed through my eyes. But the truth is, I'd felt as distant from him when I was in his arms, as I felt now.

ANNIE: I got to Bristol and walked to Heather's place, which wasn't far. I had a Google maps printout I'd carried with me all the way from Australia. It was a bit crumpled.

The landlady said that Heather hadn't lived there for a month, and that she'd left no forwarding address. 'I've been emailing her' I said. 'Well I don't like computers' is what this old lady said, in her funny accent. How can you not like computers, I thought, but I just said thanks, and she closed the door. The first thing I thought of was to email someone – Heather...her mum and dad, my mum and dad...anyone.

But instead, I just decided to go for a walk. To get lost. This is what I thought: 'Ordinary things are never going to look as marvelous to me as they will today. Things the people here look at everyday, or more to the point, don't even notice, will be wonderful to me today. In this place I am alone and exotic.

I took off my little passport wallet holder thingy and put it in the bin. I put my passport in my pocket, and left my backpack in the bushes.

I walked. It was great. It was completely ordinary. It was both. But there are no stories here. It was just me, doing stuff. And for once in my life, that was enough. And that was when my trip began.

BEC: I thought I might try to find my roots. And there I stood. I went to the right village, in the right county. And there they were. Stones. Stones with writing on. Bones beneath. My roots.

STEVIE: We were in Trafalgar Square, and I wanted her and me to go up on one of these awesome bronze lions together, and get a photo, but she was all grumpy and wasn't into it. She wanted to go into some gallery up there somewhere, but I didn't want to look at pictures of other people when I could be making pictures of me, so I said I'd go up, and she could take a photo of me. She still wasn't into it so I just gave her the camera and started to get up on the plinthy thing. I was sitting on the lion when I looked down to see her still standing there but she'd put my camera down on the ground. I thought maybe she didn't understand or something so I was up there, like, gesturing and that, and then I was like, calling out, but she just stood there with her arms folded looking peeved as.

There was a group of other people like, starting to look at me and I felt really embarrassed. And I said what are you looking at you fuckers? like really angrily and there was this mum holding a little kid, and I said sorry, and I looked down and Em had started walking away, like, leaving my camera there on the ground in Trafalgar square, for any criminal to come along and get, and it was full of the day's photos that I hadn't uploaded yet.

I had to take my time getting down off the lion 'cause it was pretty high up, and by the time I got back down to ground level she was gone. I tried texting her but the message didn't get through. I went over to the portrait gallery, thinking I'd find her in there, but the place was absolutely huge, all these dusty faces looking at me.

I went back to the backpackers in Piccadilly and uploaded the day's pictures while I waited. The last photo on the camera was of her hand, giving the finger. I uploaded it anyway.

HELEN: I thought I was going to die. Sweat was pouring off me as I climbed, but this freaking hill wasn't going to beat me. I was talking to myself as I climbed, like a crazy person. Singing songs. Anything to keep me going. The incline looked so gentle from a distance, but now I felt like I needed ropes and stuff, like those guys who abseil on the river cliffs back home.

It was so tempting to stop along the way, to turn around and look how far I'd come, to look at the greenness and the old town behind me, but I did not want to stop.

Finally I saw a guard rail above me, I reached up, grabbed it, and pulled myself over, and stood there, panting and sweating. And what a view.

Bitumen. A roundabout. Lots of tour buses. crowds of sightseers.

An old woman with one of those wheely walkers came hobbling towards me.

HELEN enlists another TRAVELLER to play the role of OLD SCOTTISH LADY

OLD SCOTTISH LADY : (Scottish accent) Are ye alright there darlin'?

HELEN: Yes, I said. I'm from Australia.

OLD SCOTTISH LADY: Well that's a long climb

HELEN: She gave me a smile and hobbled away. That was my summit. I'd very much taken the hard way, while busloads of senior citizens paid a small fee to be coast up a gentle incline, to the very same destination, in air-conditioned comfort. I looked back at the city, and down in the green green green below, my little red bike.

FRANKIE: After all the to-ing and fro-ing about what museum to see, I've decided to simplify things by not seeing anything at all. I spent more time looking at diagrams of the tube and bus schedules than at masterpieces of painting or sculpture. London's so grimy, at the end of the day you just feel like having a shower.

I've decided to cancel my trip to Paris. It was just the Eurostar ticket. And two nights accommodation. But it's OK, nobody need know. I've decided to stay just here. It's quiet during the day, most of the other travelers are out, and the area, while it's a bit grungy, is interesting enough. Every morning I walk to the same café and have two eggs and a massive cup of tea, and just look out the window. I've started to notice the patterns of some of the people that live here. The big issue seller. The guy in the hat and overcoat that swings his umbrella. When a police car goes by, with its English siren, I feel like an extra in *The Bill*. I'll stay here a bit longer. I've talked to the manager of the backpackers about the state of the bathroom, and he says he'll clean it. I'm paying extra to have my sheets changed daily. It's fine. There's internet here. I've found a way to sanitize the computer keyboard with some disinfectant wipes, and combined with my hand sanitizer it's all good. So I'm keeping up with the blog, but not putting everything in. I pretend I'm too busy to update my status, but I'm often there, just lurking. Nobody knows where I am. It's easy to find images to post to add a bit of colour and movement. I'll sit out the trip here. Cut and paste. The view from the Eiffel tower looks good.

SAM: I woke and the sun was higher – the perfect angle to bounce off the water and blind me. I felt like I had sand in my eyes. The coastline came into focus and I realized I'd fallen asleep on a golf course.

I looked at some of the small round rocks in the water, and noticed they were moving in the waves. The brightness of the day was intense. The light exploded off the water. I looked again and another stone appeared. Black and slick. It had eyes.

I sat, as still as stone myself and looked back into the black eyes. Seals. Three, or four, floating in the Irish Sea, gently bobbing up and down, calmly looking back at me. I realized I hadn't been breathing, and slowly took in some air. A family of seals. Just their heads. I didn't think about the rest of their bodies that must have been under the water. Just their heads. It felt like a visitation. That they'd floated up just to let me know that I was going to be ok. Seals of approval.

And I said the only words I said that day. "hello." I said. Talking to seals. My voiced sounded small. Dried up. Spoiled by its accent.

And then they were gone. So there it is. Great story, eh, a real show- stopper. I've never told anyone that before. I don't know what kind of stories you're supposed to gather when you're overseas, but that's one of mine. The mundane and the magical. Alongside one another.

LIAM: I'd had a bit of a squizz round Europe, that was good. I did one of those bus tours. It was a friggin hoot. Blind. Anyway, so it was costing me money just sitting around in London and I was in a bit of a rut so I got a job working the bar at this pub in Bristol. It was Ok, nothing I hadn't done before, got to chat to the locals a bit. They liked me. What's not to like. There was this cute aussie girl who used to come in, always on her own, but it turned out she was Christian. Every Friday shift there was this group of women that came in, sat in a corner and pissed themselves laughing all night. Table service from me with a bit of Australian charm thrown in free of charge. Once I got close up I realized that they weren't that good looking – a bit porky, you know, all that bangers and mash. A couple of them were married, I think. There was one, Shirley, she wasn't. Her hair was bottle black, and she had nice eyes and thick ankles. Anyway, I finished my shift early one night and I helped her out into her minicab at closing time.

I was headed to the Ministry of Sound, but I ended up going home to her flat in a tower block. It was pretty good, but we had to be really quiet because her daughter was asleep.

We drank a can of beer each then she went to bed, and I stayed on the couch. I slept for a while, then watched the sun come up over the housing estate. Then her daughter came out. She was around fourteen, I guess. Pretty good looking. Her mum must have been older than I thought. I started acting all embarrassed, out of courtesy, I guess, but it was pretty clear I wasn't the first guy she'd seen on the couch at her place in the morning.

She sat next to me and started watching MTV, eating cereal.

EMILY: I walked into this church. St Martins in the Fields, and there was a lunchtime concert on.

The place was very peaceful after what had happened in the square, and I felt like I could breathe. I took a seat up the back, and I could hear the blood pounding in my ears. I could hear the musicians shuffling their music up the front. Then they started playing and I don't know how to tell you this, but it was like there was air in all my joints, like my heart had helium in it, like someone was cradling my head.

It was just what I needed. I dunno what the music was. Something classical. And as I sat there I realized there was no-one around me taking photos, tweeting or fiddling with a phone.

All I had was the experience... and... now that I'm saying them, these words. And that was when I decided.

KATE: He wasn't tall, dark, or handsome. But then neither am I. we met in a bar. He blathered at me, and I prattled at him. You can tell. You can see it in their eyes, and I saw it in his. He was up for it. "Well up for it" as they might say here. But behind that there was a softness, and a knowing that it'd be OK if we went our separate ways too. That this moment was as important as any possible future moment. That was what I wanted. At that moment. It turned out we were staying at the same backpackers, and we were direct about it. He wanted to know where I was, and I wanted to know where he was.

I went to him, entered his warm bed. It smelt of him. It smelt tasty like a bakery. A lower bunk. There were others in the room. It was gentle. Quick. There was no performance. Thank god. And we lay together, and woke together in a foreign city. We waited while the German boy at the other end of the room rose, packed and departed. We did it again. And I felt no guilt. I thought of all I had at home. My boy. My man. My lover. I didn't think of losing him. I thought. "let me have this" I don't know who I was asking. Maybe myself.

And I didn't once ask him what he was thinking.

Lighting change. The characters speak, voicing their online voices for the first time. Their speech is natural, and for the first time contains some of the emotion that has been absent from all the previous 'status updates'.

FRANKIE: Paris.. is.. awesome, it's everything you think it might be from story books and movies. Here's the view from the top of the Eiffel tower.

LIAM: Found... my very own... MILF in London. Lock up your mothers! Yee-ha!

KATE: Missing you, babe.... Will write soon.

SAM: I'm in... Ireland! Should... I get a... celtic.. armband tattoo?

ANNIE: Heather, wherever... you are, I ...am de-friending you not because you are no longer my friend, but because you never were.

BEC: Gazing back into the past is wonderful – I've found the village my great-great-great grandfather came from and there's even a street named after us!

NELL: I wish I could stay here forever.

PETER: Royal Shakespeare Company OMG!

STEVIE: We are ready for Barcelona, but is Barcelona ready for us?

EMILY: Check out womentravellingalone.com

HELEN: "It's always... further than it looks.
It's alwaystaller than it looks.
And it's always harder... than it looks."

The laptop closes the laptop gently, sending them into darkness.

Behind them the screens are crowded with the text of a thousand travel blogs, social networking updates, and digital happy snaps. The images blur, then fade.

Darkness.