

THE CRITICS

Richard Asher

Driving road trains in Australia starts in Parow

THE TANNIE GLARED at me over the top of her spectacles. I could barely see over her elevated counter; she towered above me like she owned the place. It may not have been so, but it was clear she was used to getting her way. This woman did not take crap in any way, shape or form.

'*Met wie ry jy?*' she barked, not a trace of sympathy in her voice. Her little serving-hatch was covered with prison-style bars, and dominated by her all-powerful cash register. This dimly-lit reception area was about function, not form. It was a throwback to the days when the interiors of South African institutions were planned by the same sort of creative genius responsible for Soviet hotel foyers.

I swallowed hard. '*Met Anton,*' I said. She gave me a suspicious look and stuck out a hand for my first payment. There was no turning back now.

This was to be the start of my odyssey. My goal (I know it's crazy) is to drive road trains across Australia. Step one, then, was to get my heavy vehicle licence. Which is why I'd come to Parow for the first time in my life. It's an industrial place that, to put it kindly, is never going to be on the Cape Town tourist trail.

But I had no choice. If you want driving lessons in a truck, and you don't own one, there aren't many places that provide them. So there I found myself, reversing a massive Mercedes straight into Parow's morning rush hour.

How I survived that first lesson, I can't say. Twelve forward gears takes some getting used to. As do the turning dynamics, which require you to completely ignore the corner you're aiming for until you're about to crash into something – then turn hard at the last possible second. Turn early and you brush robots. I quickly discovered, however, that brushing robots was one of only two ways to get my instructor's attention. The other is rocking up to lessons in a VW Scirocco.

But as the lessons slipped by, road driving got easy. Aside from the turning, and sitting so high, it's like a car. Clutch, brake, throttle, gears. Familiar enough.

But the yard... it makes you want to scream. They actually make you alley dock. I mean, who's going to alley dock an articulated lorry in real life? C'mon. The instructors said

'everyone fails on the alley dock'. I said I believed them: I'd only got it right three times out of a hundred in practice. They just shrugged. They weren't into the motivation thing.

The problem with alley docking is that it's bloody impossible. Until you 'get' it, that is. It's like riding a bicycle. Nobody can teach you. You've just got to keep trying until it clicks. Which is why, I guess, the instructors spent most of the lessons playing on their cellphones. Unless the truck broke, which happened every other lesson. Then they'd spring into action, scratching furiously behind the cab, petrified that the school's main *oom* was going to pin the blame on them.

I failed my first test. You get two attempts at alley docking, (the traffic department knows it's a bitch) but I sodded them both up. Turned too much, too early. 'Today wasn't your day, Mr Asher,' said the polite cop who tested me. But was I going to have a day at all?

It seemed I wouldn't know the answer until March 2010, thanks to the impressive waiting list for tests. What those darlings at the department do all day I don't know, but it sure isn't testing. The only test you can get at a traffic department in less than three months is an eye test, which they would probably religiously insist upon even if you're applying for a sound system licence.

Then someone said I could get a test within six weeks, if I tried on the other side of town. So over I sped to book another date. And take another eye test.

Along came big day number two. Sodded up my first attempt. But the second seemed perfect. The trailer was square, straight even... a work of art. I'd done it! I leant out of the window with a broad grin, awaiting a thumbs-up from the portly cop. That's when I saw it – my side mirror lightly wrapped around a pole.

'My friend, you could have stopped reversing. You were already in,' he said as I slumped over the steering wheel in anguish.

I haven't been back. I'm still in trauma. Did I mention I've spent over three grand on lessons and tests? Now I'm trying to find out if alley docking is required in the Aussie truck test. Even if it is, I'm sure I'll prefer Perth to Parow. **TC**

ILLUSTRATION: CAINE SWANSON



Richard is also learning how to use a hat fitted with flying corks and, just in case, studying the art of painting didgeridoos with tiny white dots