

arts

## Rich pickings in unfocused play



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### THEATRE

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#### *Summer of the Aliens*

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*Peter Morrison*

**T**WO OF Louis Nowra's recent plays, *Capricornia* and *Cosi*, suggested we were in for a new, maturer phase in the already considerable career of this imaginative Australian writer; and in his semi-autobiographical *Summer of the Aliens* there are rich pickings indeed, many memorable incidents and images; but it is too diverse, using too-detailed a canvas for a two-act play of conventional length.

ventional religion.

What it really needs is focusing, a clear line of progress and perhaps the discarding of some distracting and (to me, anyway) irrelevant passages and references — even a character or two.

What's it all about? Well, that's part of the problem. It really boils down to an incident-packed Melbourne outer-suburban summer of a timid, frankly uninteresting adolescent boy who is obsessed (unlike his friend) with UFOs, not sex.

Only at play's end does he have intercourse, and then with a lusty young girl who is about to be taken off to a "children's home", having been observed masturbating her father-in-law.

Though our anti-hero (transpar-

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ently called Lewis) has shared a closeness and kind of friendship with the girl, the coupling is the end of their relationship. As the narrator, Lewis' older, alter ego, notes, he did not visit her in the "home" and never saw her again. Thus a boy becomes a man?

The boy is only one of Nowra's obsessed characters. Sex and

obsessed characters. Sex and shooting cats occupy the boy's other, male, friend. The postman is obsessed with house numbers, a hard-done-by Catholic wife with a fragment of "holy" bone, whose powers to relieve her situation is no more evident than the efficacy of her prayers.

The UFO-watcher's father, unwelcomely returned from work on the Snowy River Scheme (this is 1962), is obsessed with stealing barrowloads of soil from neighbours' gardens to level his own (or more correctly his wife's).

And so on.

There is a one-armed Dutch immigrant girl who keeps mouthing the obscenities she has been mischievously taught by the sexy cat-killer. A Japanese woman in full national regalia enigmatically glides across the parched landscape. We are privy to the masturbation incident and other delectables, such as urinating. One must wonder whether Nowra is out to shock (though surely not: there's nothing we haven't by now seen on stage) or that it's better to show these acts than leave a little to our imagination.

to our imagination.

Be that as it is, what we see and

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hear at The Wharf may be a mish-mash and an overloaded smorgasbord that might be better organised and expanded into a novel, but there is a wealth of good acting and impressive theatricality to be enjoyed, particularly after interval, so don't despair if the first act (the longer by far) is not to your taste.

With one exception (and I put this down to miscasting) the players are almost uniformly strong, giving the characters every chance of credibility.

Special credits might however go to Nicholas Eadie as the narrator (who wanders from time to time about the set), Damon Herri-man (in the ungrateful role of the chaste adolescent), Sara Zwangobani (as the playful young female friend), Mitchell Butel (who brought delightful comedy and superb subtlety to the cat-killing "Aussie" of Italian parents) and Maggie Blinco (as both a Mum and a Grandmum).

And that's not to discount the

And that's not to discount the heft of the others.

So, *Summer of the Aliens* is less than totally satisfying or satisfactory, but the show has much to recommend it. It is no fault of director Angela Chaplin's or designer Stephen Curtis' that it is not wholly successful.

Directed by **Angela Chaplin**  
Designer: **Stephen Curtis**  
**Sydney Theatre Company**  
**The Wharf**

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