



LOUIS NOWRA was born in Melbourne. He is the author of such plays as *Inner Voices*, *Visions*, *Inside the Island*, *The Precious Woman*, *Sunrise*, *The Golden Age*, *Capricornia*, *Byzantine Flowers*, *The Watchtower*, *Summer of the Aliens*, *Cosi*, *Radiance*, *The Temple*, *Crow*, *Miss Bosnia*, *The Incorruptible*, *The Jungle* and *The Language of the Gods*. He has written a non-fiction work *The Cheated*, three novels *The Miser of Beauty*, *Palu*, *Red Nights* and a memoir *The Twelfth of Never*. Some of his radio plays include *Albert Names Edward*, *The Song Room*, *The Widows*, *Sydney* and *Moon of the Exploding Trees*. Besides translating such plays as *The Prince of Homburg*, *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Lulu*, he has written the libretti for *Whitsunday* and *Love Burns*. Telemovies are *Displaced Persons*, *Hunger* and *The Lizard King*. He wrote the screenplays for *Map of the Human Heart*, *Cosi*, *Heaven's Burning* and *Radiance*. He lives in Sydney.

SUMMER OF THE ALIENS

LOUIS NOWRA



Currency Press • Sydney

CURRENCY PLAYS

First published in 1992
by Currency Press Pty Ltd,
PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 1212, Australia
enquiries@currency.com.au
www.currency.com.au

Reprinted 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2012, 2016, 2019

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Cataloguing-in-Publication data for this title is available from the National Library of Australia website: www.nla.gov.au

Cover design by Trevor Hood for Currency Press.
Printed by Griffin Press, Adelaide.

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I was a Teenage Alien

Louis Nowra

The past makes our present. We can never escape from the past no matter how far we want to run. It can be said that it's not so much that we can't go home again, but that we have never left home. One of the themes of *Summer of the Aliens* is that the past has made the narrator what he is – no matter how much the older Lewis has changed there is still a connection to his younger self. But if there are differences, and there are, one of the main ones is that the older Lewis in growing up has, like all adults, left behind a major part of his childhood, or, for want of a better word, a part of his soul.

This play is a black hole of fiction, surrounded by a halo of truth. It has many autobiographical elements and although there are many factual and chronological discrepancies, I have tried to keep true to the emotional chronology of my youth. This is a chronology that can place the Cuban crisis in summer, when it was, in fact, earlier and place the curious behaviour of someone like Pisano in a shorter space of time than it was in reality. Memory is remembered emotion, not facts. In my mind the Cuban crisis did occur around the time of my obsession with flying saucers and aliens.

Why is this so, I ask myself? One of the reasons must be the science fiction films of the fifties and early sixties. In such films as *I Married a Monster from Outer Space*, *It Conquered the World* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, it is easy to see that the aliens who came to conquer earth were not unlike the

Communists who threatened to destroy us (that is, western democracies). To people like myself and many Australians, young and old, the Russians were as foreign, as potentially evil as any alien. It is obvious then how I could conflate the Cuban crisis with my fascination for UFOs.

This interest in flying saucers was fueled by two events. One night I saw a television interview with a George Adamski who talked of how he had been abducted by Venusians and they had taken him to Venus where 'I ate apples just like on earth'. He was delivered back to earth where they informed him that aliens walked amongst humans, pretending to be like us, so that they could examine and learn about us. This idea that aliens could seem like humans scared me, as did the film *Invaders from Mars*, where a boy discovers that his parents are not his true parents but aliens who have taken over their bodies. Again both events instilled in me the awful realisation that it was not possible to be certain about the humanity of people, or more insidiously, the humanity of your own parents, your own flesh and blood. No doubt, my own uncertainty about what it meant to be an adult, about growing from a boy into a man and my uncertainty about my sexuality played an enormous part in all of this.

The landscape of the play is recognisably Fawkner, a suburb to the north of Melbourne. For years the only thing notable about it was that it housed the dead. Fawkner cemetery was the only thing that grew. The rest of the suburb was paddocks. There were very few trees, only long grass, cracked earth and the only colour was the purple scotch thistles in spring. In 1949 the Housing Commission built 113 houses. The experiment proved a public relations disaster. The houses, constructed out of concrete blocks, may have been cheap but they had no sewerage and the roads were unmade (it was not until 1960 that the Housing Commission attempted to build again in Fawkner). My family lived in one of these 113 houses, in a landscape so drab and boring that only the landscape of the mind offered colour and excitement.

To the north-west of Fawkner was the suburb of Broadmeadows, again a landscape filled with the featureless volcanic plains of paddocks, from which our school took in pupils, many of them immigrants from Europe, especially England and the Netherlands. Surprisingly although there was a dislike of these immigrants, the greatest hatred was directed towards the pommies. I think the reason for this was so many of us, who belonged to the working class, were of Irish or Scottish descent and therefore had the collective memory of our ancestors and even our parent's dislike of English imperialism. I vividly remember a pommy arriving in our class one summer (and it's curious, but I do not remember winter in my childhood) and you could see in his scared eyes, that he knew he had better act tough. Someone asked him his name and he said 'Rocky'. We all laughed because he was so short and wan looking. At lunch we took him out to play cricket. He said he could bat. I opened the bowling and after one ball I could see he was woeful at the game. In our neighbourhood you seldom took pity on the weak, so the next ball was a bouncer. He turned when he saw it coming, as if he wanted to run away and it hit him on the back. Everyone jeered. He was just a pathetic pommy after all.

When, in my early teenage years, our family shifted to a middle class suburb, my mother took the stunted trees and shrubs which had not grown in the Fawkner soil and planted them in the rich, loamy soil of Macleod. Within a year they had doubled their size. The metaphor was obvious. Fawkner was barren and sterile, Macleod, fertile and green. My own development was different. I took with me the values and attitudes of Fawkner only to discover quickly that my brashness and aggression were seen by my new middle class neighbours, school mates and teachers as the behaviour of an insensitive yobbo. In order to survive the hardest training ground in the world – the school yard – I quickly tried to change myself. So deliberate was this attempt at transformation that I would copy the gestures and vocal mannerisms of boys I particularly

admired in order to be like them, sometimes uncannily like them. In a way it was like an alien studying a new world, trying to mimic and ape the inhabitants of his new world as closely as possible.

Working class life is lived at a much shriller level. Violence and aggression are not sublimated into manners and patterns of decorum. In *Summer of the Aliens* I have tried to feature this and the quickness with which people react to imagined slights or differences. It was a world where the arrival of a policeman was a tense stand off, where neighbours had criminal records, where theatre and art were regarded as a poofster activity and where to survive and be part of your group you had to be seen to be tough and resilient. Sometimes I imagine, fantasise is probably the right word, how I would have ended up if I had stayed in Fawkner. I see myself as a truckie, with a beer belly and six or seven kids, down at the pub most nights, an ocker guy, enjoying his truck, his booze, his mates and his unambitious life. If anything the late sixties and early seventies shattered one of the essential features of the fifties and early sixties – the preordained nature of the course of your life. There would be school, early marriage, children, attractive suburban home, work in the same job, retirement and death. With the arrival of the seventies came affluence and young people rebelled against this ideal. It seemed possible to escape from this conformity, this preordained pattern to your life (something I play with in *Cosi*, my follow up work to this play).

Originally *Summer of the Aliens* was written for radio. In adapting it for the stage there is a considerable shift in emphasis. The radio play is an impressionistic portrait of the neighbourhood seen through the eyes of a boy who is having trouble understanding the world around him. The stage play centres on relationships, especially the relationship between Lewis and Dulcie. It is through Dulcie that Lewis begins to understand that the struggle to be adult is the struggle to understand the world around him. One of the important words he must understand is the word Dulcie asks him to name ('What

is that word, Lewis?’). It is a word I still have trouble understanding. If anything distinguishes the two versions it is the endings. In the radio version Lewis runs away; in the stage play he stays with his family, having, through Dulcie, begun to understand that the people around him are not possessed by aliens but by drives and emotions we label ‘human’.

My work is generally not regarded as being autobiographical. Where other playwrights obviously mine the ore of their own lives, until now I have not, although I can see in such plays of mine as *Inner Voices*, *Inside the Island*, *The Golden Age* and *Byzantine Flowers*, a hidden, and to me, powerful undercurrent of emotional autobiography. This is not to say that *Summer of the Aliens* is an autobiographical play. It is more a work of fiction with autobiographical elements. I can say that there are aspects of my own parents in Norma and Eric but in reality they were different people, just as I was, though to a lesser degree. What I have done is act like Frankenstein. Like the doctor I have raided the graveyard of my memory and have created a monster out of the various limbs and appendages I could dig up.

Why now? Why haven’t I, like a lot of other writers, written autobiographical plays earlier in my career? I have no answer except that now, when I’m drinking in a bar I am beginning to see more often that potbellied truckdriver, with his bog Irish face, swapping stories and lies with his mates. I’m beginning to be less condescending towards him and I’m liking him more and more.

Melbourne, December 1991

Summer of the Aliens was first performed by the Melbourne Theatre Company at the Russell Street Theatre, Melbourne, on 17 March 1992, with the following cast:

NARRATOR	Louis Nowra
LEWIS	Tamblyn Lord
DULCIE	Kylie Belling
MR PISANO / UNCLE RICHARD	Ernie Gray
NORMA	Genevieve Picot
ERIC / MR IRVIN	Robert Grubb
GRANDMA / MRS IRVIN / JAPANESE WOMAN	Beverley Phillips
BEV / DUTCH GIRL	Josephine Keen
BRIAN	Vince Colosimo

Director: Nadia Tass

Set Designer: Trinia Parker

Costume Designer: Trina Parker

Lighting Designer: Jamieson Lewis

Lighting Operator: Richard Johnstone

Composer: Phillip Judd

Sound Recording: Kerry Saxby

Stage Manager: Greg Diamantis

Assistant StageManager: Margaret Lloyd

CHARACTERS

NARRATOR, the older Lewis

LEWIS, 14 years old

DULCIE, 14 years old

NORMA, Lewis' mother

ERIC, Lewis' father

UNCLE RICHARD, Lewis' uncle

BEV, Lewis' sister

GRANDMA, Lewis' Grandma

MR IRVIN, Dulcie's step father

MRS IRVIN, Dulcie's mother

BEATRICE, a Dutch girl

MR PISANO, the postman

BRIAN, Lewis' friend

JAPANESE WOMAN

SETTING

A Housing Commission Estate in the paddocks of northern Melbourne in the early sixties.

The publisher would like to thank the following for permission to reproduce photographs: p.25 Herald and Weekly Times Ltd; p.61 Trina Parker; p.77 Hills Hoist courtesy Hills Industries Ltd.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

It is late morning in a gully near a shooting range, where men are shooting at clay pigeons. LEWIS crouches in the gully as he buttons up his shirt. DULCIE sits on the ground, grimacing as if in agony.

DULCIE: Please. Please.

[LEWIS pays no attention to her and peers up over the gully.]

Lewis. Please. I did yours.

[He reluctantly kneels behind her and lifts up the back of her blouse.]

It's so itchy.

[He begins to peel her back.]

Careful. I want it off in one strip.

LEWIS: Why?

DULCIE: So we can make a Nazi lamp out of it.

[The NARRATOR, in his late thirties, enters, wearing a suit, a smart country and western shirt and rattleskin boots, looking like a hybrid American/ Australian.]

NARRATOR: This is the end of the road. A Housing Commission Estate, north of Melbourne. The houses were built of concrete slabs and plonked down on these paddocks that stretch all the way to Sydney.

DULCIE: [to LEWIS] Slowly.

LEWIS: You know, this gully would make a good trench.

DULCIE: What for?

LEWIS: When the communists come. Mum said we'll have to live five to a room then.

DULCIE: Don't talk. Just concentrate on my skin.

NARRATOR: It's just paddocks. Flat all the way to the horizon.

There are no trees or flowers, just dry grass and scotch thistles. In summer the earth cracks, in winter it becomes like black clag. Some people have got soil from the Merri Creek to put on their lawns. You can tell their gardens: their flowers and bushes actually grow.

DULCIE: I put tons of butter on it.

LEWIS: Never helps. Cold tea. Vinegar. [Noticing a red mark around her waist.] What's that mark?

DULCIE: Mum said if I tied a rope around my waist that every time I thought impure thoughts I'd tie it tighter so I'd only have the pain to think about. Like the girls of Fatima.

LEWIS: I thought it was because you were practising the hula hoop a lot. [Referring to her skin.] Almost there.

NARRATOR: That's me: Lewis. And that's Dulcie; my friend from a few doors up. We live in Singapore Street. All the streets in our estate are named after famous battles: Gallipoli, Tobruk, Somme, Kokoda, Singapore. [More shots ring out.] Behind the estate is the shooting range. I went there to collect the brass casings from the spent cartridges. I'm waiting in the gully for the shooters to finish.

LEWIS: Do you think there's life on other planets? Damn!

DULCIE: [referring to skin] Oh, no. You broke it!

NARRATOR: The Time. 1962. Summer. A time when people feared that there was going to be a war between Russia and America. A time when we had beaten the West Indian cricket team. It was the year I developed an obsession with flying saucers.

LEWIS: [peering over gully] Hey, he got one. Blind luck. [Recognising one of the shooters] It's Brian's dad. [DULCIE stands to take a look. He pulls her down.] Get down! They'll blow your head off. I don't know why I bothered to take you along.

DULCIE: Get lost.

LEWIS: He must be out of jail.

DULCIE: He owes Stan money. They had some scheme going with a cop, stripping cars.

LEWIS: Maybe he's practising to kill your father.

DULCIE: I'd pay him if he did.

LEWIS: When they passed the dark side of the moon they gave him apples to eat.

DULCIE: Who?

LEWIS: The one I was telling you about. Aliens kidnapped him.

DULCIE: Aliens?

LEWIS: He was on the news. They interviewed him. He said they had apples like ours. Except crispier.

DULCIE: [amused] Kidnapped by aliens.

LEWIS: He was. [They duck as shots ring uncomfortably close.] Brian's dad isn't a good shot. [A beat.] He was taken to Venus. To a gigantic city. He said it was a bit like New York. Only men and women were of the same sex.

DULCIE: How do you tell them apart?

LEWIS: [flummoxed] Don't know. I guess they do.

DULCIE: How do they breed?

LEWIS: Didn't say. [A beat.] It was only a quick trip. Maybe they'll tell him next time.

DULCIE: Why did they kidnap him?

LEWIS: To show him. They said they might come to earth and live with us. They'd run out of water.

DULCIE: Why would they come here, we've got a drought?

LEWIS: [irritated] I don't know. [Peering over the edge] They're going. Let's get the shells.

[They crawl out of the gully, LEWIS, in his eagerness, rushing ahead. DULCIE stops.]

DULCIE: Lewis!

[He turns around.]

Geronimo!

LEWIS: [knowing what is about to happen.] No!

[She rushes at him and wrestles him to the ground. He gives in and she sits on him.]

DULCIE: You give in too quickly. Fight me.

LEWIS: I don't want to

DULCIE: Wrestle.

LEWIS: Get off.

DULCIE: Fight me.

LEWIS: The scrap merchants close at noon. If I don't get to them in time we won't have the money to go to the pictures.

DULCIE: [reluctantly] All right. [A beat.] Does it feel good?

LEWIS: What?

DULCIE: Me sitting on you.

LEWIS: You're heavy.

DULCIE: Thanks a lot.

[She gets off him and he jumps up. They start to collect brass casings. LEWIS finds a clay pigeon.]

LEWIS: I bet the flying saucers look like these clay pigeons.

DULCIE: Black?

LEWIS: No, they'd be shinier, like the colour of brass.

[DULCIE throws the brass she has collected at LEWIS.]

What's that for?

DULCIE: I'm not a cripple or something, you don't have to take me to the pictures.

[MR PISANO, the postman, appears.]

PISANO: Morning, Lewis. Dulcie.

LEWIS: You coming to shoot, Mr Pisano?

PISANO: Taking a short cut through the rifle range. It takes minutes off my round.

DULCIE: Where's your bike?

PISANO: Someone nicked it. Which is typical of this neighbourhood. Anyway, my feet are more reliable, they don't get punctures. [Remembering something before setting off] I told your dad, Lewis, before he pissed off, to paint your number bigger. You do it, you're the man of the house.

[To DULCIE] And make your letter box number bigger too.

DULCIE: But you already know it.

PISANO: Listen, girly, no check. Just get the number bigger.

[He hurries off.]

LEWIS: Mum says he's got wife problems or something.

DULCIE: It's because he lives in Singapore Street. There's something wrong with the water supply.

LEWIS: It tastes all right.

DULCIE: How do you explain the fact that every family in the street has had girls and you're the only boy? You have to be careful not to grow up to be a sissy, so Stan says.

LEWIS: Your Dad doesn't know what he's talking about. You laugh at me about UFOs, but this thing with water is just as strange. [Picking up brass casings] Come on, we don't have much time. [DULCIE helps him.]

SCENE TWO

Back veranda. Evening. There is the sound of crickets.

NARRATOR: Maybe Dulcie was right. Maybe there was something wrong with the water. I was the only boy in the street. Practically all my playmates were girls. Even at home it was all girls. My mother. My sister. My grandmother: she had come to stay when dad left us.

[Lights come up on LEWIS combing his grandmother's very long grey hair. He recites what she teaches him.]

GRANDMA: Bonnie Prince Charlie was born December 31 1720 and died January 31 1788

LEWIS: Bonnie Prince Charlie was born December 31 1720 and died January 31 1788.

GRANDMA: [half to herself] Died. [Getting carried away.] Died in ignominy because of the English. Reached as far as Derby. He could have easily taken London, if it wasn't for the French. The Frogs always let you down. Their support evaporated like rain on a hot tin roof.

[NORMA, Lewis' mother, enters.]

What were the dates of the rebellion?

LEWIS: 1745.

GRANDMA: And when did he take Edinburgh?

NORMA: Will you stop it, mum?

GRANDMA: Stop what?

NORMA: All this thing about English history.

GRANDMA: It's Scottish. I hate the English!

NORMA: [to LEWIS] Bonnie Prince Charlie was a drunkard.

GRANDMA: Out of disappointment!

NORMA: It's twelve thousand miles away. Dead history.

GRANDMA: Not to me. Not to millions of people who know England would be a better place if Bonnie Prince Charlie had ascended the throne. Dead history is Australian history. A few greedy miners get killed and it's called a civil war. A real civil war is like in England. Thousands upon thousands died. Now that's a Civil War.

NORMA: Just stop it, that's all, and put your budgie back in its cage. It's pooping everywhere.

GRANDMA: It's not like dog's poo; it's really small.

NORMA: It shits in our food.

GRANDMA: Charming. Charming language. Same as your father. Bad language and hating budgies go together. Like you and your no-hoper husband.

NORMA: Keep Eric out of this.

GRANDMA: Look at you. Lewis. Living in a housing commission house.

NORMA: You have no right to criticise me seeing you're living here.

GRANDMA: I have every right, I'm your mother. You've got brains and what happens? You run off with Irish scum and when I try to instil in Lewis the tiniest bit of refinement – [To LEWIS.] What side of a woman does a gentleman walk on?

LEWIS: Left hand side.

GRANDMA: Why?

LEWIS: To draw his sword more easily and to protect her dress if a passing carriage sprays mud.