



LOUIS NOWRA was born in Melbourne. He is the author of the plays *Inner Voices*, *Visions*, *Inside the Island*, *Sunrise*, *The Golden Age*, *Capricornia*, *Byzantine Flowers*, *The Watchtower*, *Summer of the Aliens*, *Cosi*, *Radiance*, *The Temple*, *Crow*, *The Incorruptible*, *The Jungle*, *The Language of the Gods* and *The Boyce Trilogy*. He has written the non-fiction works *The Cheated*, *Warne's World*, *Walkabout*, *Chihuahuas*, *Women and Me* (essays), *Bad Dreaming*, *Kings Cross: a biography* and its companion volume, *Woolloomooloo: a biography*. His fiction includes *The Misery of Beauty*, *Palu*, *Red Nights*, *Abaza*, *Ice*, *Into that Forest* and *Prince of Afghanistan*. His memoirs are *The Twelfth of Never* and *Shooting the Moon*. Some of his radio plays include *Albert Names Edward*, *The Song Room*, *Sydney*, *The Divine Hammer*, *Far North*, *The Wedding in Venice*, *Jez* and *The Light of Darkness*. He was the principal writer of the documentary series *First Australians* and created the TV series *The Last Resort* and *The Straits*. Besides writing libretti, and the telemovies *Displaced Persons*, *Hunger* and *The Lizard King*, his screen credits include *Map of the Human Heart*, *Cosi*, *Heaven's Burning*, *The Matchmaker*, *Radiance*, *K-19: The Widowmaker* and *Black and White*. He lives in Sydney and is married to the writer Mandy Sayer.

# *The* LEWIS TRILOGY

*Summer of the Aliens • Così • This Much is True*



CURRENCY PRESS  
SYDNEY

## CURRENCY PLAYS

First published in 2018  
by Currency Press Pty Ltd,  
PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia  
enquiries@currency.com.au  
www.currency.com.au

*Summer of the Aliens* first published by Currency Press in 1992; *Così* first published by Currency Press in 1992.

Copyright: *Me and My Shadow* copyright © Louis Nowra 2018, *Introduction* copyright © Toby Schmitz 2018; *Summer of the Aliens* copyright © Louis Nowra, 1992, 2018; *I Was A Teenage Alien* copyright © Louis Nowra 1992, 2018; *Così* copyright © Louis Nowra, 1992, 2018; *Trial by Madmen* copyright © Louis Nowra 1992, 2018; *This Much is True* copyright © Louis Nowra 2018.

*Copying for Educational Purposes:* The Australian Copyright Act 1968 allows a maximum of one chapter or 10% of this book, whichever is the greater, to be copied by any educational institution for its educational purposes provided that the educational institution (or the body that administers it) has given a remuneration notice to Copyright Agency (CA) under the Act. For details of the CA licence for educational institutions, please contact CA: 11, 66 Goulburn Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000; tel: within Australia 1800 066 844 toll free; outside Australia +61 2 9394 7600; fax: +61 2 9394 7601; email: info@copyright.com.au

*Copying for Other Purposes:* Except as permitted under the Act, for example a fair dealing for the purposes of study, research, criticism or review, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission. All enquiries should be made to the publisher at the above address.

Any performance or public reading of *Così* is forbidden unless a licence has been received from the author or the author's agent. The purchase of this book in no way gives the purchaser the right to perform the play in public, whether by means of a staged production or a reading. All applications for public performance should be addressed to HLA, PO Box 1536, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012. Tel: +61 2 9549 3000; Fax: +61 2 9310 4113; Email: hla@hlamgt.com.au

Cataloguing-in-Publication data for this title is available from the National Library of Australia website: [www.nla.gov.au](http://www.nla.gov.au)

Cover design by Hugh Ford for Currency Press.  
Printed by Finline Print + Copy Services, St Peters.

# CONTENTS

---

<i>Me and My Shadow</i>	
<i>Louis Nowra</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	
<i>Toby Schmitz</i>	xi
SUMMER OF THE ALIENS	1
<i>I Was a Teenage Alien</i>	
<i>Louis Nowra</i>	3
<i>Act One</i>	9
<i>Act Two</i>	36
<i>Act Three</i>	62
COSÌ	89
<i>Trial by Madmen</i>	
<i>Louis Nowra</i>	91
<i>Act One</i>	97
<i>Act Two</i>	151
THIS MUCH IS TRUE	185

---

## Me and My Shadow

---

She arrived like a vision. Dressed in a kimono, she came to my house in Fawkner, a Housing Commission estate, and I walked her across the desolate paddocks to my school, where I showed her off to my class. Her extraordinary presence told me there was another, more exiting world out there beyond my drab world. I had forgotten her until years later when I was given a photograph from my childhood. It shows me beaming with pleasure to be in the company of my Uncle Bob's Japanese girlfriend.

Until I saw this image I hadn't thought much about my childhood and, for years, I always felt embarrassed about having been a house. Like Proust's taste of the madeleine that was a catalyst for his sudden recall of his past, the photograph dredged up memories of my upbringing on the estate and, for the first time, I began to see the experience as being fundamental to who I am as an adult. I was in my late thirties and, unlike many writers, had never written an autobiographical work, but the photograph took hold of my imagination and I found myself writing an impressionistic radio play about my youth. I turned it into a stage play, *Summer of the Aliens*, narrated by someone I called Lewis, who is not so much my doppelganger but a fictionalised version of me. His version of my life rearranged it, made it neater and gave it a narrative drive that reality didn't.

One element that bothered me was the potential reaction of relatives to the way I had transformed them through the eyes of Lewis. It was with some trepidation that I took my Uncle Bob to see the first Sydney production in 1994. He meant a lot to me. No-one read books on the estate and no-one was interested in the arts, including me (I lived for footy and cricket). Uncle Bob lived a bohemian life in the city and directed musicals for J.C. Williamson, the famous Australian theatre company. For years he was my one connection to world I would eventually be a part of.

He was in a scene with the Japanese woman, but instead of Lewis being seven years old, he remembers the woman entering his life when

he was fourteen. I thought Uncle Bob might bridle at this fabrication and also how I had portrayed him, but after the show he said ruefully, 'It was a sketch of me, not an oil painting'. Now that he had become a playwright, he knew that my life had been reimagined through the eyes of an alter ego.

The name Lewis separated me from veracity, even though some of the characters and incidents were based on real people and my experiences. The way the older Lewis remembers the past and the behaviour of his younger self in *Summer of the Aliens* is different from my memoir *The Twelfth of Never*, where I endeavoured to tell the truth.

The follow-up play, *Così*, features Lewis directing mental patients in a version of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. It was based on the experiences of my twenty-year-old self, when a friend and I worked with patients in the Mont Park asylum complex. We convinced the new social worker that a play may help some patients find a temporary and enjoyable escape from the melancholic world they lived in. We decided to do a version of *Trial By Jury*. I loathed Gilbert and Sullivan so I took out much of the music and replaced it with songs by the Bee Gees and those I had composed myself. I also acted in the musical and sung (my chutzpah in even deigning to sing still amazes me).

Such a thing had never been attempted at the mental institution before. It was a one-off performance and I still recall the cast's explosion of euphoria when they took their bows at the end. We had not only dared to do the play but we had pulled it off. It was the most moving theatre experience of my life.

Unlike Lewis, my reason for involving myself with mental patients was that I was trying to process the idea of madness. After all, both my grandmothers had ended up in Mont Park asylum and my mother was pursued by her own demons (she had shot and killed her father). Lewis' reasons for directing the show are sunnier and more practical than mine, but we both share the revelation that as we were gradually sucked into the life of the patients it seemed to us that the world outside the asylum was much crazier.

Lewis' experiences of the asylum are mostly benign and his absorption into the lives of the performers transform him, exactly as happened to me. In writing the play I wanted to make it a comedy. I was reacting against all those movies, *Shock Corridor* or *One Flew Over*

*the Cuckoo's Nest*, which portrayed mentally ill people as a hysterical mix of aggression and torment. This was not my experience at all, and it's not Lewis' either.

After writing *Summer of the Aliens* and *Così* I set out to write a third play, with Lewis in his mid-forties. It was commissioned by a theatre company and soon after beginning it I realised that I was concentrating to an inordinate degree on Lewis, and the people he interacted with were merely shadows. I returned the advance and determined to give up on any more plays featuring my near namesake.

In the meantime, I wrote a memoir about my early years and later two non-fiction books about Kings Cross and, recently, Woolloomooloo. Both books interweave history and my personal engagement with the area and its local identities. Many of the people in the second book were friends I made at the Old Fitzroy Hotel in Woolloomooloo. At the same time I became intrigued at how Lewis, a fictional character, would reshape and remodel them and incorporate them into the way he viewed the world that was not mine.

Two things happened that made me want to finish the trilogy. One was my wife Mandy, who knows the locals well and has written about them in *Misfits & Me*. She knew earlier than me that here was a subject ripe for Lewis. Then, at an opportune moment, Andrew Henry, the artistic director of the Old Fitz Theatre, asked me to write a play. My titles always come first and, once I had come up with *This Much is True*, it seemed it could have been the title for the previous two plays, as if teasing the audience to wonder which parts were indeed true.

But they're true to Lewis' version of those non-fiction people I have written about. It's as if he takes my fascination with such people and refashions them, places them in a story which he has created. In other words, his memories are different from mine, even though they have sprung from the same origins. The other thing that disassociates him from me is that, in a play, the characters are re-interpreted by a director and the actors' performances are a further reimagining and therefore a further distancing of them from the reality.

It may seem curious but whenever I see Lewis on stage (or even in *Così*, the film) I don't have a visceral connection to him. I can acknowledge similarities to me, especially our attraction to these people who changed the way I view life, but he is different to me

in some important respects; he seems more beleaguered, saner, less acerbic, more inclined to step back from physical confrontation (he being more sensible than me) and is probably a more genial man.

Yet there have been a couple of times when we have become one. In 1992, when I was playing the older Lewis in the Melbourne Theatre Company production of *Summer of the Aliens*, Nadia Tass, the director, didn't want me to wear my usual attire of black suit and cowboy boots, but a daggy outfit of brown trousers and blue shirt. When I protested she said, 'Melbournians won't like you if you dress like a smart arse'. I found myself wanting to say 'But I wouldn't wear that!' When Ben Mendelsohn, playing Lewis in the premiere production of *Così*, wore a turtleneck jumper, I was mortified for Lewis and me. I still am.

In this last instalment of Lewis' memories, he differs immediately from me. He's not married for a start (he's 'in-between divorces') and he's younger (is vanity playing a role here?). If there is one great thing we have in common it's that Lewis and I have found inspiration in communities of people who are not part of mainstream society. In *This Much is True*, Lewis finds himself mixing with a motley crew of a fixer, meth chemist, drag queen, con man, debt collector and assorted others. Several of the real-life people who I have written about are dead, but in Lewis' version some are not. That's the great power he has over me—the power of his imagination to outwit real life.

*Louis Nowra, 2018*



## Introduction

---

‘The precise role of the artist, then, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.’

—James Baldwin

‘It said “Who wants to have fun in the theatre?”’

—Cherry, in *Così*

*Summer of the Aliens* appeared to me in high school, my first Louis Nowra. By the time I was in university dramatics, and then at NIDA, where Doug’s cat monologue was, and may still be, the most popular audition piece for edgy actors, *Così* was required reading. Then, last year, I directed the premiere of *This Much Is True*, in the theatre of the pub that inspired it. In the years between, I played Luke Boyce in Nowra’s *Boyce Trilogy*, absorbed the rest of his canon, came to know Louis personally, and now delight in time spent with him.

I can’t pretend a scholarly opinion, and would not invite one. Plays live in flight, and re-reading these plays I recall the excitement of classroom readings, of acting them out in my head, and the magic of seeing productions. Nowra believes plays are ‘plasticine’, up for continual interpretation, antithetical to anything constant or sacrosanct. This is a theatre practitioner, a student of human contradiction, and an artist who trusts fluidity.

I feel it a singular honour to be asked to introduce this collection, and though part of me encourages you to get on with experiencing the plays themselves—hopefully out loud with lovers of theatre—the following are observations from a fellow theatre practitioner.

The main character of this trilogy, Lewis Riley, follows some of Louis Nowra’s life, conveniently and aptly, from a housing commission in Melbourne, to work in a Melbourne mental institution, and finally back to a housing commission community, in Sydney, with the wolf

of poverty never far from his door. Louis says that Lewis is ‘not him’, but that they share ‘emotional memories’, which he points out are ‘not fact’. These are ‘memory plays’, which employ different ways of experiencing story through memory as the trilogy progresses. The slipperiness of memory is part of the story, structure and theme.

Other themes seep through the plays: madness, criminality, the legacy of fathers, and social conflicts of race, gender and class. Pop music, suicide, theatre—the more one digs the more one finds. Larger historical shifts also inform the plays: the Cuban missile crisis in *Summer of the Aliens*, the Vietnam War in *Così*, the literal erosion of the inner-city poor in *This Much Is True*.

These particular plays are fuelled by outsiders. Characters are excluded or have withdrawn from the mainstream, and we detect—through his autobiographies, fiction and discussions—that Nowra has long preferred their company. So does Lewis, and we can chart his growing understanding of his own outsider position through the trilogy.

In *Summer of the Aliens*, young Lewis’ world is defined by outsiders: immigrants, war veterans, Russians, the poor. He uses extra-terrestrials, the ultimate outsiders, to explain the strangeness of his isolation on the fringes of the city, where he says, ‘People didn’t make any sense at all’. This gives way to ‘signs of movement’, a coming of age, when he experiences connections with his friends, and comes to understand the burden of being human. Lewis shifts from the cruel, pitiless behaviour he has adopted to survive, to his first notions of romantic love, and a universe where ‘People didn’t hurt one another’.

In *Così*, we find Lewis uncertain about his relationship, his career, and most of all about how to deal with the mental patients, all of them outsiders. Justin says to Lewis: ‘They are normal people who have done extraordinary things, thought extraordinary thoughts.’ Julie discerns that the patients scare him. Then, through the mounting of a play within a play, Lewis comes to care for them, and fights to protect them. By the end, Lewis has gone from claiming that ‘Love is not so important nowadays’, to stating that, ‘Without love the world wouldn’t mean much’.

In *This Much Is True*, Lewis has become a professional observer, to the point of venturing into the inner thoughts of his own characters. ‘You can be a misfit’, says the fixer, father-figure Cass, to Lewis, ‘as

long as you fit in'. Lewis is now in complete sympathy with outsiders, even the manipulative con-man Rhys, and in turn he effortlessly earns ours. His final realisation is that he has gained a power: he can honour his beloved outsiders, and even raise them from the dead, by writing. To serve his story, yes, but the audience senses something larger at work. Lewis and Louis are encouraging humanism.

Over the trilogy Lewis tries to connect with outsiders, then is forced to, then chooses to. Lewis and Louis believe that curiosity about each other is the important thing. This recognisable contradiction, of isolated people finding a collegiate belonging, is the pillar theme of these plays.

With a keen eye on entertainment, Nowra uses his storytelling skills, his ability to discern a good yarn, to keep these ideas buoyant, palpable. And of course there is his wit, sometimes a sophisticated set up, sometimes a searing one-liner, sometimes vaudeville. The scope for physical comedy alone in *Così* is breathtaking. (My favourite gag in *The Boyce Trilogy* was this exchange between two brothers. TODD: I feel like a shag on a rock. LUKE: Now is not the time. The audience creased, every show.)

Fluidity, changeability, is a constant in Nowra's work. This is a writer confident in pursuing surprise. For just one example, note the use of Lewis as narrator. There seems to be no rhyme, reason or rule as to when narrator Lewis appears, but it is always rewarding, and always a surprise.

There is an expressionistic technique too, employed in these plays. Visions occur that blur time and place. A line of Julie's from *Così* leaps at me: 'Love is hallucinating without drugs.'

I think Nowra's sartorial bent is worth noting. He often has clear ideas about what his characters wear and how they appear. I remember him being fastidious about my costume in the poster for *The Marvellous Boy*. Here the performer and director in Nowra emerges, aware that how a character presents, indeed how they feel in their chosen mask, is vital. This, paired with Nowra's tendency to actually roll his sleeves up and wade quickly into conflict when he senses injustice, encapsulates the human author at the heart of his plays. Nowra is aware of the outward narrative we all exude, while always prepared to let it slip or shatter, in the wink of a comma, or the snap of temper, to reveal an emotional truth. Surprise, again.

The word nostalgia, when broken down to its roots, means a painful homecoming (nostos, 'homecoming'; algos, 'pain' or 'ache'). The Lewis plays brim with nostalgia, an attractive human emotion that can be warm and melancholy, even simultaneously. The trilogy sees characters dealing with the darkest parts of life—abuse, loneliness, insanity, fear, addiction—yet always there is a turning to love. This dichotomy of dark dovetailed with light is found throughout Nowra's work, and especially in these plays, which refract his own life to the borders of mirroring. Louis has talked about *The Lewis Trilogy* as 'affectionate', and of his desire to 'celebrate' the people who have given him their stories, while maintaining the 'ice cold heart' of a writer who 'steals' from his subjects. When Venus demands of Lewis in the third instalment, 'Promise me you won't write about this', Lewis can only answer with silence. I believe that in these plays, with great cleverness and effect, Nowra has his cake and eats it too. A contradiction we can all relate to.

What appears immediately to me, reading Nowra's plays, is his ability to sympathise with characters. The actor in me is offered a way to give all his characters, even the most distant, the bleakest of them, human detail. Even the monstrous Mr Irvin in *Summer of the Aliens* is gifted a softer analysis by his wife, and laughs from the audience in his first chat to Lewis. Nowra refrains from judgement as best he can, and allows the characters' lives to be warm, worrisome, complex. This is humanism in dramatic form. Nowra's curiosity about the human condition fires the plays, and as a result leaves the audience asking questions about themselves. Louis has often talked to me about his desire for all his characters to 'have their aria'. In *Così* this happens quite literally. To my mind, this is a writer who cares about people on a human level.

Nowra has the poet's ability to see things in other things. Ghosts in architecture, humour in the vernacular of criminals, beauty in mental ill-health. His marriage of poetry and naturalism in dialogue and soliloquy arrested me as a boy, and now a man: it sings.

Nowra is an observer, a self-confessed voyeur and flâneur. The voluminous scrapbooks on his shelves, the far-ranging topics in his autobiographies, the wild spectrum of characters, situations and techniques in his plays, all point to a magpie's eye. In this trilogy,

where Lewis is surrounded by outsiders like himself, we come close to a kind of electric event horizon between observer and subject. Nowra can be found any given afternoon at the pub that inspired the last of these plays, sometimes deep in a circle of storytellers, sometimes alone, always in an impeccable suit, fishing for human stories. ‘Are you listening, do you feel in control?’ Justin asks Lewis, in *Così*.

A few motifs strike me most in this trilogy. The first is fire. Other elements get a work out, but it is fire that sweeps through the end of *Summer of the Aliens*, and fire that threatens, and perhaps cleanses, much of *Così*, and in *This Much Is True*, one of the most unifying moments is when the pub regulars stare into the fire and reminisce. Then there is theatre. Theatre arrives vaguely as a concept in the form of Lewis’ Uncle Richard, yet is attached to the theatre of his Japanese wife, who fascinates Lewis. It is raised again in his father’s repeated evoking of Greek tragedy. The process of theatre teaches Lewis about humanism in *Così* (‘This is where I belong,’ says Roy), and unifies, again, the outsiders in a group excursion for the last instalment. A final repeated image, I noticed recently: the trilogy opens and closes with a woman tackling a man to the ground. I will leave analysis up to you, if that’s your thing.

These plays are great yarns, with Babushka doll yarns within. For me, the most rewarding, overarching yarn that emerges, bookended by Lewis’ belief in pulp-fiction aliens on one end and his recognition that dramatising fellow outsiders is a two-way street on the other, is the one about how, despite the fact that nailing down reality is impossible, there is rich, human reward to be found in the conundrum of trying.

I envy anyone opening these pages, whether in a professional production, in student readings, or simply mouthing the words on a bus.

*Toby Schmitz, 2018*

Toby Schmitz is a leading Australian actor and award-winning playwright. His plays include *dreamalittledreamalittle*, *Lucky*, *Chicks Will Dig You!*, *This Blasted Earth*, *Pan*, *Cunt Pi*, *fifteen and then some*, *Grazing the Phosphorus* and *Capture the Flag*. In 2017 he directed the premiere of *This Much is True* at The Old Fitz Theatre, Sydney.

# *Summer of the Aliens*

## I Was a Teenage Alien

---

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 fuelled 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 poofter 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 *Così*, 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.

*Louis Nowra, 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
UNCLE RICHARD/MR PISANO	Ernie Gray
NORMA/JAPANESE WOMAN	Genevieve Picot
ERIC/STAN IRVIN	Robert Grubb
GRANDMA/MRS IRVIN/JAPANESE WOMAN	Beverley Phillips
BEV/BEATRICE	Josephine Keen
BRIAN	Vince Colosimo

Director, Nadia Tass  
Set and costume designer, Trina Parker  
Lighting designer, Jamieson Lewis  
Lighting operator, Richard Johnstone  
Composer, Phillip Judd  
Sound recording, Kerry Saxby

## **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.

## 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. Nineteen sixty-two. 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*] Alright. [*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 shortcut 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 letterbox number bigger too.

DULCIE: But you already know it.

PISANO: Listen, girlie, no cheek. 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 alright.

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 thirty-one, seventeen twenty, and died January thirty-one, seventeen eighty-eight.

LEWIS: Bonnie Prince Charlie was born December thirty-one, seventeen twenty, and died January thirty-one, seventeen eighty-eight.

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: Seventeen forty-five.

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?