



May 18, 2009 05:26pm AEST

## Bush-gothic narrative draws on myths

John McCallum | May 18, 2009

Article from: [The Australian](#)

**Thursday's Child. Monkey Baa, Seymour Centre, Sydney, May 15. Touring nationally until November 13.**

LIKE a lot of recent theatre for young people Thursday's Child is a popular novel on legs.

The production, by the company Monkey Baa and directed by Sandra Eldridge, is based on a successful book by Sonya Hartnett. It has a young cast performing in a style that is relentlessly energetic.

It tells of a family struggling through the Great Depression, with a weird young kid named Tin who goes feral and starts burrowing into the earth and living down there like a rabbit. He wants to escape his family, perhaps, or maybe that is the only place from which he can help them. The story is narrated, in retrospect, by his sister Harper, an adult woman remembering her childhood, when she was a little girl confused by mysterious events that still haunt her.

Great myths of Australian culture are drawn on. Tin is a lost child. His family, insofar as they have any relationship with him at all as he hides underground, are like a troubled version of the Rudd family in the On Our Selection stories, plays and movies: forever trying to pull together to battle hardship, but in this case mostly failing.

Tin is like a new version of Fish Lamb, in Neil Armfield's production of Tim Winton's Cloudstreet, except that instead of disappearing into the water he vanishes into the earth. Harper is a feisty but troubled young girl with, perhaps, enough canniness to survive the developments of an extravagant plot.

As the show progresses the plot grows into a kind of bush-gothic narrative, as circumstances in the supposedly real world above the ground become harsher. Tin, an ambivalent figure, is eventually drawn from his tunnelling retreat into action on the surface, as he tries, for reasons that are hinted at but not made entirely clear, to help his beleaguered family.

There is a neatly expressive set by Imogen Ross, evoking in a stylised way the homesteads and verandas of the bush tradition with an eloquent series of backdrop panels, and a good score by Jeremy Silver.

The play's origins as a novel are obvious - the emphasis here is on storytelling - but the melodrama of the story, with the tragic death of a young child, and an evil exploitative villain who preys on the family's other innocent daughter, has a surprising ending that the great actor-manager-playwrights of the late 19th century would have revelled in.

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