Holy Day
by Andrew Bovell

State Theatre Company of South Australia
Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre,
ends 8 September.
Melbourne season at the CUB Malthouse
from 13 September to 6 October, 2001.

Andrew Bovell’s Holy Day had been in draft form for something like ten years, set aside for such various other ventures as his script for Strictly Ballroom and the current New York stage version - as well as the soon-to-be-released Geoffrey Rush film - of his widely admired Speaking in Tongues. So it is impressive that a writer of his calibre and standing has now chosen to step forward with such uncompromising material - and fortuitous that it has been developed through the commissioning process of State Theatre’s On Site Laboratory. A work of this complexity needed time for reflection, and the auspices of Centenary of Federation support - because it is a difficult play about difficult history.

Set somewhere in the desert in mid-nineteenth century Australia, it focuses on the privations and violence of settlers, and the fear and retribution of Aboriginal contact. When a missionary’s wife appears at a traveler’s rest claiming that her husband has been murdered and her child stolen by natives, some want immediate reprisal, while others doubt the veracity of the claim.

Bovell provides us with an unsparing fictional portrait of a colony anchored in violence and relentless self-interest. Nora, the Irish owner of the lodging is a bitter pragmatist, a Mother Courage of the Outback, who sees every encounter as commerce, even when she whores herself to protect her adopted Aboriginal daughter, eerily named Obedience. She stands her ground against the likes of Goundry, the desperate psychopath accompanied by the mute youth Cornelius, and warns off Linda, an Aboriginal woman who is befriending Obedience. But there are forces at work that not even Nora’s steely perseverance nor the settler Wakefield’s moderation can becalm.

Director Rosalba Clemente has strived for a creditable clarity and stillness in Bovell’s grim drama, ably assisted by Cath Cantlon’s excellent costumes and design - a raked, map-like wooden plain with a stark black backdrop, a desolate charred cross and the inscription Terra Nullius - complemented by the ochres in Mark Sheldon’s lighting and Bernie Lynch’s sparsely sombre music. Clemente brings a much-needed economy to the produc-
tion which in its detailed plotting and brutality of incident could easily have been overstated. With a running time of two hours it is possible that some trimming yet, even to Bovell’s commendably crisp dialogue, could further sharpen the work for the Melbourne season in September.

The performances are uniformly strong. Kerry Walker is outstanding, both comic and sinister as the laconic, almost unbearably cynical Nora. Frank Gallacher’s Wakefield is a disturbing portrait of the moral price of inaction and as Elizabeth Wilkes, the missionary wife, Mandy McElhinney represents a complexity of motive and an exhaustion of faith. Rachael Maza as Linda, the accused native woman, is also impressive, chained to the stake like a defiant scapegoat. Dino Marnika is a scarifying Goundry, indifferent to the restraints of Epstein (Peter Docker) and merciless to the mutilated innocents - Cornelius (Cameron Goodall) and Obedience( Melodie Reynolds)

Holy Day is a relentless, and gripping, account of events from first contact which, in recent national political debate, have often been systematically repudiated and belittled. In this production the State Theatre Company has boldly challenged such revisionist history, not with didactic simplification, but by taking a larger imaginative grasp of the issues and their implications.

This is the uncomfortable theatre that openly states that there are consequences - material and spiritual - arising from the cruelties of the past. The Greeks thought it was the business of the drama to present such notions to their citizenry - and, in this courageous and plainly written text, Andrew Bovell is right to think that this is still the case.